

The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart
An Anatomy in Stories and Accompanying Essay

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Abstract

This dissertation consists of a collection of short stories titled *The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart* and an accompanying critical commentary.

These tales look to question the ways women relate to their body through examining and emulating certain aspects of traditional fairy tales. While previous feminist examinations of the topic engaged with fairy tales to subvert and rewrite social expectations of the female body (for example, Angela Carter in 1979 or Suniti Najomshi in 1981), the stories in this collection find a middle ground, neither re-writing fairy tales nor completely eschewing them. In my tales the body is used as a starting point; concentrating on a particular body part (head, hands, feet, etc.) per story to narrate the different ways women relate to and approach embodiment.

The critical commentary, presented in three chapters, returns to the themes I touched on in my creative work through an analysis first of the use of the body and the motif of mutilation in “Cinderella”, “The Little Mermaid”, and “The Girl Without Hands”, then through the examination of metamorphosis in contemporary texts of magical realism (Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* and Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*). Each of these chapters is accompanied by a critical reflection on the way the research impacted the creative practise. This self-criticism is expanded in the third chapter, where I engage with Julio Cortázar’s principles of the short story and Hélène Cixous *écriture féminine* to further analyse my work.

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Introduction

Bodies and Tales

Growing up, it seemed to me that all fairy tales began in the same way. Not with “once upon a time”, but with a beautiful girl faced with danger. Like many I grew up with “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “The Beauty and the Beast,” and “Sleeping Beauty,” along with a handful of others. Fairy tales presented a world I could understand, where rules had clear effects and even the worse punishments were trials for the characters to grow and mature. More than anything, I was in love with the way bodies worked in these tales. Women were always beautiful, of course, the fairest of the land – but the bodies themselves, whole or apart, mattered as much as their beauty. So in “Sleeping Beauty” the curse comes through her finger, and in Rapunzel the prince sneaks in using her hair. Cinderella’s foot in her translucent shoe is the key to her identity, and equally translucent is the attire that the Wise Little Girl dons to solve a riddle set by a king, to which her body (neither naked nor clothed) is the answer.

However, upon deciding to pursue a PhD in Creative Writing I realised I did not want to write fairy tales, nor did I want to re-write these tales, as other authors have. Re-writing has been an oft used tool in postmodern and feminist writing, useful because it allows the writer to force the narrative to face itself and its values. It was in fact Angela Carter’s revised collection of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*¹, that first brought my attention back to the genre. But re-written fairy tales have been around since 1979, and in fact have become a common occurrence in popular culture.

On the other hand, I was interested in how the female body was used and represented in literature, both literally and as symbol. It occurred to me that women were identified with their bodies in different ways than men were. As Marina Warner explores in *Monuments and Maidens*, “in public and private, we exchange [...] both as commodities and ideas, as shared aspirations, desired proofs of status and badges of identity through the symbolic form of the female form.”² The female body is not chosen because it truly represents anything – to paraphrase Warner, Justice is presented as a woman not because women are inherently just or fair, but because the female body is seen as an inert, blank canvas onto which anything might be projected.

¹ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1993)

² Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. (London: Vintage, 1985), xix.

In the original binary of “man/woman” man is always the positive, active agent; woman represents always the passive, and often negative aspects of humanity³. Man/Woman, Culture/Nature, Logos/Pathos, Mind/Body. In this divide, the body has been regarded as something deceptive, something that is to be tamed and defeated in order for the mind to achieve knowledge or be in touch with reality⁴. In a society that disregards the body, women have been at once relegated to be nothing more than their bodies and exhorted to raise above it.

These were the ideas that circled my mind when I first thought about writing the series of tales that eventually became *The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart*. I realised they could be complimentary – that I could take my concerns about the body and write about them in the same way fairy tales do without necessarily writing fairy tales. I chose to write in metonymies, piece by piece, always allowing one particular body-part (eyes, feet, hands, etc.) to carry the narrative, but never controlling it. The tales you are about to read deal with the constant embodiment and disembodiment that women go through in every day life. Sometimes this is conscious; and thus I have tales about sickness or about retaining control over one’s body, sometimes it is unconscious and I reflect on this in tales where the body controls the narrative from the background.

The chapters that follow the stories show the kind of research I undertook during my studies. The first of these chapters is focused on fairy tales and their relationship with the body; by analysing three classic fairy tales (Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, and The Handless Maiden) I argue that fairy tales often make use of certain body parts to illustrate social mores and beliefs. Through the body, fairy tales present how we are or how we should be. This is followed by a short commentary of three of my stories, to analyse how these kind of texts affected or influenced the writing.

The second chapter deals with more contemporary authors and concerns. Through an analysis of metamorphosis in Marie Darrieussecq’s 1996 novel *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*⁵ and Karen Russell’s short story “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves⁶” from the eponymous book, I argue that metamorphosis questions what we are and how we

³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1987): 104.

⁴ These ideas might be found in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave as much as in Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. Somatophobia is, sadly, not a uniquely Western phenomenon.

⁵ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, Linda Coverdale, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

⁶ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* (New York: Vintage, 2008)

should be what we are. As with the first chapter, a short analysis of another two of my more modern stories follow.

My third and last chapter shifts focus into my writing process. Here I describe how did I come to settle on this project, the writers whose work inspired me, and the aesthetic decisions that I considered and researched throughout my work on this dissertation. Finally, included in this chapter is a “case study” of one of my tales; an in-depth look at the writing of a single tale from its inception through the research, its drafting, and the writing process.

I would like to finalize this introduction by explaining the title I chose for this collection, *The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart*.

This title is in fact the first line of the 95th stanza of “Hávamál”, the second poem in the Elder Edda (or Poetic Edda). I initially sought a copy of the Elder Edda because I was interested in “Völuspá”, the poem which narrates the mythic creation of the Norse world and the birth of the gods from the body of the ice giant Ymir⁸. I had an interest to compare it with the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan myth of creation, where the Elders Tepeu and Gucumatx come together and create a maize plant from their bodies, from whence they craft humankind. The idea of gods creating humans from their flesh appealed to me, given my topic, and I knew very little about Norse mythology.

Yet what truly captured my attention was this second poem, “Hávamál,” sometimes translated as “Sayings from the High One.” The poem begins with an old traveller joining some men by the fire, and in return for their hospitality he shares his wisdom. To no one’s great surprise the stranger turns out to be Odin in disguise, and soon he ceases his advise and begins to tell the story of his unrequited love for a nameless woman. The stanza I refer to is one of the few that seem to be there to transition the poem from proverbs into tale, and thus seems to hover between wisdom and narration when it says

The head alone knows what lies near the heart
A man knows his mind alone;
No sickness is worse to one who is wise
Than to lack the longed-for-joy.⁹

⁷ Henry Adams Bellows, Trans. “Hávamál,” *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

⁸ Henry Adams Bellows, Trans. “Völuspá,” *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

⁹ Henry Adams Bellows, Trans. “Hávamál.” 95.

The line I adopted for my title seems, to me, to have at least two readings. The first speaks of a certain interconnectedness between these organs that is not generally accepted: that the two are in communication, that reason and emotion know each other and the resulting mind in the following line is born out of this knowledge. The second reading is different, and depends on the words “lies”. To lie: to be reclined, or flat atop of something, immobile. Any object might be lying on the ground for someone to find. Or else, to lie: to tell falsehoods, to deceive. What lies near the heart? The phrase at once conjures images of different emotions that one might find near the heart, that the brain knows are there to find. But we could also think of what lies *to* the heart, the many things that misguide and confuse us. The line then might reference that one might know, through reason, that the things closest to the heart are also the ones most capable of obfuscating it, and still be unable to change the way one feels.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly for it to be chosen as title of a collection, this line makes reference to the two most important organs in the body, both biologically and metonymically. To talk of head and heart is to talk of a whole: reason and emotion, thought and feeling. In my tales I would attempt to write as many body parts as I could – I would attempt to create an anatomy of stories. The head and the heart are good places to start telling a story.

The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart

There once was a woman who had a baby with wings instead of arms.

She had fallen in love with a man, by a beach somewhere exotic. Oh, he had been in fine feather the night they met, proud as a peacock, gentle as a dove! But she gave the news and he flew, swanned off to Spain, she heard he was larking around with girls in Ibiza while her tummy grew and grew. No hen-do could be planned when the groom had chickened out. The damage was done and her child was born armless but in full wing.

'This never showed in the ultrasounds!' she cried to the nurses, sent them fluttering about with files and lab results. From then on her room turned into a clinical aviary, with doctors and nurses parading their colours; from yellowing old coats to pink, blue and jade sterilized scrubs. The doctors hummed and hooted over the new-born, the nurses squawked over midnight shifts. X-Rays were taken, magnetic resonances extracted, computers rendered a DNA chain that was only .0000009% different from normal human beings. And when all possible tests had been carried out they all showed the same: Catherine had given birth to a very healthy girl who happened to have wings for arms.

And with the danger lessened, the nurses changed their chatter to find the perfect name for the child. Angela, one proposed! Gabriella!, exclaimed another, or Paula... even better, Archangella! For surely she was a gift from God, the most literal of angels! To spite them, she named the child Ertha.

Beyond spite, she thought that if life was going to give her daughter a literal representation of her father's flight, then it was her right to be as literal as she wanted, too. And the girl would need something to ground her, to come back to earth when she needed to. More so without arms! Already Ertha struggled, as she nursed, batting her wings against her mother's sore breasts. She twisted and squirmed in her arms, like she wanted to be dropped, like she could already fly away before hitting the floor. Like her father, perhaps, she was trying to leave; like her father, perhaps, she was having problems understanding that love might hold but not restrain, that freedom wasn't opposed to loving.

But how would she be able to teach the baby, if she failed to teach her father? How would she build her a home, with wings in place of hands? How would she learn to love, to be more than a bird of passage?

And the woman thought, perhaps she would have to take a lesson from her ex-beau; teach the child that compromise was always possible. She too would have to spread her wings and fly the nest, find a place for the two of them.

Somehow she would manage. She would build a place for Ertha to grow until her wings were strong enough to carry her wherever she wanted. For her child she would balance earth and sky.

The moment she came out of the hospital she avoided reporters, family and friends; with only her mother and baby she moved to a village in the United States National Radio Quiet Zone, where there was enough earth and enough sky, and where its 147 inhabitants were open to the impossibility of seeing a little girl flying overhead.

The Head and the Winds

Look! Onto the crossroads, under the shadow of these mountains carved hoary by age and wind. Here you are at the end of existence, where reason and logic are stretched so thin they are almost non-existent, delicate like a caul through which thoughts come unfiltered and raw. In this desolate dark valley the only sign of human civilization is to be found at the point where two roads meet, at the heart of the crossroads. There, where old men claim they have seen the devil, where young women who were not ready to be mothers are hunted by flaming hounds: here the ground rises but a little, earth that has been hollowed then turned: a grave.

Above rages the wind in a thousand voices: here old gods cling to life, impishly mischievous in their youth when they had worshippers to use and abuse as puppets and pawns, they have grown cruel after centuries of oblivion. They seethe, and their voices become the wind, thick and resentful, so sharp with old bitterness that its blasts wound like hailstones. It is this wind that has carved the mountains into fangs that gnaw at the sky; it has swept all colour away from these lands. It cuts to the bone, extirpates any previous, present and future warmth, moans sad tales into your ears and makes your eyes water with tragedies you have never and will never hear of, it tears out happiness with every gale.

How the winds revel at the sight of the three men that approach the crossroads! Forgotten demiurges rush onward to unload their never-ending shit-coloured grief onto them, kicking muddy sand into their eyes, their mouths, encumbering their already miserable advance. The three men, as brutish as the landscape, sputter and clean their faces as they stumble forward. Their features are pasted onto their faces with the artistry of a child playing with clay, twisted red and bulging from years of drinking grungy spirits, which fill and confuse their brains, not unlike the spirits that are now raging over their heads. Only their lips are thin, years of pressing them shut against the blows of the wind had filed them into a wan line, or else they had become so with disuse, generation after generation of voices drowned under the roaring of the gods. These men exist, visceral, forever covered in dust and excrement, carrying overhead a coffin they notice only when the turn comes for them to climb inside.

(But don't we all? Isn't our first blanket knitted by time into a shroud, our most lasting stories told by one mouth and silenced by another until they become echoes vanishing in the abyss? These gods that clot the wind, who were once stories, were they to look above them and see death hanging there, would their suffering be eased? Would their howls be quieted in

the knowledge that none of them is unique, that like all in this world they too will be afforded rest? No: that would be a wisdom greater than most gods are ever granted.)

One of the men pushes in front of him a wheelbarrow, a worm-eaten crate with rustic wheels, held together only by the rust that grows around the nails. He puts it down by the crossroads, by the fresh grave, and there they thrust their shovels, pitilessly, into the yellow soil: this is not a corpse they must take care not to damage. 'A suicide,' it is whispered. 'A witch,' it is told.

Behind the three another man has followed, dressed in flat reds and purples; his features are less swollen but his lips as thin and dry. He holds a neckerchief to his face to avoid the wind's wrath, but still his eyes water and under his furs he grows ever colder. Rumour has it he is cold down to his very soul, that he has dabbled in magic arts and understands the words the wind whispers and has learned much without giving anything back, that now the winds hate him and avoid his abode because he promised words and then kept silence. People say he has no blood, that he is but a corpse not unlike the one he has ordered dug up. That he is animated by greed for inhuman knowledge, and feels desire only for corpses like himself.

The men dig while the gales slam on them in abhorrence, they shovel dirt into the wind to add insult to forgotten gods; they fight against the images the rumours conjure into their minds of bodies hacked and strewn about on sawdust that blood and rot has turned black; of nails still growing on the fingers of a lonely hand on a table, of a long-haired head with lips blooming red – and the necromancer licking his own pale lips, taking the head in his hands and whispering sweet nothings in ears blocked by graveyard soil, kissing the flesh that in death has brought forth more colour than anything alive.

Yet the wind never allows any idea to linger too long. It sweeps their heads clean; they work until the sand gives way to darker gravel and eventually their shovels meet something soft: a shroud, deep grey and now tinted mud yellow. Slowly they dispose of the earth around it under the watchful eye of the necromancer, and finally the sturdiest of them all leans in to cradle the dead witch in his arms. Not two fortnights ago in the darkness of a new-moon night he had lowered the same body into the grave from whence he now lifts it. Balled up like a child in its mother's belly the corpse is weightless like paper, like a stillborn baby cradled in the undertaker's arms. Bodies go into the grave and out back to life; undertakers turn midwives when the situation calls. He places it in the wheelbarrow with tenderness he hasn't been paid to use, but he has lived long among the dead and the hopes that he will one day be treated with love have infected him with tenderness toward all unliving things.

The client, the man in red and purple, wants them to take her apart right there: he wants legs and arms off, for he needs to keep not even the entire trunk but only the torso down to the diaphragm; he wants only what she'll need to talk.

Feared in life the witch is diminished in death; the pine boards in the casket barely shift under her, yet still she commands some respect. One of the men approaches with the axe upon his shoulder to yank away the shawl that covers her – but her eyes! They stare unblinking at him, half-rotten whites crying rust and sand! The man steps back, the second one fears angering her ghost; he doesn't notice the many hundreds, many thousands raging spirits around his ears. And the undertaker will not turn away from kindness; he can become a midwife when the situation calls, but he will not become a butcher at the crossroads.

Wind and voices diminish when they reach the village, though some pursue the group: the murmurs travel among the ragged houses and scratch the ceilings, which seem to huddle close as though seeking to find warmth. Light here is a perpetual grey gloaming, so pale that it allows no shadows as the four men pass, and people recoil from the windows with the sudden gust that accompanies the group, and trace vague gestures of protection over their breasts, their eyes. They forget their ears and mouths.

The necromancer wishes for a spacious palace that could split the winds against enamelled turrets, a twisted gothic dream of flying buttresses, dented gables and gargoyles crystalized in a moment of writhing pain. Mouchettes, daggers, the most delicate trefoils to obstruct the passage of the already weak light into his workshop, where the darkness and the dust would birth glorious mistakes, horrors he would love and revile and fear at once... but he lives in one of the many white stone houses, barely distinguishable from the ones squeezing the alleys around it. Constant sand-laden gusts have tinted the walls yellow; wind has plucked away the thatch on the roof – if anyone cared, if the villagers defeated their fear, it would be easy to climb and find one of many holes to spy into the house. At least indoors the necromancer has achieved the desired appearance: the dust has accumulated on every surface, filth and mould crawl thickly up windows littered with dead flies, the grime covers them like dark, fast-growing amber. Everything inside this house speaks of destruction and stifled re-birth, but also of willed blindness, deafness, of an inability to look outside beyond the fading layers of grey.

Only the undertaker is allowed in after the necromancer to cart the dead crone into the workshop, the wheelbarrow imprints a line on the dirt that covers the boards. Behind comes someone else, quiet like the dust, like the grime as it consumes the windows. Hired to clean

the house, she is under orders to respect the romance of dirt, but the carting of a new body signals activity, and she follows the men in silence, stepping into the prints they left, she leaves no traces of her own. Her hair is dark, her skin pale and her hands rough; like the men at the crossroads there is no beauty and almost no colour in her features, her lips are thin and cracked, her eyes too small, her ears jut out from her head too large for the rest of the features. But she is quick-witted and a fast learner, and just two years of watching the necromancer have left her with more understanding than he would believe possible; he considers nature has made her necessarily weaker.

She is happy to allow this belief, she prefers to work in the man's shadow, stepping on the prints he leaves so he won't suspect her of learning. She observes and listens, entertains her own quiet ideas about the things she sees in this house: life, death, silence, the voices that rage overhead and that the necromancer sometimes drags into the house, but which he fails to keep enslaved. She suspects there is a link between them: that life inhabits a body as the winds come into the house, disturbing everything until a they are forced out by silence. Death, she thinks, is only a layer of dust that might yet be blown away with every new gale. She has seen the winds come at her master's words to re-inhabit the bodies he brings; she has felt the house too come alight with the voices that ride the gusts, and she has seen everything abate flat again when the winds escape through the holes in the roof. Can no one else hear those murmurs, the anger on which they ride? Not the undertaker, witness as he is to the cycles of death, nor the necromancer, moving the winds in and out of corpses, touching the gales beneath reanimated skin?

She tells no one. She is thought of as quiet: villagers and visitors alike believe silence is her fate, that daily sightings of death and a cruel master have crushed her into a perpetual hush. They fear her, her silence and unwavering gaze that is able to look at bare bones the same way she looks at living flesh. "Little ghou!" is what they call her, and wonder whether she is truly alive or just another of the many corpses that are carted in cold to be thawed off death. If they asked her she would say that she lives not in silence but in secrecy, and it is her right not her fate. She is building a unique knowledge, not yet sufficient to propel her beyond her master's reach. Soon, perhaps, something will come that will make her overflow, create a wave that she will ride into the world! Then secret and silence will cease to be her realms, she will build and live a palace of her own creation.

But now she is silent, she follows, she steps into the necromancer's foot-prints to avoid creating her own, and peeks in through the door to see the body of the crone being lifted

onto the table, and money changing hands. She barely moves when the undertaker turns to leave; the man knows to avoid her gaze and at the doorframe draws signs of protection over his chest. She wonders, Does he know whose power he invokes against her? What knowledge does she possess that could threaten him, and why does he fear it at all?

There comes the slam of the door, and from the workshop the clatter of tools being selected. She is not called to help, but sits in a corner and watches him untangle the body from its shawl and reposition it on the table. She knows the corpse. In the marketplace, where the girl skulks around the stalls looking for whatever foodstuff she can afford to buy or steal, she heard about the witch from groups of women who gather together and whisper to one another. Perhaps the remoteness of the village and the beating of the wind have blown into these women's heads that they all have something of a witch inside them. So they can talk about her, she is one of their own, she poses no threat to them. A witch, a suicide, the men say; the women cackle, 'Yes, a suicide, the kind who stabs herself six times in the back before putting the noose around her neck.' Suicide! 'Murder by another name.'

But the girl had never seen the witch, nor ever dreamed of using her services, and the inert body on the table holds no interest for her, she is only curious that her master would have brought an old crone into his home, when every other corpse before had been a beauty. How thin the legs are! How scarce her hair, that it makes her head look so much bigger, she can see the shape of the skull underneath.

The necromancer picks his tools: a saw, then a cleaver, and takes measure of the body before lifting the knife up high – then down it comes, hacks until the bone cracks, one shoulder then the other, then the junctures around the legs. He flips her over and repeats the treatment at the back, then saws the weakened joint and discards the four limbs on a heap of dust and wood-shavings, where one arm rolls down onto the floor palm-up, not bleeding, not moving, like a dry twig that lost its fight against a never-ending winter.

The girl is not surprised by the violence, nor the sawing, nor the careless treatment of the limbs. She has seen it before; she has committed the same sins. But she wonders that the man stops there, that he spares the witch's belly and chest, that he leaves the inner organs untouched. Instead he ties the limbless remains to a chair and, perhaps unsettled by the withered sex, covers it with the shroud. Then chair, witch, and shroud are dragged under a hole in the roof.

There are books in the workshop, which the girl flips through in secret when her master is out with live women for once, during the spring months when sunlight breaks through the

whirlpools of sand and wind to create spots of warmth in the workshop. In those long afternoons she sits in the workshop and reads with stolen knowledge, she reads words and reads the universal language of line, drawing, and colour, memorizing the designs, patterns, and templates scattered through the pages: circles, pentagons, hexagons, stars ruled in symbols and languages whose meaning she has glimpsed through the rituals her master carries.

Like her the necromancer has also memorized the books, though the passion that moves him is not the clear curiosity that compels the girl forward but a nearly scientific desire to prod the mysteries between body and soul, he thinks of himself as more of a doctor than a magician, a master of anatomy; a scholar of that which moves the flesh and abandons the body when death comes, absconded by the wind into the high heavens.

He works with his two hands and his memory, never once consults the tomes that he once perused, draws the outline of a circle around the crone's tied body and fills it with symbols – ones the girl barely recognizes, a combination of several different patterns, dotted with even smaller symbols of stars, planets, constellations and animals to fill all empty space.

In the shadows of the doorway the girl listens to the wind hovering over the holes in the roof, feels heat move through the workshop from the many candles her master lights. And then the drawn patterns are on fire, flames that rise but don't burn rise in a pillar of red reaching out to the sky, and the sky itself quickens to greet it in a clash! Red it rages, a towering din of sparks and speeches! Once, in other rituals by candlelight, she has heard a voice, seen a flame, a soul that once belonged to a body come back from its wayfaring runs and gasp at air through its old mouth, form the same words it used to form before life was severed. But never so many, never so hot, yet this angry clamour of wind and souls directed into the desiccated body tied to the chair. In it goes, shaking body and chair, making the skin fissure and break in flakes, and the crone's neck whips back as her chest expands with air, voices, fire. The noise disappears into the witch; the room returns to stillness. Only a high hissing from the tied witch punctures the air.

Then the necromancer laughs, triumphant in this ritual that the girl still doesn't understand, he approaches the corpse and moves its head to face him. The witch moves her eyes, she blinks, then gnashes her teeth and flails the stumps where once her arms did grow. To the girl it seems the witch is going through a great effort, though what does that effort achieve she has yet to discern. She remembers how in the past all awakened corpses show

disorientation, fear at the necromancer, at being in the hands of someone whom they didn't trust in life.

Unknowing or uncaring, the necromancer steps back and begins a new incantation. He commands the descended spirits to speak through the witch's mouth, use the body he has prepared and teach him, spellbound to him he demands to hear the secret ties of life and death, commands them to pour their knowledge once more onto the world. He summons them by names the girl has never heard before, that to her ears bring the sound of thunder, of pouring rains, of earth asunder with fire, the names of the voices in the winds.

But the witch strains against her bindings; if she had arms she'd punch, if she had legs she'd kick, but she only has her torso and head – and she says,

'No.'

And when the man stops, when there are no more names in his list, she says, 'Four limbs you took from me, you'll not take my voice and make it speak others' words. No.'

A step back, and the necromancer tries another incantation – again she contorts, her breast lifts with effort, the shroud falls down, but her mouth remains closed until a single word escapes,

'No,' and nothing else.

It becomes a daily ritual, where the necromancer cycles through ceremonies, through coaxing and abuse, rotating so quickly that the girl feels sorry for the witch, then marvels at her resistance. Perhaps being reanimated didn't allow pain to be felt like it did in life, or so she could only hope as the woman persisted in her silence in front of the beatings.

The same books the man had abandoned for having nothing new to say now lay strewn about the workshop, pages and spines warped from candles and humidity. But no matter the ripped skin, the sweet words, the new magic worked on her, not one word comes from the woman but 'No.'

Every morning the girl cleans the workshop in silence, cowed by the witch's on-going fight against the gods that push from within and the man that pulls from without. The crone gnashes her teeth, and twists limbless in her chair against the rope that cuts into her skin; once she spat something on the sawdust, black and rotten, like mulch at the edge of a river. But no voice comes from her but that of her own.

Outside the wind is quiet and the old gods rage no more over the crossroads; in the sunlight the village perhaps begins to regain something as heads, bones, and hearts grow a little warmer with every sunrise, but a haze remains over them, a feeling of vulnerability, of

uprootedness as though the wind had long ago had torn their bodies out, like trees left with roots exposed; growth possible but its memory remote and forgotten.

But no one wonders where the wind has gone with its stories and its knives. Only the girl, like the few whose roots were always exposed, knows of the struggle in the workshop, underneath the hole where the sun's rays come in, on the little chair about to give in under the combined weight of the spirits inside the old body that is about to crack under the same pressure. And she wonders, chair or witch, which one will break first?

One morning, as the air grows milder and the people in the village stop their shivers and teeth-gnashing, the girl walks into the workshop to see the witch smiling. Her rust-splotched eyes follow the girl as she sweeps around the books, under the table and chair, takes the melted candle-stubs away and replaces new candles and new sawdust.

'Where are my legs?' says the witch quite suddenly, 'Where are my arms?'

'Threw 'em out,' answers the girl. Is she to trust this dead woman? She admires the resilience the witch has shown; how through her sere skin no winds are able to break through, how through her mouth comes only her own rusted voice. But she does not know she can trust her. 'They were beginning to smell.'

'You hear? The chittering, the rustling of the leaves? What is it?'

'Some creatures, small, they don't walk on the ground like we, but flutter 'round and make noise whenever the sun goes anywhere.'

The crone laughs. 'Ah. Birds, child. They are birds.'

Now the girl stops her sweeping, and thinks. 'The wind never let 'em come before, did it.'

'Nay. Too much noise, too many voices screaming at once.'

'You know 'em?'

'By name, each and every kind. From the dirty sparrows you see from your window, child, to the hawk that kills it at midday and the owl you hear at night. Once they lived here, people knew what they were.'

The necromancer returns. The witch falls silent, the girl sinks back into pretend idiocy, above them there is silence and the cry of birds. Everyday the crone seems to gain strength over the voices that crawl from her throat, or at least has attained peace with them; she grits her teeth less often, doesn't spit any more rot onto the shavings around her chair. Sometimes the girl finds her face uncreased, and in those days they talk. The witch knows the names of the birds and their cries, she teaches her the names and uses of plants, how to tell signs of disease in animals and trees. Then one day she asks her,

'What do you do here?'

The girl has a broom in her hands. 'I sweep,' she says, 'I clean 'n cook, and take out the things he tells me to, like arms and legs that've gone rotten.'

'Did you cut them yourself?'

'No, he don't allow me to.'

'What about the books?'

'He don't allow me either. But I've read some of 'em.'

'So you have learned,' the crevices around the witch's mouth grows with every smile: her joy is now predatory in its width, in the sunken eyes that do not light when the lips purse to grin. 'You know what he knows. And I could teach you more.'

'Maybe,' says the girl, 'Though I en't ever tried nothin' myself.'

'I can guide you,' says the witch. Her mouth is wide; her eyes too big. The girl steps back. 'I can teach you more than he ever would.'

'That en't much difficult, he's never taught me nothin'. Bet you wouldn't do it fer nothin', either. What do you want?'

'My limbs!' cries the crone, 'New limbs! You will go to wherever it is that your people are buried, you will get limbs for me and give me back what your master took. I slept, and was awakened only to be enslaved, to have your master attempt to take my voice away!'

'Oh yeah? Whatcha gonna do when you've got some legs back?'

'Walk,' says the crone, 'Walk back to my grave, release the winds in me to their rage and return to the sleep I earned.'

But the girl goes back to sweeping. 'En't gonna do nothin' of that.'

The crone smile turns; her broken skin is like a maw that would open to devour her whole if she were not limbless, tied to a chair.

'Why?'

'Cause I don't want those winds blowin' all over,' says the girl. 'I think I like these bird-things.'

'Help me!' screams the witch, 'I shall teach you! You will learn to heal, to see, to kill if that's what you want.'

She shrugs her shoulders. 'That e'nt what I want.'

Days go. Peace has reigned in the workshop, in the stillness of a world's glacial thawing into spring, now the witch screams everyday, she offers the girl all her secrets and all her hatred. She spits and twists and bends her body against the restraints; skin flakes and breaks

around the ropes. The girl leaves her to rage; leaves the necromancer to his confusion, she knows when she is in power. Days go, nights go, the still air warms, she is patient.

Then one day the witch seems exhausted; head lolling against the chair when the girl comes to do her sweeping. Her eyes seem to pop from her skull, her stomach is distended with the captives inside.

‘Girl,’ says the crone, ‘Child. I have offered you my knowledge. I have offered you your master’s knowledge. You could have both.’

‘But I don’t,’ says the girl, and sweeps. ‘Don’t wanna be you, don’t wanna be him.’

‘What could you possibly wish to be, to know, that I’m failing to offer?’

The girl then stops her work. ‘You en’t offered what the winds know.’

‘What do you know what the winds know?’

‘I know, ma’am. I heard ‘em when they used to whisper, I hear them say *everything*, and I seen you en’t listening to ‘em, and my master too, too busy askin’ instead.’

‘You could not control them,’ says the witch. ‘They would rob you of yourself. Of your voice.’

But the girl stands there, half-leaning on the broom. Her sight falls on a cleaver her master has not put away. How easily she takes it to hand, how solid, how light! The witch screams, she does not listen, winds gale in her head.

‘No, they wouldn’t,’ she says, ‘‘cause I’d listen, I’d repeat. I’d let them borrow my voice to tell their stories, I’d repeat their words until they quieted.’

She raises her weapon. Her eyes meet the witch’s, she catches a smile growing in the old woman’s face. Like sunrays breaking through the holes in the roof the metal breaks unerring on the crone’s unclothed neck, frail like dry wood it gives way. No blood greets the girl but wind from the pipe and the bones – and the witch is laughing, her maw smiles as her spirit joins the winds that escape through her body! The laughing head flies from its pedestal into the girl’s hands – she is free! Free come the winds from the head, singing for the first time their stories into the arms of the girl. She holds the head above hers and showers in the wind; becomes the dead woman and becomes herself again, the gods grin down at her!

The wind rises, a storm escapes the house, takes with it the black amber in the windows, the candles, the dust and shadows. In the village the people that forgot to protect their ears and mouths find new names sliding down their heads into their tongues, thoughts and memories of places and people and gods, all things past that become present and stay forever future; they burst from their homes and talk to each other but all that comes from their

mouth are stories. Jumbled words, spilling tales and ideas, they run to the crossroads, there break like waves in every direction, eddy and swirl into a world which has exploded into spring.

In the workshop shines the sun, the head and the winds are gone. The girl holds her hands aloft, overflown with gods and stories, stands at the centre of a new world. Her hair is wild, her eyes shine under the light, her cheeks are flushed – and her lips flower with tales, flower like a compass rose!

The salt first appeared in the cupboard, of all places, which was why Rosemary took such a long time to notice it. Only natural that there'd be loose salt sprinkled amongst the peppercorns and sesame seeds, the aniseed, vanilla pods, dried chipotles, and turmeric.

But then there was salt hiding in the carpet, and in the creases of the bed sheets. Rock-salt in the shower and kitchen, hardening between mosaics and around the cap-burners on the stove, dusting all floors in fine crystals that stuck to the soles of her feet. Salt rimming the toilet seat like the world's nastiest margarita...

Eugh, Rosemary. Must you be so gross all the time?

Salt: she knew because she worked with it. Rosemary was a chef, she worked less through theory and more through her mouth: at thirty-seven she had never managed to outgrow that oral instinct, the toddler-like desire to know the world through its taste and texture in her mouth. Salt: she knew because she had tasted it. She had taken some of the grains she found between her sheets and put them on her tongue, her mind screamed *Gross, Rosemary!* in Rob's voice; her tongue simply informed her it was salt.

Sanity and common sense opposed the idea. Where would the salt be coming from? Surely it had to be a kind of moss, a type of mineral grime she had never seen before. But things had stopped making sense some years ago, and Rosemary accepted the salt as one more of these things. Crazier things had happened. Women created entire babies inside them all the time, and then they made milk. When she visited her GP to check on some "lady discomfort" he had asked her whether the discharge looked like cottage cheese. Babies, milk, cottage cheese; why not salt? Women could supplant the dairy industry anytime now! Rows of women, milked day in, day out...!

Must you be so gross all the time?

Rob had left nearly a year ago, but his voice lived on inside her. There had been reasons to his parting – bad sex, possible infertility in one of them, and his love for her simply disappearing one day. Perhaps her grossness had been to blame. Whenever she accepted a piece of sticky toffee pudding swimming in custard at the restaurant, *gross*, whenever she farted in bed, *gross*, whenever she forgot to clean her hair from the shower, *gross*, whenever she fried an egg with oil leftover from the night before, *gross*. Perhaps, Rosemary thought,

she had simply interiorised grossness to a point in which she had simply started producing it as a tangible by-product.

Or perhaps the salt was Rob's love, which she thought had evaporated so suddenly. His vindictive love, sublimated from his body, had condensed into salt and solidified around the spaces he had once occupied, transforming her flat into an ecosystem she could no longer inhabit.

She wished she could talk about it to her friends, in the silly Tequila Thursdays they had inaugurated in the wake of Rosemary's break-up. She had tried, in muted ways, to explain how hard it had become to be in the flat, how the air was dry and her skin was chafing, how she couldn't get a good night sleep anymore. It made the salt sound like a metaphor instead of a real accumulation that grew night by night. Her friends all insisted they understood what she was going through, from "OMG I totally get it" Carmen to "I always thought Rob was, like, a psychic vampire" Joan. They all suggested a number of answers and directed her to a number of people, from yoga masters to herbalists and psychics. Rosemary had nodded and taken down numbers, keeping always one shot behind her friends in case she got too drunk and began babbling about deserts and mines; slavery and the origins of the word "salary."

In a span of three months Rosemary invested in solutions of all kinds and sizes. Rock crystals, to be placed at different spots of her flat: they would balance her energy and absorb any possible bad vibes left by Rob. She did everything the shop-owner explained, down to washing the crystals with water and mustard seeds. The next morning the crystals had disappeared under new dunes of sand.

Candles followed, in all colours, meant to be left overnight until the wick was consumed. Rosemary found them, like the crystals, smothered by salt before they could burn very low. She tried meditation and mindfulness but was disturbed by the whisper of the salt accumulating around her, the grains that rolled down her arms and over her forehead. And when she visited a GP, unable to explain the real cause of her cracked ankles and delicate skin, she had been given a prescription for sleeping pills and an anti-fungal cream she was meant to apply on her feet.

Meanwhile, the salt claimed recognition. What had started as errant crystals in the carpet accumulated into a clear layer, then thickened into fine dunes that swallowed her feet as she walked. At nights she dreamed of Rob announcing he was off to a triathlon holiday and she was trying to get there too but had left all her luggage at home. The dream would dissolve into never-ending train ride through dark mines and salt palaces, but she never had the

luggage to be able to stop anywhere. Sometimes in her dreams Rob would kiss her again, and of course his taste was of salt: she would wake to find the crystals had grown around her while she slept, nearly entombed her in a pyramid of white misery. Within months the salt blocked the doors, clogged the drains, and made finding her makeup at the bathroom sink an enterprise much resembling an archaeological dig. Rock crystal amassed in the closet wall only to come down and entomb all but two pair of shoes (work pumps, ballerina flats); there were rough grains in her bra, in her socks, and in her panties, it made her scared the salt would somehow penetrate her and travel deep into her body and make her infertile, drying her uterus-first.

Eugh, Rosemary. Must you be so gross all the time?

But what was she supposed to do about those fears? About the things she thought, even if they were stupid and perhaps erred on the side of dirty? And what was she supposed to do about her personal desert, which chafed her ankles and had begun blocking the T.V.?

And of course, the only room which remained clean and empty in the middle of the growing white desert was Rob's ex-studio, where he had kept his desk and computer and gym equipment. It was the best room of the flat, at the very heart of it, the first one you saw when you opened the front door. He had chosen it because it was the last room to receive sunlight; in the evenings as the sun set the rays would paint the walls with caramel reds and oranges. It could have been her refuge from the salt, where she could drag some pillows and sit to eat and live without the constant irritation. But in its emptiness, devoid of the posh furniture with which Rob had once filled it, the room was too much a failure, more oppressive even than white dunes.

Rosemary avoided it, instead she spread a clean bedsheet over the dune that used to be her sofa and sat there every evening, watching T.V. as much as she watched the dunes grow. And when the salt swallowed the screen, she sat on her dune and thought about her options. She could take pills, stop dreaming, find other men and sleep at their houses and see if the desert moved with her. Become the slut she had never been. What could she lose? All her life she had been told that having multiple partners would lead to diseases of all kinds, but in truth years of monogamy and care had left her with UTIs, as many instances of the thrush as ever before, and an equally painful vagina.

Eugh, Rosemary. Must you...

'Oh, shut up,' she threw the empty teacup at the salt, slid down her dune, and put on rubber gloves to dig for her mobile.

The next afternoon she was dressed and ready in a cocktail bar, with “OMG I’m so happy you agreed to come” Carmen to accompany her to a speed-dating event. From these twenty men with whom she’d have four minutes each she would choose one, go for drinks and go to his for the night. She would find the spark, a feeling somewhere in her that would tell her that she yet lived, that the salt had not quite consumed her. But as she looked at the men, and as none truly looked back at her, she remembered that the reason she had never been much of a slut was because she had never been that interested in men and sex to begin with. Her throat tightened and she sat down on the chairs assigned for the women, as though about to interview some fresh faced *sous* for the restaurant, only these men were, like her, less on the side of fresh and more on the side of dough. She suspected none would very much like her, less so when two chairs ahead there were some younger, prettier girls, who would undoubtedly prove less salty as well.

Men, to their credit, did seem interested in a chef who happened to own a two-room flat. Less to their credit, they seemed interested not in her but in the possibility of room and board. They worked in finance, and had little conversation to offer, and she had as little to offer in return.

Only one stood out. Jalil Şerif, a chemist, teeth and fingers yellowed by smoking, black hair and barely-there chevron moustache. He had stared at her name tag, and instead of asking like all others what did she do, he simply said,

‘Salt, huh.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Isn’t that what it means? Rosemary, dew from the sea, which is salt.’

‘Huh. I always thought it was just “Rose” and “Mary.” I like that better than salt.’

‘Well, I don’t think anyone else is going to make the connection. People probably think of the herb first.’

‘I guess. Maybe I should just write them separately. Or with a hyphen.’

‘But then people will only call you Rose, and you’re not a Rose, are you? No offense, really. You just seem very Rosemary to me.’ He stopped for a moment, then suddenly said, ‘Do you know salt can be boiled?’

‘How? It’s not a liquid.’

‘Everything has a boiling point, and a melting point. It’s just a matter of heat.’

‘So what happens when you boil it?’

'It becomes lava, more or less. It has a very high boiling point. Around one thousand, four hundred and thirteen degrees Celsius.'

““Around”?”

'Exactly one thousand, four hundred and thirteen degrees Celsius.'

'Oh. So not something I can do at home?'

He smiled at her with his yellow teeth. 'Depends on your kitchen equipment.'

'Huh. I could probably do it then. I'm a chef.'

'Ah, a British chef! Boiling would come to you easy, then!'

'Oh no no, sir, not this chef!'

She laughed. It was the first time in the event she had said it with pride. Something of a spark flickered in her for a moment. What a different man he was from Rob, who never smoked or vaped or did any drugs harder than red wine. Jalil wouldn't count his calories, thought Rosemary, wouldn't keep foam rollers and stretch-bands in his office for that moment when he just had to massage his butt. Jalil probably didn't know what a spirulina was supposed to be, and would never buy chia seeds in bulk. At the end of the event she wrote her name and number in a small card to be handed to him, but didn't look for him before she left. Her friend scolded her for wasting an opportunity, but Rosemary reckoned it was a good first effort after a year of loneliness and salt.

Her flat awaited, however, in silent shades of blue with the desert that refused to budge. Outside the day begun to fade, she had to throw her weight at the door and force her way inside. Salt spilled outside, she clambered atop the ruins and lost a shoe. Ahead she could see Rob's studio, door open, empty floor crossed by slits of sun coming through the blinds. Crystals of salt dusted her legs and seemed to move up her black skirt, racing each other as through static. Her legs sunk into the salt, she had to wade through the hallway until she reached the empty room.

The salt that slid off her clattered on the clean floorboards. She opened the blinds and the light of the pre-dusk poured into the room like caramel thickening on a pan. At the door, the errant crystals that had stumbled in shimmered, each awn shone like gold-leaf and each face was red. She kneeled down, moved to avoid blocking the light, reached out to drag more salt into the room. It changed under the light, from sad greyish grains into fire-like gems.

Rosemary sprung up, climbed over the dunes, threw away her remaining shoe. She tripped and got up, rose waves of salt behind her, reached the kitchen and forced the pantry open to retrieve an old flat broom and a garbage bag. Into the bag she shoved her clean

clothes and remaining pair of shoes, into the empty studio she began sweeping the salt, more and more enthusiastically as she saw the colours playing on the grains. Soon the entry hallway was empty and half the kitchen too, and sweat ran down her forehead as she worked. In the shower she hit the wall of rock salt until it toppled down, and she carried the fragments too into the studio. Under the sun they shone like jewels; diamonds gilded with gold. The salt itself seemed glad to take movement, to follow her around. It was her child, of her creation, or perhaps it was the love that had once been hers, it didn't matter. It went into the studio, filling the corners and making small hills, landmarks of quartz and old candles she had found buried. Her footsteps behind her marked her path; a zen garden of space lost, regained, reformed.

And Rosemary, in the middle of it, was dusted in white: a bridal dress, a shroud, shining red and orange and golden as the sun descended. She felt tired, and hot, hot like one thousand four hundred and thirteen degrees. The desert boiled.

*Fiona McCool sucks on her thumb,
Gets in the car, begins the school run.
Summer above, spring is just gone,
Nothing comes in, her mind remains clear.*

Aye, like a babe scared of the dark she sucks her thumb, and foreknowledge comes like fear does at night-time: visions of crashes and blood stained car-windows, of solitary walks interrupted by muggers, of a friendly face dropping a pill in her drink. Yes, Fiona McCool might suck on her thumb like a child shaking under blankets, but she is no coward! One blessed by the visions knows to plan, she leaves her car behind and cycles instead, she knows to avoid the alleyways, she knows to wait for the pill to drop in her ale before calling the police.

And no vision dares appear under the spring sunlight, through the warm airs of June. Fiona McCool climbs in her truck, the one she uses for work, and sinks her foot on the pedal, rolls the windows low as they go, launches onto the roads. She has pixie-hair dyed green, piercings around her ears, tattoos inside each wrist. She is a brave woman, Fiona McCool. Her sole child, beloved Oscar, barely eight years of age but already tall like his mother, attends the same school she did.

Yet it is not every day she drives down these roads. Busy with her own business, she spends her time among nature, carries soil and seeds, grows her own trees, plans gardens for a fee. She's a landscaper, her truck carries fountains, rocks and statues, spades, pickaxes, poles. Happiest working outside, rain or shine, she keeps irregular hours. Yes! Oftentimes when she arrives at her destination, much confusion awaits her, housewives and their men, alike, do stare at Fiona McCool, and say,

'Oh is it just you? I thought it'd be a bloke, to be honest. No, no, but can you manage? It's a really big tree...'

Today her women wait at the school-gate, friends and comrades all. There is Meghan, mother of Eva, and Claire, mother of Ethan, and red-faced Paige, with her third child on her hip. Twenty-six years, Fiona McCool is the youngest of them by a decade or more, yet they coalesce around her, and offer a helping hand. They open their house for Oscar when his

mother works late, they feed him his tea, they help with his homework while she wrestles giant rocks in Zen gardens and fights rogue streams into new beds.

‘Fiona!’ They call when they see her, with great happiness. ‘Bless, how are you? How was the weekend?’

‘I’m so happy to see you today, dear, you’ve no idea.’

Yes, they are glad, for a powerful woman, Shauna O’Doulán, had moved in from a different county, and brought her cohorts with her. New women, mothers of a strange sort, with dyed hair and salon tans, driving SUVs and sipping skinny lattes! Gentrification, is the word the newspapers use, invasion what Fiona McCool calls it. They come, they sneer at the houses and states where the locals live, they moan about the lack of good schools, but nevertheless stay, stay and force change as they see fit.

And change they bring now, for Shauna had dethroned their former leader and taken over the PTA. She wants a different school: more hours, remedial classes and private tutoring, music and sports in the afternoons, lessons in French and Mandarin Chinese for elegance and an edge over competitors. And wherefore shall the money come for the classes, for the workshops, for the teachers imported from around the globe? The gentrifiers have found a way: the school bus they find a waste of precious resources! Defund it, they bellow, and money shall appear for musical instruments and afternoon workshops. And now Shauna O’Doulán has summoned all to her home, in the posher side of town, where the two factions shall come together and fight over the changes they desire.

Now Shauna O’Doulán comes close, sunglasses dark on her brow, at her waist glistens a Gucci belt, and upon seeing Fiona McCool she exclaims,

‘Oh, hi Fiona! How nice to see you! How are you?’

‘Alright, Shauna, thanks,’ she’s a strong woman, Fiona McCool, and puts a brave face to adversity. ‘You’re looking well.’

‘You too! Did you dye your hair again? It looks so nice, but you really do need to stop it, you know hair gets weaker every time you dye it, right? You should grow it out, it’d look so much nicer on you,’ says Shauna O’Doulán, and touches the short chalky waves of McCool’s mane, and instantly Fiona McCool knew that her words were guise for ill intentions. For they were of two different stocks, and she knew there was no appreciation in Shauna O’Doulán for her dyed hair or her piercings. ‘But I’m so glad you could make it; I didn’t think you would! Spring must be a busy time for a gardener.’

‘*Landscape*, and yes, very busy. Best time for transplants and new builds.’

‘Yes, landscaper, of course. Anyway, I’m so glad to see you here, I know you weren’t on board with the idea originally, but I’m sure we can change your mind. No, don’t say anything now, Fi,’ there’s a mean girl in Shauna yet, the kind that never outgrew high school. The kind that made Fiona McCool’s life hell on earth, a bully through and through. She was not always this brave woman, Fiona McCool, and even now she is forced to stop. ‘Keep it for later, everyone will want to hear it.’

Thus leaves Shauna O’Doulán, and angry the women shake their heads and denounce the insults received.

‘What a self-absorbed cow.’

‘She thinks she is so much better than us, doesn’t she?’

‘Not like she does anything with her life, though.’

Wisely Fiona McCool tells them that such is the mean girl magic Shauna O’Doulán wields, to cleave and whittle at you until you are too short, too small to weather the onslaught. But long years have passed since the teen years Fiona McCool, and she has matured much. It shall take more than mean words to take her down.

‘Damn right,’ states Paige, mother of three, and addresses the toddler on her hip. ‘We ain’t gonna let the mean girl win, are we? Are we? No we ain’t!’

So comes the time for the children to run free from the school gates, and show their mother their day’s work. Finger-paint drawings of family and house, sheets of rounded letters that the younger had filled, while the older did carry potatoes and wires that they would transform into clocks. And the mothers pack them into their cars and drive up into the posh side of town, following the car of Shauna O’Doulán.

Atop a great hill awaits the house, surrounded by a gated garden, fierce Chihuahuas guard the entrance and bark at the newcomers. Fair maidens wait at the door, au-pairs come from Spain and Romania, with jars of Pimm’s that they distribute round the women. Free flow the fruit cups, children run to the garden and find it strewn with expensive toys, dolls and cars and playhouses. They play in groups under the watchful eye of the au pairs, but to the wise eye of Fiona McCool the garden is featureless and boring. Grass as far as the eye sees, sad round shrubberies with polished stones to isolate them, ivy covers the walls but it is shaved short, nothing betrays the possible wilderness of nature.

And O’Doulán comes and puts a hand on her shoulder, and says,

‘If you’re ever in need of money, Fi, just let me know. I could always use another pair of hands in the garden.’

The insult rings clear in Fiona McCool's ears, aye, she feels herself grow hot with anger, but bites her tongue. The time for attack is not come, instead she says,

'As long as it more than pruning and cutting your grass, I would be happy to do it.'

The two bands wait in the living room, in leather sofas sat facing each other. Much finery surrounds them, plush cream carpet that folds under their feet, glass tables with gauzy lamps and store-bought souvenirs from Shauna O'Doulán's rambles around the world. Tall are the windows, large the home-cinema in the back, a lonely au pair dutifully refills the glasses of the women as she goes by the room. But Fiona McCool sees not finery but intimidation and distraction, and so begins to worry. Already her friends sink in the cushions, ignored by their enemies, deep in discussion of the latest episode of Bake-Off.

She sucks on her thumb, cautious of what is to come, but while she grasps the message the visions bring, quick like an adder Shauna imposes her will and calls forth!

'Is everybody comfortable? Let's get started, we don't want anyone missing *Strictly* tonight, do we!'

Riotous assent comes from her followers; the rest smile terse. Says Shauna: that many had moved to the city after their husbands relocated; so had the men made the city flourish with glittery tech firms and start-ups delivering clean laundry and fresh coffee beans; and so had old graffitied neighbourhoods boomed in price. But values, too, moved, and said Shauna -

'Some of us feel that the school offers too few options for extra lessons, and we feel that this will put our children at a disadvantage. We've raised this matter with the school, but apparently budget is tight. So we looked around, and we found that if we move certain things around, and play with the budget, options increase.'

Verily did Fiona McCool wish to ask who were these "we" O'Doulán talked about, but bit her tongue, kept herself civil. And timid Paige, with her toddler on her lap, raises her hand.

'Shauna? How do you mean, play with the budget?'

'Close the orchard, sell the plots!' calls a woman behind O'Doulán, and another carries the attack.

'Cancel gaelic sports!'

'And home ec, too! Is this the 19th Century or what?'

'Those, and the school bus,' concludes Shauna O'Doulán. 'If we defund those and sold the space of the orchard, the money could be directed into afternoon workshops, remedial lessons, and private tutoring that will give an edge to the children...'

Claire, mother of Ethan, comes forth: 'What edge are you...?'

‘The eleven plus are coming! Do you think children can get into a decent school nowadays without tutoring and cramming?’

‘But not all of us are interested in the eleven plus...’

‘Which is why we’re discussing this, of course. Rule of the majority, wouldn’t you say? And anyway, in America, toddlers receive musical education and language acclimatization classes since kindergarten. No duh they lead in technological advancement.’

‘But we like the orchard!’ vain are the attempts of Claire, mother of Ethan, even if they are valiant. ‘And the sports are a point of pride for the school.’

‘But how are those going to help in the future? Tell us, Claire, explain how knowing how to grow apple trees is going to be of any help for our children,’ Shauna O’Doulán voice comes like a thunderbolt, and Claire sinks into her seat. ‘Local sports are orchards are *nice*, but they’re not of much use in a CV.’

‘They’re eight, they don’t need a CV!’ cries Paige. ‘And never mind the future, we need the bus *now*! Many of us work during the afternoon...’

‘And that is why this program is so helpful! The children will stay in school, safe, fed, will take more lessons, do their homework... you get them home by eight, ready for telly and bed.’

Claire dares not say any more, Paige tries to rouse support.

‘It just seems late, is all. We like to have tea together, and talk about the day with them.’

‘You can do that before bed!’ scolds Shauna, ‘Wouldn’t you be happy, too, if they’re a bit more tired? You always whine about how long it takes to put them to bed.’

‘Well, it does when there’s three of them, but I...’

‘So now you’ll have more time to mind the youngest! Win-win, Paige.’

But Meghan calls out, ‘Maybe for you, Shauna, but some of us actually like having our children around!’

Yet there are cries from behind Shauna,

‘Are you implying we don’t?’

‘How dare you!’

‘Are you calling us bad mothers because we care about the future?’

‘At least we’re not complaining about bed-time!’

‘Hard as it might be for you to believe, Meghan, we will miss our children too,’ declares Shauna, in a self-righteous smirk. ‘We just choose to prioritise their education over our happiness. Their future is more important.’

‘Their future isn’t only exams!’ replies Meghan, but her opponents remain ever fierce.

‘But exams are a part of their future, whether you like it or not! Or are you planning to have them sit out their GCSEs and their A-levels too?’

‘Better start them when they’re young,’ cries another woman, ‘So they get used to being tested and assessed. It doesn’t stop with school, nowadays.’

And Meghan looks around, in disbelief she mutters, ‘Not sure I want them to live like that,’ but dares say nothing more.

So in that moment of quiet, once more Shauna O’Doulán smiles and steps forward, and calls forth for the vote to be held,

‘Because I don’t think there’s any more objections? No? I mean, we can all agree that longer hours of education will be better in the long run for the children, and will teach some of us to let go. So, hands up, who votes for defunding home ec, gaelic sports, and the school bus...?’

Fiona McCool has to be fast, stop the vote before it goes through – but how can she do it, and avoid the pitfalls already laid before her? She cannot accuse her enemies of being truant mothers, she would not sink so low. She cannot say that she does not yearn every day to come back to her child, whose first steps she missed and whose first words she didn’t hear, working hard as she was to get her business running. Like Meghan she would be accused, screamed at, misheard. Memories arose, of similar times, when to suck on her thumb brought only mockery and jeers!

For she has been a timid child, Fiona McCool, who enjoyed trees and flowers and the names of plants. Shunned by her peers, all alone she used to walk round the football field; looking at the players, in high hopes the ball would roll her way and a boy would talk to her.

So one did, and his friendship proffered to her: thus it was that Fiona McCool found herself with child when she was but seventeen, and her father kicked her out in anger and called her “a slut, just like your goddamn mother”, and left her to live in a shelter, working shifts in a gastro-pub to make meets end.

In this way she acquired her powers: the Cock Horse was the name of the pub, Finnegas its landlord, and he reckoned himself a poet. The greatest poet on God’s green earth! Guardian of knowledge and music! Odes he wrote about hunting, fishing, bullfighting, dogfighting, wrestling and sex. Long hours Fiona McCool was forced to sit and listen to his writing and bawdy tales, for he slept around and cared nothing, smacked McCool’s bum more than once. He enjoyed Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Ayn Rand, whom he thought

interesting for a woman. And whenever a patron confessed to enjoy something there did Finnegas appear to demonstrate them foolish in their predilections. Sad the day he discovered McCool kept a copy of *The Bell Jar*, he did decry it –

‘Sentimental nonsense, pure tosh. Thought she’s so great because she was sad, did she? Boo-hoo! No fucking wonder Hughes left her, must’ve bored him dead.’

Ah, but a cook had quit the pub mid-shift, one day, when Finnegas walked in with his latest catch: the largest salmon McCool had set eyes on, live quicksilver in its desperate rippling, held aloft by line and rod.

‘Get in the kitchen, Fiona,’ he did rage, ‘I’m gonna roast this sucker, and I don’t want to see a boil on the skin, you hear me? Keep an eye on it ‘till I return.’

Gutted the fish, head and tail cut off, he set it over the fire and she sat down to watch it. The unnamed baby moved in her tummy, and McCool did wonder what would be of her and her child. Then a boil began to rise on the untouched skin of the fish, and in a panic she pressed her thumb on it to make it disappear, though she felt her skin boiling in return, for she feared Finnegas rage and couldn’t afford to be fired. And as she nursed her thumb in her mouth, on her tongue she tasted the saltiness of the fish, and the ashes from the fire underneath: yet something else there she felt: as words travel from the head to the tongue, something moved from her thumb to her tongue to her brain.

Alone she saw herself, poor and laid off, her baby fostered by others, into a family that would include her not. Burnt in her mind remained that image, of the many that came the first time she sucked on her thumb, of her babe in the hands of nurses and care workers; and on her thumb remained a mark of green: a metallic stain, left by the mercury on the fish. Love for her baby and love for her plants, and the fear of losing both: Fiona McCool knew then no one would help her if she did not reach for help first.

Off she tore off her apron, threw it at Finnegas with a cry of “Shove it, asshole!” and left to make amends with her father, plan her business, plan her life. And ever after, in moments of great peril she would suck her thumb and a vision of the future would come and clear her doubts.

Aye, Fiona McCool sucks on her thumb now, no one jeers, no one dares. And like fear at night-time visions come – nay, like a clear head after a long sleep! Visions of trees and of land and of roots, of apples and dark soil turned. No meaning had she divined then, but now she stepped forward, to say,

‘Just one second, Shauna. What did you mention about the orchard?’

And O’Doulan stops, and looks taken aback, and asks, ‘What about the orchard?’

‘That’s what I’m asking. You said you would sell it, but didn’t explain anything else. I’m frankly surprised no one else picked up on it.’

‘Because there’s not much else to explain. The hospital next door is looking to expand their parking lot, and...’

‘How much money would be derived from the sale?’

‘I don’t have the numbers with me,’ claims Shauna O’Doulan, ‘But I guarantee...’

‘And who’ll be liaising between the two? It’s not like the PTA can handle the sale on its own.’

‘Of course not!’ true lands McCool’s attack, and Shauna falters slightly. ‘We would hire a firm – estate agents – they would handle the legal side of it.’

And fire burns anew in Meghan’s eyes, and she looks up to say, ‘I can’t believe it! You – your *husband* runs the new estate agents in town, doesn’t he?’

‘It hasn’t been decided who will handle the – ’

‘Oh please, Shauna, you mean to tell us he wouldn’t get involved?’

‘Fine, maybe he will!’ Shauna admits her wrong-doing, but remains steadfast on her feet.

‘And he will look after the best interests of the school!’

But from her own group there arise cries,

‘Shauna! How could you not tell us?’

‘That’s a conflict of interest!’

‘My only interest is to ensure our children grow up successful,’ O’Doulan insists, but many women turn their backs on her and open the tall doors behind them. They call their offspring, call for dolls and cars to be picked up, jumpers to be put and hands to be washed. And while O’Doulan screams that the vote has yet to be decided, none turn to face her, Fiona McCool knows her spell to be broken, she has triumphed this day.

So she picks up Oscar, who comes running at her knees, and gives him a kiss he professes to hate, and hears him explain they were playing to be superheroes. And he had chosen indeed to be Thor, he said, one of the good guys, but had allied himself halfway through with the one playing as the evil Loki, for Iron-Man had taken a turn to the mean. It is good, she says, to see an enemy is not always so: stand up to bullies, be friendly, be good!

"Vous êtes si belle, si bonne et si honnête, que je ne puis m'empêcher de vous faire un don..."

- Charles Perrault, "Les Fées."

The Bad One: Hello? Yes, hello, this is me! Thank you so much for the invitation, love, it was real proper of you. No, no, no, it's no bother at all! About bloody time someone asked *me* about it, too, you know? I'd thought someone out there would've wanted the whole story.

The Bad One: Well, you probably know the story, don't you hun? Everybody does, it was on every bloody tabloid all over the sodding world. You know how it is, Page three, tits, page four, girl magically spits out diamonds and roses with every word. Fuckers!

The Good One: Thank you for your letter and invitation. I understand that you wanted to do this in person, but as you might know I try and keep to myself. If you don't mind, I shall answer in writing.

The Good One: I have to say I fail to see what you would attain by revisiting this story. I assume it isn't out of curiosity – there is already a number of books written on us.

The Bad One: And pearls, of course. I used to say, you know, that that was the closest she ever got to lick balls... I don't, anymore. She deserves better. She was so pure, my baby sister, so lady-like, they loved her, ate her right up they did, the tabloids and the telly and anyone with half a brain and a Twitter account.

The Bad One: And of course no one thought to ask her how if she liked not being able to talk without a bloody rose shooting through your windpipe. Roses have thorns, hun! *Literal* thorns! And there you have it, right there, the problem with faeries. They never think things through, little bitches, never stick around. Wave a fucking wand, then fuck off on their merry way!

The Good One: You say you want to hear it "in our own voices," to "gain the story back from the society that took advantage of us." But re-telling wouldn't erase what me and my sister went through, and if you publish what I write you, too, will be taking that story – my story! – for your own advantage.

The Good One: I'm sorry if I come across as curt or presumptuous. I'm not trying to insult you. I will tell you, if that is alright, not my story but what I think about it, instead.

The Bad One: Anyway, you know how it happened. There's the fairy, hanging out by the river, like people use rivers for anything but peeing and walking their dogs. Mommy dearest sent my sister off to walk Suzie her Pomeranian, in the middle of the goddamn winter, and there's this old woman, obviously a fairy.

The Bad One: You know she says nowadays she didn't know, that she truly only wanted to help her get some water from the river... Well / don't know, but if she was looking for a way out, I wouldn't blame her, I couldn't! Our mam was a proper cunt, if she treated me the way she treated my sister I'd been in a hurry to get the hell out. Huh? Yes, love, you can quote me on that! Hahah, she's not alive to sue you anymore, don't you worry.

The Good One: Overwhelmingly, whenever these "Fairy Gifts" tales are told it is done so as an empty, feel-good stories, stripped of all undertones, political and personal.

The Good One: But sadly, those that received these "gifts" have their lives re-shaped against their will. I say against their will because the fairy gift is usually unexpected, or at least the faeries never ask for the subject's opinion on the matter.

The Bad One: So anyway, she gets into the river to get water for this “old maid”, probably freezes her tits off in the process, and ta-dah! Old maid transforms into a beauty, and goes “Oooo your heart is pure as your actions are good” or some bullshit, “Oooo allow me to now reward you blah blah”, and when she comes home she’s clutching her throat, tears in her eyes. I think the last thing she ever said normal-like, you know, was “I can’t breathe.”

The Bad One: And then she’s sick on the carpet, and mam’s screeching about how expensive the cleaning’s gonna be... only instead of actual sick, there’s one rose and two diamonds there. Oh my days, you should’ve seen it! Sis crying, “Mam, I dunno what’s happening to me!” and diamonds and roses and pearls coming with each bloody word... oh, and I do mean bloody, hun, sorry if it gets too graphic, but imagine the thorns ripping the inside of her throat, blood and sick *everywhere*. And mam, you think she was worried or scared?

The Good One: Take, for instance, what was done to us. The fairy replaced our voice with a physical representation of what she perceived to be our moral worth: good, therefore wealth; bad, therefore vileness.

This resulted in an objectification that we could not control: for if we spoke, we produced objects that dictated our value; if we remained quiet we lost all chance of obtaining a value of our own.

The Good One: Perhaps a topic worth researching instead of my tired story is the link between moral good and monetary wealth that the fairy I came across seemed to see so clearly. “You committed one good action, therefore you deserve everlasting monetary repayment.”

The Bad One: Nuh-huh, you've got that right. Hah, no, mam knew a good show when she saw it. And you know what's better than a show? No? Well, two shows. And she had two daughters.

Yes, that's right, she just sent me right out the door, soon as she finished gathering the pearls. "Ooo, look what comes out of thy sister's mouth when she speaks. Wouldst not thou be glad, my dear, to have the same gift given to thee?" And I was all, Hahah no. And she kept going, "But how safe thou wouldst be in thine future, bearing such a marvellous gift!" And I was like, Oh yeah, being sick all over the carpet is the newest marvellous, innit. But I mean, she was my mam, you know? And I was only sixteen.

The Bad One: Yeah, so I went to the river, I took my time doing it... I was hoping the fairy would've been gone by the time I got there. Yeah, no luck. I'll give them that, I guess, faeries know their business, or their script: they wait for the second sister.

The Good One: For me, there was no correlation. One action, a whim of the moment, came to dictate my moral character for the rest of my life.

But of course, that is often the doom of woman: to have her life defined by one public moment, never forgotten by society.

The Good One: If that were not true, would you be now writing to me, insisting I told you "my story"? The story of that one moment when I walked into a river to fetch water for another woman is now my only story, and the only reason you, and everyone else, know me.

The Bad One: She was dressed real posh, you know? Seventeen century posh, anyway, and ordered me to get her some water from the river. And I was like, Yeah, no. You want your water you can get it yourself, love.

Well I didn't want to be ordered around! God knows its bad to mess with fairies. I was wishing she's tell me to piss off, instead she bloody got me spewing snakes and toads with every word, you can probably hear them on your side, can't you love?

The Bad One: Mam was right disappointed when she saw me, hooo you should've been there, seen her face. Not that she had much hope for me to start with. She set about training my sister, instead. Yes, that's right, singing, dancing... mostly singing. She'd sing until her throat was torn and bloody, I swear her voice changed completely around then. I guess she scarred her throat from the inside, you know? The roses didn't cut her anymore, and the pearls and diamonds came out all clean.

The Good One: You might answer, then: "Correct your story. Correct *me*, by telling your real story."

But I say, do you think I have not tried? I tried. When everything was done and over, I tried to move on from that instant-become-tale.

The Good One: I tried working for a number of NGOs, I tried setting a number of NGOs. I tried, most of all, silence. That, perhaps, you might remember: I joined a Buddhist monastery, to live and meditate in silence. No one could understand why I'd give up using my "precious gift". Eventually the monastery asked me to leave – too many paparazzi had followed me.

The Bad One: So, yeah, once she wasn't spitting blood mam began passing her around. I was a circus freak, spitting toads and snakes, but my sister was high-class stuff. Still is, I guess.

Me? I'm still a hussy, love, but I'm good. Hahah! Well, at some point you get used to it, hun, or at least I did.

The Bad One: Anyway, mam had her up on the telly, photo-shoots, anything that'd get exposure. Paid her way into private clubs, into high society. Never brought me along, in case I couldn't contain myself and tell those nobs what I truly thought of them, so I can't tell you for sure what followed, but you can probably imagine. Yeah, like children with a piñata the moment she introduced herself...!

The Good One: I found out, upon leaving the monastery, that my attempt at reclusion had not been very well-received by the world. I had been pilloried across all media: tabloids ridiculed me for my attempts at achieving enlightenment, the more high-brow circuits pilloried me as an example of a wealthy, out-of-touch nouveau-riche misusing her wealth.

The Good One: (of course, the same had happened to my sister: made fun in tabloids, written about in elegant journals. The first mocked her for being mouthy, the second wrote think-pieces about whether she represented a coordinated effort to shame mouthy women... of course, I don't think any of them thought to ask *her* to write.)

The Bad One: You probably saw her on the telly around the time, or maybe not, how old are you? Oh, I see. No, yes, of course, there's clips online and all. Yes. You know, I remember there was one I got to attend! Just the one, yeah, there were a few other poor things also "blessed" by fairies.

The Bad One: I remember that boy, what happened to him? But he was re-incarnated into a bird, poor thing. And that girl who got real smart all of a sudden. Poor thing. She was pretty, too, too pretty to be taken seriously and too smart to enjoy being pretty, I think. I think I heard somewhere that she put a hot pan into her face, or something? It was all quite sad, when I think back on it, when the happiest one in the room is the one spitting vipers and toads.

The Good One: To return to what I was saying, it seemed that without my knowledge, a role had been decided for me: women with money, it seems, are to speak for all women, are to shoulder a bigger share of the fight. Silence was a privilege I could afford but that I was not meant to give in to, and in doing so I had failed woman-kind across the world.

The Good One: Of course wealth is a privilege, that I shan't deny. But wealth does not equal freedom. It might have looked that way, since I literally produced wealth.

But I was a hostage, to my voice and my story. I could not move: I had to be the woman that the money coming from my mouth, that that one instant when I was fourteen dictated.

The Bad One: Naw, no one was interested in me, hun. Wasn't pretty enough, I reckon... but it was good, that. Gave me a chance to escape from my mam, you know? I started singing in whatever pub would have me, yeah, real dives some of them, first for a pint, then for my dinner, then for money once I saw I could. Then a friend said, don't the French eat toads anyway? So I took out a loan and opened my first restaurant.

Uh-huh, "The Toad's Gullet", I called it. Dinner, show, and kitchen restocked.

The Bad One: These were the good times. Hard work, too, every night, but I loved it. Met my ex- husband there, he was a herpetologist, you know?

And my sister, too, fell for what seemed to be a decent bloke. Our mam planned the wedding, I opened my second restaurant, "The Serpents' Nest." Proper posh, this one, good menu, no singing. I realised, you know, elegance comes from silence and vegan options.

The Good One: Now I find it interesting, to think of the value of silence. I mean, of course, the literal monetary value of silence.

Have you ever thought of that? Possibly not, because maybe you have not given much thought either to the value of speech.

The Good One: It is clear, in my case: each word is worth an average of \$1279.00. Silence, therefore, is a net loss of at least that amount plus all other revenue that might come from my secondary actions while I speak. But one does not need to spew gold and jewels with every word for a number to be attached to one's words.

The Bad One: The wedding? Oh, divine, it really was. First time mam looked happy for anything other than money. And my sister, lovelier than anything. You should've been there, that fat diamond that fell from her mouth when she said "Yes"!

I think we made a special effort to find and invite the fairy. It seemed only fair she was there. Yeah, I was really looking forward to see her, give her a good punch in her stupid teeth, but of course she didn't deign to appear.

The Bad One: But of course no man my mam had approved could actually be good. Yeah, everyone knows that bit. A gambler, a drinker, a violent cheat...

And so many people ask, well why didn't she leave? Well, what do you expect brought up by a woman like our mam? She obeyed him like she obeyed her, and he'd gamble away all her pretty produce.

The Good One: There are many ways to frame this. For instance: if you are perceived as a knowledgeable person of good provenance, what you say will be perceived as worthier. If you speak with an accent, meanwhile, you might be a master of your trade but your words will be valued at less.

The Good One: If you were to collate salary with word value, then you have a gender disparity: a woman's word will be worth only around 80% of a man's. If to speak is to earn, she has to speak more to be heard – her silence, therefore, is more expensive, more dear than male silence, if only because there is a bigger need of her words to close that gap.

The Bad One: And you know, she still protects him, worries about him. Too much love in her, poor thing, to forgive the twat. And me, I should've been there I guess, to protect her.

I've always felt a little guilty, really. I failed her with mam, and I failed her with that husband of hers. Maybe I was blind to the abuse because it was my mother, maybe I wanted to believe in the happy ending. Hope dies last, don't it?

The Bad One: It took me a while, yeah, to realise. It hits you, hun, when you realise, you feel the wind's been knocked out of you, you feel your face cold. I dunno how it took me so long, like, she never wore more than a dusting of matte, now she had three layers of foundation? Apparently she'd decided to get a job, stop "abusing" her gift. Which essentially cut off his one source of income.

You know what he did? He beat her around until she begged him to stop, and *then* stopped only to pick his winnings.

The Good One: So I understand the anger at my silence. There clearly was a belief that, because I was able to talk words into diamonds and pearls, my words were inherently worth more than those of the average woman.

The Good One: Which was incorrect. At the time of my rather public divorce, I had nothing but my words... which fell on deaf ears. No one wanted to believe I had been abused by both my mother and my husband, or that I could suffer.

The Bad One: Absolute utter fucker.

The Bad One: And the way the media sided with him... Let's not dwell on that, okay hun?

I waited with sis until he came, gave him a piece of my mind and took sis away with me. He sued me for battery and assault, but was overruled because I didn't do any assaulting, just spoke and let the vipers do the rest.

The Good One: I suppose no one wants to believe a fairy tale can go wrong *after* it has ended, and of course the wedding marks the end. No one cares to know if the princess is being abused: her story is done.

The Good One: Perhaps there are times when silence is the only way to retake your story. When everyone around you refuses to be interested in what comes after happily-ever-after your only possibility is to try and take it back from anyone who might try to retell it. Eventually, with any luck, it might die, disappear, and you might be able to rebuild on top of it.

I don't know it is the correct thing to do. It felt like the correct thing for *me* to do.

The Bad One: My sister moved in with me around then. Yeah, that was right after the monastery times... Poor thing, it was awful. Everyone bloody writing about her, everyone had a bloody opinion on what she should and shouldn't fucking do. Fuckers, the lot of them...

Sorry hun, I hope you don't mind the language. I just get real angry sometimes.

The Bad One: It just seemed unfair, the way they treated her. Put her up in her nice pedestal, like she'd ever asked to. And when she tried to get down, gave her a good trashing. Where's the fairness in there?

The Good One: I sometimes envy my sister.

The Good One: I might produce wealth, but it is fake, an out of control value that buries me. My sister commands her life and wealth, and separates one from the other. Her value doesn't come from the money she produces it but from how she produces it.

The Good One: I have tried to imitate her. I am working, tiny jobs, in refuges for battered women and victims of domestic abuse. I use my middle name; I pretend to be mute. I try to give my life value outside wealth.

The Bad One: Anyway, she's better, now. She needed a good rest, that's all, you know? Just space to know who the hell she was. I had just left Mr. Herpetologist, too, and started enjoying silence and classical jazz. Which is all you need to think straight, if you ask me, silence and jazz.

The Bad One: Think she's forgotten about monasteries now, or maybe the trashing just put her off it. Yeah, she works a bit, and went back into education... no, heaven knows what she's studying, half the time I can't keep up with her books. She has a PhD in something or other, not sure what... She's silent, mostly, though not with me. We learnt sign language, these days we spend entire evenings gesticulating away without any pearl rolling under the sofa. Or any viper going around, anyway it's winter and you know cold weather's no good for snakes.

The Good One: But sometimes it is not enough. I get angry, at these women I see who go back to husbands like mine, who choose silence like I do. And then I go back to my sister, to live off the money she created through a gift that was meant to be a curse.

The Good One: I envy her because she never required silence. Not for lack of abuse – our mother was as terrible to her, and the press perhaps worse to her than they were to me. And yet she spoke, through toads and vipers, and sang and was happy.

I hope I don't seem too bitter, though I freely accept I am, a bit. Would you not?

The Bad One: And I suppose that's the end of the story, I think. We're alright, like this, you know, hun? It's good sometimes. I think, at the end, no fairy and no gifts managed to get between us.

No, love, those words are not to be whispered here. We're happy, "ever after" is a bit much to ask, innit? Anyway, I really do need to go, now, no don't feel bad, I miss chatting sometimes, live chatting, just I have to gather the toads and snakes now, of course. I hope it was useful for your homework, or whatever it was. Be well, love! Bye-bye!

The Good One: My story is no longer mine to tell. As of now, I have ceded it to my sister (whom you have, in all certainty, contacted). Which is perhaps slightly better than it not being told at all, or being told badly in a "Where are they now?" piece.

But it is still not mine.

And as much as I love her, in my silence it sometimes comes between us.

I hope this was useful to you, and thank you for writing.

Myriam's third eye begins to sprout one day, as an acute headache that lasts all night before accumulating on her brow. The next morning it is a small nub an inch above her eyebrows, leaning slightly to the right.

Her mother is the first to notice it, and starts counting the minutes until she can call the family doctor to schedule an appointment. Third eyes aren't unusual in the family: Myriam's father has one, just over the bridge of his nose, never quite open even as the other two watch T.V. or read the sports section of the newspaper. And both Myriam's mother and grandmother had their own; now supplanted by a diminutive scar always covered in make-up.

Her mother taps away at the internet in search of a plastic surgeon, her father takes Myriam's chin and tips her head upwards. His third eye blinks sleepy; she doesn't believe it is taking anything in.

Her older brother hovers around the table. He should not be there, he has moved out but sometimes drops in to do laundry and eat for free. He seems interested. Like their late grandfather, he never sprouted his eye. Myriam never liked her grandfather, and doesn't know whether she can trust an older brother so removed from her life.

'Does it hurt?' he asks.

'Like having a hard pimple,' answers Myriam.

'Groooooos.'

'Shut up, Jacob, you asked first!'

'Myriam, stop it!' calls her mother from the computer, 'Why are you always picking a fight? We're having breakfast!'

'So what,' Myriam slaps her father's hand away, 'He started it.'

'He did not,' her mother slams the laptop closed and takes Myriam's breakfast away. 'Since you're clearly not going to eat, you can start getting ready to leave. And don't pick at it!'

Myriam's hand had crawled up to her brow – she whips it down, but not a minute later she fondles it once more. Her mother rolls her eyes.

'Fine. Don't blame me if you get an infection.'

Her father only reopens the newspaper. 'Listen to your mother.'

She doesn't. She doesn't see any reason not to touch the nub: it isn't yet open; it can't get infected. And she enjoys the soft pain that comes from pressing it or tracing its contours

with her fingers, the sure sign something is growing. She isn't sure how she feels about it, nor is she sure what the rush is to have it removed, even if that's what all women do.

Her father drives her to school, but parks the car instead of simply letting her out as usual. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel, and says,

'You know it's something natural, what you're going through. Maybe you should be talking to your mother, instead, but you know how she is.' Myriam's mother is there and isn't: she gains weight and diets; she tries different brands of anti-ageing creams. She erases her age and keeps her brow straight when her son mocks her vanity. She would rather not inhabit her body, but would be lost if she didn't have it to dedicate herself to it everyday.

Her father continues. 'Anyway, it's natural. You're growing up.'

'Dad...' Myriam is already rolling her eyes.

'Hey, all I'm saying is, you might get some stares,' he insists, 'Kids your age pick on anyone different. Lord knows I picked on girls when they got their eye.'

'Dad.'

'Geez, Myriam – just...' She's angry and he doesn't know why. When his eye came no one mentioned it, and his wife never talked about how hers had first appeared. He had nothing he could say to the girl next to him. 'Just play nice, alright?'

'Oh my God. I'm not five!'

She gets out of the car. What is happening to her isn't uncommon, but so far she is one of the first in her grade to go through it. Two other boys have grown their eye, along with one girl who had it removed a few days after she first walked in the classroom with her faux-zit.

Myriam is thirteen years old and a tomboy, one of the youngest in her grade, which means she is bullied every now and then but does her own share of bullying in return. Some days she pines after boys she thinks she can't have, some days she doubts she likes boys at all. She dresses in old jeans, a blue flannel shirt and black trainers. She dreams of getting tattooed; she would like to dye her hair pink. She never wears make-up, but she does wash her face with the anti-acne soap that her mother gave her for her twelfth birthday. She is a tightrope artist, balancing childhood and girlhood on two hands; the third eye might send her tumbling down. In her mind she sees the rope suspended over a lake, dark and still, no ripples cross the surface. She makes her way through the schoolyard and wonders what it would feel like to fall, what she would find underwater.

'Oh my gosh, Myr,' a friend exclaims the instant she enters the classroom. 'Oh-my-gosh, that is so not a pimple!'

'Tune it down, Lena!'

'But it's your third eye! Oh my gosh! Can I touch it?'

'What for?'

'But no one in my family has it! It's so cool!'

'Dude, it's just an eye,' but she lets her friend touch it. 'Ow, careful!'

'Oh wow, it doesn't feel like an eye, Myr. It's... like, harder than I thought.'

'I think it takes time to get eye-like,' says Myriam, though she doesn't actually know.

Helena cocks her head. 'Are you gonna get it removed?'

'I guess,' but she doubts. 'My mom is already finding a doctor. But I dunno. Like, why do people do it, anyway?'

Lena shrugs, 'Isn't it bad for you?'

'Just for women?'

'Maybe? I mean, I dunno. Some things affect men and women differently; I guess?' Lena shrugs her shoulders and skips to her seat as the teacher enters the classroom. His eyes linger on Myriam just slightly longer than usual. He is the first other than Helena to notice, and it seems to Myriam that he might as well have pointed and made an official announcement. She gets called names during recess – someone shouts 'five-eyes!' when she puts on sunglasses; a boy she gets along with throws an empty tube of Clearasil at her head. She throws it back and yells that he needs it more than she does. A bully throws a pebble, she throws a few back and is dragged away by her friends. Lena comments that some girls from the class above them took a week off school when they got their third eye, just to avoid bullying. But Myriam knows this is just the novelty, and tomorrow no one will care.

Before second recess she touches the nub and begins to wonder if it would be functional, and what would the world look like with a third eye? Would distance be affected; the way it was when you closed one eye? Would everything look realer, or more 3D? She uses a free period to go to the library with Lena and consult Wikipedia. Their search for 'third eye' takes them to a page on mythology:

*"The **third eye** (also known as **inner eye**) is a mystical or esoteric concept referring in part to the ajna (brow) chakra in certain eastern spiritual traditions. It is also spoken of as the gate that leads within to inner realms and spaces of higher consciousness. The third eye is often associated with visions, clairvoyance (which includes the ability to observe chakras and auras), precoognition, and out-of-body-experiences. People who have allegedly developed the capacity to utilize their third eyes are sometimes known as seers."*

‘Oh my God that would be so cool,’ Helena whispers in a single breath. ‘Imagine, if you could, like, look at people at see their mood or their personality or something? I’d totally keep my third eye if it did that.’

But Myriam says, ‘This is obviously not it,’ and goes to the Wikipedia “disambiguation” page, where she finds tens of bands and movies and books titled *Third Eye*, *The Third Eye*, *Eyes*. In the biology section toward the bottom she clicks on “Parietal eye”.

*“A **parietal eye**, also known as a **parietal organ** or **third-eye** or (often but less correctly) **pineal eye**, is a part of the epithalamus present in some animal species as well as in some human beings. The eye may be photoreceptive and is usually associated with the pineal gland, regulating circadian rhythmicity and hormone production for thermoregulation.”*

Lena wrinkles her nose. ‘What is all of that, even?’

Myriam has to click on every blue link and read the articles carefully before going back to the ‘parietal eye’. From what she understands, third eyes are responsive to light and play a role in the regulation of hormones and temperature. They are considered mostly a residual organ, rather like the appendix but completely useless. There is a section discussing its emergence in human beings (growth, secondary sex characteristics, culture, treatment, controversy), but a bell rings and the girls to return to their classroom. During lectures, Myriam taps and taps on the growing knob; again wonders what will the world look like through it. The waters she imagines underneath remain still.

Her mother takes her to the doctor that very afternoon. She fills a small sheet for Myriam, with her name and age, and information on allergies and past illnesses and surgeries with short and energetic handwriting. Myriam looks at the jewellery jangling from her mother’s neck, at her nails painted deep red and then at her own nude fingers. She sneaks a look at the three nurses: one has the tell-tale scar, the other two sport a plain forehead.

The doctor doesn’t have a third eye. Myriam is made to sit on a tall bed, his two normal eyes look at her unfocused or bored.

‘A parietal growth,’ he pronounces; Myriam is happy she remembers the word from Wikipedia, ‘We’ll have to check to make sure, of course, but it’s rather obvious given her age.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ her mother nods as the doctor puts on a pair of rubber globes to feel around Myriam’s forehead. ‘Can you recommend a surgeon?’

‘Yes, I’ve a colleague who specialises in this. I’ll give you his card in a second...’ he takes Myriam’s temperature and looks inside her mouth. She snaps it shut, and asks,

‘What if I kept it?’

The doctor barely looks at her. ‘Why would you want that?’

‘I dunno,’ Myriam shrugs. ‘I’m just curious.’

‘Are you afraid of the surgery?’ now the doctor faces her with a smile. ‘Some people don’t like the idea, but it’s a very routine procedure. It won’t take long, and you don’t even have to spend the night in the hospital.’

Her mother nods again, jewellery clinking along. ‘It’s very simple, Myriam. When I had mine they kept me one night just to make sure it didn’t bleed, but technology is so much better now, I doubt they need that.’

‘Yes. The wound is cauterized with laser... and the sooner we take it out, the smaller the scar of course.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ interrupts Myriam. ‘I just don’t see why do I have to get it removed.’

‘Well, the parietal eye is related to certain hormones called oestrogens, mostly. But it’s useless in women because the ovaries produce the necessary hormones.’

‘Why do men keep it, then?’

‘Men...well,’ The doctor sighs. He doesn’t seem to believe any of this is worth explaining. ‘Some men need an extra help regulating the balance between oestrogen and testosterone. But it’s still somewhat useless, which is why not all men develop it. In women, it’s a primitive organ. A, a remnant, like the tailbone, or the wisdom teeth. There’s no sense in leaving it.’

‘Do people get their tailbone removed?’

‘The parietal eye can lead to complications afterwards. Like the appendix.’

‘But do you remove people’s appendixes just in case?’

‘It’s different,’ her mother interrupts. ‘Where is this going, Myriam?’

And out come the words that, maybe, had been forming since that morning, when she first touched the eye. ‘I just think I wanna keep it.’

Silence greets her. The doctor’s eyebrows twitch, something seems to move too in her mother’s forehead. A remnant.

‘It can be painful, Myriam,’ the doctor leans against his desk, catches his breath. ‘The hatching will erode the bone and create new tissue, and eventually the skin will break. You can’t scratch it, and if you get an infection we’ll have to remove it and the bone will be so weakened that we’ll have to put a metal plaque to protect the brain. The scars...’

‘What are the chances?’ Myriam asks.

‘Low, in men.’

‘Then it’s low in women as well, right?’

‘There are differences...’

‘That’s okay,’ Myriam interrupts.

‘It can lead to hormone problems...’

‘But you just said it’s useless because the ovaries do the... balancing, or whatever. So what if I keep it?’

‘Will you listen to him, Myriam? He’s a doctor!’ cries mother at once.

‘But if all women remove it, how can he even know how it can cause problems?’

‘There are tests,’ the doctor huffs, he seems to be tired at this resistance. ‘And you don't play with hormones. It can lead to some serious complications.’

‘You don’t know that,’ scoffs Myriam.

‘Myriam!’ screams her mom again, and apologises to the man. They leave without a surgery appointment, and her mother is silent for most of the trip home.

‘Of all the things to be a rebel about!’ her mother unleashes only when Myriam’s father returns home that evening. ‘Don’t you see how useless this is?’

‘But removing it is just as useless!’ yells Myriam in return.

‘No it’s not! Myriam, we’re doing this for your own good!’

‘The doctor said it won’t affect...’

‘He said it can lead to serious complications,’ her father, as ever, plays the role of the only level-headed in the room. ‘You can’t play with your health, honey.’

But Myriam remains steadfast. The doctor had seemed detached, unsure, and uncaring more than anything else. She receives the same treatment from all the other specialists her mother drags her to see, and this lack of interest is what offends her the most. And she distrusts something in her mother, too: the jewellery, the painted nails, the makeup around the scar. Like the doctors she feels remote; interested only in making Myriam do the same she had done.

What had been originally a whim becomes steadfast. She researches, reads the Wikipedia article over and over and each of the reference links at the bottom. She learns that in many cultures royalty preserved the eye, in others only shamans or seers, no matter the gender.

‘Women used to keep it in India, and in Africa,’ she tells her parents one day, ‘Until the British and the French forced them to remove it.’

‘They didn’t force them, they taught them modern medicine,’ her mother counters. ‘Now there’s campaigns to make sure girls in Africa get it removed in a hospital instead of in the bush.’

‘That it’s modern doesn’t make it right!’ exclaims Myriam, but can’t sustain why exactly she distrusts what they call progress. It only makes her mother increasingly angry while her father grows small, conciliatory as he drifts away.

‘There’s no advantages to the eye,’ he tells her one night, sitting on her bed. ‘I have it – some of your uncles have it, we never use it.’

‘But you could,’ says Myriam. ‘You just don’t want to.’

‘Because there’s no need to. There’s nothing you can’t see with the two eyes you already have. The third one won’t... it won’t let you see auras or spirits or anything like that.’

Myriam looks aghast at him. ‘Dad, I’m not an idiot.’

‘Then why, Myriam? If it’s rebellion you need, get a piercing, or a tattoo. I’ll – I’ll pay for it, if you...’

‘Then it’s not rebellion! And it’s not even about that!’

Only her brother treats her like before, like a friend, visiting when he feels like it, stealing her breakfast, showering her with bullying love. He calls her a freak, a geek, and gives her a battered book by Catherine Dunn, which she takes a long time to read. Sometimes he sits on her bed, in a parody of their father, and says things like –

‘There’s no advantages to the eye! Look at you cousin Dal, he has it and he’s a douche!’

Myriam pretends she doesn’t find it funny. ‘Oh, so you’re saying the eye made him a douche?’

‘Maybe! How do you know it didn’t? Huh? Can you prove he was a douche before his eye sprouted?’

‘Uh, yes I can, Jacob. When we went to Disneyland, he threw popcorn at my head to get seagulls to attack me.’

‘And that was funny! Hey, maybe we could get you a pet seagull – no, a parrot! And an eye-patch for your new eye! You could be Three Eyed Myriam, scourge of the seas!’

‘Oh God, please shut up,’ Myriam laughs. ‘That’d be so lame, and mom would freak out if she even saw a parrot in the house.’

‘But you’d be living in the high seas, matey, aye! No landlubber’s gonna tell you where to keep yer parrot!’

She realises later that that was probably the longest conversation they had ever had. He had never been interested in her, and she had always written him off as one more adult. She begins to wonder if she could live with him, away from the never-ending fights and disappointed sighs. When she brings it up he shoots her down very quickly: he works long hours, he's never at home, she's better off with their parents. Jacob doesn't want her there, she realises, and thinks he's not quite an adult, but doesn't know what else to call him.

One night Myriam dreams that the eye has grown so big that the skin on her forehead is stretched and taut, when she touches it her face unfastens and falls. Like an undone zipper, flapping and bloody, she stares into the mirror at the red mess underneath with three white eyes looking back. In her dream she asks her father to take her to the doctor but he is too sleepy and says he will take her later. Only his third eye looks at her. She wakes up scared and looks for a mirror: the nub grows larger, but there is no blood yet.

However, as the doctor has promised Myriam is assaulted by headaches every day. She is forced to take time off from school because of them, and because the bullying is no longer friendly. Helena visits her at home, but Myriam can tell she is being careful with her conversation. She talks about T.V., club activities that Myriam is missing, and updates her on school gossip – yet Myriam's name never figures in that information. Myriam guesses Helena is keeping bad rumours from her, but is in no hurry to inquire. She will enjoy them first hand, when the headaches end and the eye hatches, and she has no more excuses to stay home.

A long red line marks the place where the skin will open, and Myriam traces it with a finger.

'It's starting to feel more like an eye,' she explains. 'Y'know. Kind of like jelly.'

Helena pokes at her own eyes. 'It's harder than jelly. Does it, like, carve a new socket or something?'

'That's what the doctor said.'

'Does it hurt?'

'...yeah,' says Myriam. 'It's like a headache inside your brain and outside it at the same time.'

Lena falls quiet, lies on the bed and looks at the ceiling. 'Why are you bothering, Myr?'

And Myriam answers, 'I dunno. I just feel like it's important. You know, like, if it's my decision, I should be allowed to do it.' Then, after the silence, she adds, 'Are people messing with you at school?'

‘Only Josh and his asshole friends,’ Lena shrugs her shoulders. ‘I dunno I’d keep my eye if it came, though.’

Myriam hugs her knees. ‘Y’know my dad promised to take me to New York if I agreed to have it removed? We’d go see *Hamilton* or something.’

‘And you said no?’

‘Yah.’

‘No way! *Hamilton*? Like, if he could really get tickets, I’d be all over that! You could’ve gone see the Parsons School and stuff!’

‘I don’t even like Project Runway, Lena.’

Lena laughs. ‘Still! I’d give an arm and a leg to visit New York, Myr, never mind my fucking third eye. If you heard what everyone’s saying...’

Myriam can imagine what they are saying. She is a bit of a tomboy to begin with, and keeping her third eye removes her further away from what is normal, what is girly. And maybe she is dragging Lena along with her.

But when she presses the issue, Lena just shrugs and flips through *Miss Vogue*. ‘I’m just saying, I hope I never get mine, Myr. I wouldn’t know what to do.’

Myr wonders if she’s putting pressure on her friend, but nods in silence and very distractedly looks at pictures of coats that Helena affirms she would *literally kill for*. She waits for the day light drills through the thinning membrane.

And it is there suddenly, one day, as she is trying to read the notes that Helena photocopies for her. There is a new sense of light over her eyes, reddish, white toward the fringes. She runs to her bathroom to look at the mirror, but finds no great change: the smooth red line is a little darker, with small bumps along the ridges, which she believes might grow lashes. Her brow looks blotched and itches every day; because she has no pocket money and her mother is still punishing her, her brother passes her a special cream that comes in a manly, discreet tube, a contraband which she applies several times a day.

Everything speeds up after that. More light penetrates each day, until there is a tiny hole through which light comes even stronger. Every morning the opening is covered in dark, bloody crusts that form overnight. The cream hurts too much to apply now, but the itching never subsides; she cleans it with warm camomile tea instead.

But the lashes are growing now, and within a week the lids open: the new eye is milky, and its sensitivity so new that it hurts to keep it ajar. For a few days she becomes nocturnal,

and this new opening transforms the world. Three eyes mean more light into her head; the nights are brighter and the world deeper. As she gets used to it, and dares to wait up for the sunrise under her baby-blue blanket, the morning is wider and much farther away than she thought possible.

Helena visits soon after. Jacob, now a perennial visitor, opens the door and guides her to his sister's room.

'Myr, Myr!' her friend exclaims first thing when they're alone, 'You never said your brother was hot!'

'Eww, Lena, he's like, twenty-eight or something! Also, you come visit and that's what you care about?'

Lena laughs and hugs her. 'Your eye, your eye! I'm sorry Myr, the eye's cool but your brother is super hot. Tell me 'bout him, come on! What does he do?'

'I dunno, he works on T.V. He's a junior something or other,' Myriam shrugs. 'I think he, like, finds stuff to make shows about, people to interview... anyway he's ancient and you're too young for him.'

Lena cracks her neck, readying for a fight. 'I'll decide what's ancient, and anyway I'll be sixteen in two years, I can do whatever I want. Pass it on!'

Myriam laughs – and is grateful that for once the conversation with Helena is not about the eye and her absence from school. She is suddenly hopeful that Helena has misreported everything, that only the gossips will gossip and only the mean girls will be mean. That the balance won't be upset too much, and she'll continue walking her tightrope over still waters.

Three weeks after the hatching the doctor deems Myriam out of danger of infection. Her eye has lost its new-born cloudiness, the iris is pale brown and the pupil deep black. It is framed by dark lashes – thicker than the ones around her original eyes, since there is no third brow and eyebrow to protect it from the sun. The day after the hospital visit, her mother sends her back to school.

'You don't get to put your life on hold because of your stubbornness,' she says before closing the car door. It is this bitterness she doesn't understand that first begins to crack Myriam's hopes. 'Go reap what you sowed.'

And hope dwindles further as she walks through the yard. There is watchful silence around her – no one says a thing, but conversations halter and people's eyes flicker constantly to her. In the classroom Helena and another couple of girls come greet her, but their

avoidance of the most obvious subject is forced and surprisingly painful. The teacher's arrival puts a stop to the whispers, he makes a bland statement about having Myriam back after more than a month, and then starts the lesson.

The next morning, her desk has been dragged out of the room and various words ('DYKE' 'she-male LOL') are scrawled over in permanent marker. She pulls it back into the classroom, where a group of boys are waiting for her to do that.

'Didn't you get the idea? Outside!'

'Bet it's not even real.'

'Shut up, Josh!' Myriam tries to push through, but the boy pushes the desk back.

'Ooo, "shut up Josh"!' he coos, then turns to his friends. 'Dude, she probably glued a ball to her face it to make up for not having a dick!'

She lunges over the desk and punches him, he stumbles back and around them people laugh. Myriam hits him again, with her book bag, and he forgets he isn't supposed to hit girls. He yanks the bag away and catches her temple with a punch.

'Get her eye, man!' someone screams behind her. Myriam kicks him and goes for his face, he catches her wrists and forces her down to the floor, she knees his stomach and tries to twist away, he tries to choke her as she bites and kicks and pulls at his hair until she has a tuft of it in her hand, and he screams, 'Bitch! You bitch!', and slams her head against the floor.

People egg them, all around, boys and girls. Someone yells that he should show her what a real man is, someone else begs them to stop or for someone to pull them apart; Myriam can only register laughter, and smartphones flickering around her, and someone calling her name. It takes a teacher to stop the fight, and they are sent to detention. Their parents are called, and the mothers fight as well, each accusing the other of not being able to control her offspring.

'At least my son is normal!' the other woman screams last.

Myriam's mother only yells, 'There is no excuse for what he did! No excuse!'

In the car back home, her mother's voice trembles. She grips the wheel until her knuckles turn white, and speaks with a calm that worries Myriam.

'Did you really hit him first?'

'He said it was fake,' Myriam has stopped crying, her entire forehead is puffy and wet. Her new eye was nearly hit, and a bruise starts to form around its corner. 'He called me names.'

‘That’s no reason to – to tear out his hair!’ she hits the wheel with the palms of her hands and shakes her head. ‘What did you expect?’

‘What...?’

‘What did you expect would happen, keeping the eye like that? Did you think people would... shake your hand, congratulate you?’

‘No...! But they didn’t have to...’

‘Call you names? Of course they were going to!’ she stops, breaths, turns to face her daughter. ‘Is this about being more like a boy? Are you gay?’

‘No!’

‘Or, or what do they call them, trans-something?’

‘I dunno, mom, it’s not about sex!’ Myriam yells, still crying, ‘Why are you taking their side? I’m your daughter!’

‘I’m not!’ her mother screams back, then goes quiet for a long moment. Myriam dries her tears, and her mother continues. ‘But you, Myriam, sometimes you seem to be on nobody’s side but your own. And when you do that, you – you stand out, you lose allies, and things like this happen. And it *will* happen again, Myriam, you *will* get called names. For your entire life, maybe, and your answer can’t be to hit people.’

‘Don’t see why not,’ Myriam mutters.

‘Because someone’s going to kill you, that’s why. I’m serious, Myriam. People get killed for less,’ her mother spins around in the narrow space between the driving wheel and the seat. ‘So you listen to me. You’re not a child anymore. From now on boys are going to get bigger, stronger. You can’t get into fights anymore. Even more, you chose to keep the eye, *you* chose to, even though both your father and I didn’t like it. You said you were mature enough to make that decision, then act like it. Be above provocations!’

Myriam doesn’t answer. Her mother turns the key and starts the car.

Halloween passes and Myriam takes down the Day of the Dead offering for her grandmother. Jacob knocks on her door. ‘Ahoy, Geek! Wanna be on T.V.?’

‘Stop calling me that.’

‘I say it like I see it. Wanna be on T.V.?’

‘What, like one of those trashy talk shows?’

'Nah, more of a discussion panel,' he steals a week-old tangerine lying next to her computer and sits on the bed.

Myriam no longer attends school. As her mother had foreseen the bullying persisted and grew. Most of her grade had sided with her bullies, she had faced the boy with whom she'd fought, there were pushes and name-calling and stones thrown her way. Videos of her fight were uploaded to the internet and made it to the local news, classmates posted her mobile and e-mail address in public forums. At home her phone rings nonstop full of texts from numbers she doesn't recognise, with one-word insults or suggesting she kills herself.

She is thick-skinned, and veers into anger more than into melancholy. The bullying made her burn and scream, she longed to go back to school and kick people into submission. Instead she is home-schooled, and practises kick-boxing at a nearby gym, where she ties a band around her eye and brags about a botched surgery. She hates to lie, but it helps to hit something, and then take a breath and reach for her toes. But some nights the anger still gets the best out of her, and some nights she cries until she heaves.

Right now her brother smiles as though he knows something she doesn't; Myriam stops writing and swivels on her chair to face him.

'You know *WTF?*'

'What? No. Is there really a show called...?'

'*Wednesdays-Thursdays-Fridays*, yes, it's newish. And yes, the name is a bad joke. It's sort of cultural-political-comedy show, with guests in the second half to discuss current events and so. I told the anchor, Tara Byrne, about you.'

The name does ring a bell in Myriam's head, she asks, 'Doesn't mom really dislike her?'

'Mom dislikes anyone who is remotely progressive. Look up some videos or her social media, you might like her style. Anyway, she's really interested in having you in for a segment. Late this month, probably, can't be December. We got our hands full in December.'

Myriam nods lightly. The third eye blinks late, only after the first two have opened again.

'About my eye?'

'No, genius, about your highschool choices. Obviously about the eye! She's gonna have a doctor and a priest I think, to discuss what we do with it, what we should do with it...'

'Why?'

'Why not?' Jacob shrugs his shoulders in grandiose fashion, 'A topic's a topic, and you're a weirdo that fits the topic. Most ladies just run to get it removed the moment it pops up, and

we've one guy lined up for the show saying blokes should remove 'em as well... and yet you've fought to keep yours. Literally, too, you got those nasty bruises and all.'

Myriam smiles. 'You shoulda seen the other guy.'

Her brother laughs. 'Yeah, that's the attitude! Come on, this will be a cakewalk after that fight.'

Myriam swings her legs and spins twice on her chair. In the computer screen there are numbers blinking at her from several tabs over her browser – seventeen new e-mails, thirty-two unread tweets, twelve Facebook notifications. A purple and black page is open, the title in gold: Myriam's Third Eye. There are pictures of her everyday life: Helena's cats, Myriam in Halloween costume as a three-eyed Catrina, the day she and Lena helped another girl dye her hair green. There are me/also me memes, screenshots of funny texts, puppies, and telenovela stars over-acting, the captions are innocuously normal: *"OMG I can't EVEN," "mfw I see a cute kitten but I'm deathly allergic"*, or *"~_(\`ヾ)_/~ lol"* under Helena posing in a fedora.

'Lemme think about it.'

Three weeks later she brushes her hair and dresses in new black trousers with a tartan blue cropped top. Her brother drives her to the studio and gives her a "visitor" badge, she signs several sheets of paper and stamps her initials on others. Then he introduces her to people in the floor. Everyone is warm and friendly, everyone comments positively on her eye.

'I'm Lilly,' exclaims a woman who, to Myriam, looks too old to be this excited. 'I follow you on Twitter! Oh my God, you are so brave! I was just telling my mom about you.'

Myriam also notices that the woman's forehead is smooth, no scar and no eye. She doesn't know how to take her fawning: how easy it must be for this woman to feel emboldened by Myriam's actions when she never had to take any decision. These are strange people, like her brother they seem to know how to charm and how to read her.

Her brother leaves her with Lilly, who shows her to the stage where the show is recorded – to Myriam it looks like an odd cross between a bar and a courtroom, with space for a live band and purple neon tubes glowing gently from within the walls. The live audience is starting to fill into the grades, on the floor there are engineers performing sound and lightning checks. One outfits a small microphone into Myriam's shirt pocket, he stares at her pointedly with all three of his eyes. Lilly scoots her away, telling her to not pay any mind.

'Let's get you to make-up, doll. You'll see, you'll show them.'

Myriam doesn't know what she is supposed to show, but she is overwhelmed by the activity, the audience, and the support, fake and genuine the same, and obeys, meeker than

usual. She is taken to a small room behind the stage and sat before a foot-tall makeup case. Lilly smiles as the make-up woman begins selecting colours and brushes.

‘Look at her,’ she says, ‘You won’t even need the makeup, you’re so pretty. Got the good genes, didn’t you? Not like Jacob. How do you usually wear your makeup, Myr?’

‘I don’t wear any.’

‘Of course not! Duh! You are so young, it’s just I forget, since you’re so brave and grown-up, you know?’

Lilly doesn’t let her get a word in, and the make-up woman dusts Myriam’s face with some kind of powder, her cheeks with other, traces the contours of her eye with a matte paint.

‘There, it will stand out better like that.’

Myriam tries to smile. She thinks it would have stood out anyway, a giant third eye on her forehead. From the stage there erupt cheers and song, and very faintly Myriam hears a voice greeting the audience.

Lilly guides her through a narrow hallway behind the stage to the room where she will wait her turn. Myriam will appear last in the show, they are “saving” her for the last segment: she is the big surprise.

Lilly tells her to be careful, and be quiet. But it is dark and Myriam steps on something and slips. She doesn’t trip, but stops to pick up the soft white thing on which she trod: it is a t-shirt, encased in a plastic bag. On the front there is an eye printed in black, wide open, and underneath a legend reads OPEN YOUR EYE.

A tremor goes through Myriam, the still waters over which she walks in her mind ripple. Next to her there are a few carton boxes; she looks into the sole open one and sees t-shirts, neatly folded one atop the other, and resting on them a white tea cup with the same eye staring at her, the same legend. She feels her hand shake as she holds it, and then Lilly takes it away from her, giggling, whispering,

‘Oh no, you weren’t supposed to see that yet!’ she holds the cup for a second, then asks Myriam, ‘Can you promise me, when Tara takes them out, you’ll act surprised?’

Myriam feels a smile trembling on her lips, feels herself nod.

From the side of the stage she sees a glass-top desk, with the live band resting behind it. Against a fake wall there are three bookcases, one filled with books, one with memorabilia of

previous stars who have visited the show, one loaded with colourful glass bottles. At the bottom of the stage she sees a high-top table, with three stools set around it and another behind the bar. Tara Byrne sits there, the bartender in the pretend shop, crowned by a screen behind her with the *WTF!* logo moving in colourful animations. She is wearing a dinner jacket, her hair is cut in an asymmetric bob, nearly white but has green streaks in it. Her forehead is crossed by a great red scar, the ugliest Myriam has seen. It makes her forget the t-shirt and the mug, and she wonders if this is because Tara is so much older than her – even with the green streaks she looks so old – or whether something had gone wrong with the operation.

There are three men sitting around her. Only one has his third eye, and he keeps it wide open, unlike most people Myriam can remember. He is defending the eye's existence as a link to the divine:

'It's a testament to our potentiality to receive that which is holy, whether you are religious or not,' he says. He wears a white collar under a black dress shirt. 'And this is not unique to Christianity, or to any religion in particular. The eye is an opening to that which is bigger than ourselves.'

'Which is all very valid but it's just spiritual,' a second man retorts. He has no eye at all, and argues that the eye is just a biological occurrence, related to hormones; the same arguments Myriam heard from her doctor and parents. 'Look, keep it or remove it, it has no effect whatsoever on adult life. We have more efficient ways to control the flux of oestrogen, from our natural organs to pills, implants, skin-patches... This gland is of no use in modern life.'

The third man has no eye, but instead he wears a scar proudly, with no make-up to hide it, and Myriam stares at it for a long time. It is the first time she has seen the scar on a man, and at first she thinks they might be kindred spirits, her keeping it when she's expected to remove it, him removing it when he's expected to keep it.

'Dr Zubier is right that the third eye is a primitive organ that serves no real function. But as inhabitants of the 21st Century, as *rational* inhabitants of the 21st Century, I don't understand why we cling to these teenaged notions of divinity. To keep the eye is to bow to irrationality.'

'You know Rich,' says Tara Byrne, 'It's amazing how you can speak in 140 characters. Come on, man, you have space for once! Stop talking in tweets! Look!'

Behind her a screen comes to life, inundated by tweets and screenshots of different websites forming into a cacophonous collage.

‘Here!’ exclaims Tara, ‘They’re calling you a “cuck”, a... “castrated bull”, a “spayed mutt.” They don’t mince words do they. Answer to that, Rich!’

There is scattered laughter in the audience, the man waves a hand dismissively. ‘Please, never mind the teeming masses of the internet. So what, are they suggesting that my manliness is... tied with the eye? That I am less of a man because I decided to remove it? What about men whose eye never grows, then? Are they not men, or lesser than those with the eye? That is just ridiculous, primitive, frankly. And if you’re going to talk about castration, what about women? What about the forced removal? If there’s any castration going on, I’d accuse Reverend Jimenez and the other side.’

‘Hoo! Gloves are off, this is what we came for!’ Tara Byrne exclaims, to cheering from the audience. The priest has to raise his voice to be heard.

‘I’d hardly call it forced! Not by religion, at least. There is nothing in the Bible about it, nothing in the Qu’ran or on the...’

‘Pretty sure St. Augustine had something to say, on the matter, though,’ interrupts Tara Bryne, ‘What was it, “Woman is not the image of God, her Eye empty of all function and sight, but as far as man is concerned, he is by himself the image of God, like God full of sight”...?’

The audience boos. The priest grimaces.

‘Well that’s not the Bible, is it? Look, modern Christian creed is – is an amalgam of over two thousand years of changing beliefs! The barbarity and inhuman actions of our medieval predecessors, for instance, are absent from the modern church...’

‘Only in scale,’ says the man with the scar. ‘In action, what has the church done for minorities? Sure, the new Pope might pretend to support some...’

An alarm goes off in the screen behind Tara Byrne. The tweets give way to a flickering red screen reading *OFF TOPIC*.

‘And that’s not the topic today, gentlemen!’ the host exclaims over the noise. ‘We’re not here to crap on the church, however well deserved. Eye! It’s all about the Eye!’

‘Look, the removal of the eye in women is relatively new,’ the doctor interrupts, ‘Something that came to be in the last two centuries, when it became clear it was unneeded. It became normalized during the early nineteenth century.’

‘But the church at the time supported the idea,’ insists the sceptic even as Tara points at the loud *OFF TOPIC* behind her. ‘If I remember correctly, they declared women were too weak-minded to cope with the third eye.’

‘There is historical and medical context to this,’ the priest cuts in, ‘This was the dawn of psychoanalysis! Everyone at the time thought removing the third eye would diminish the risks of hysterics.’

‘And yet psychoanalysis has stopped treating women with pressurized water, so why are we still taking out their eyes? This smells of some twisted notion of patriarchal superiority. Wouldn’t you say it’s about time we push for equality?’

‘By cutting ourselves off from what is holy?’ retorts the priest.

‘Holy? Fairy tales have more utility than this pseudo-holiness!’

‘No, no, bad guests! Bad guests! We don’t insult each other’s beliefs!’ the host comes in between and Myriam wonders if treating people like pets is a recurrent shtick in the show. The men pretend to be cowed, the audience laughs. A man behind the camera signals that they need to go to commercials. Tara swivels to face the camera and gives it a smile.

‘Right! Commercials! *W-T-F*, right? But I need a new car, so keep watching! We have a big surprise for our last segment, and also I know where you live, so *you’d better keep watching*. See ya in a bit!’

She waves at the audience – they clap and cheer, as though she was really going anywhere at all. The lights dim on the stage, the three men shake hands and laugh as though they hadn’t just been accusing each other of castration.

‘Is it always this loud and bright?’ whines the sceptic.

‘Always,’ says the priest. ‘I’m a fan, but it’s a different experience to be on this side of the screen.’

Myriam is led to sit not by the “bar” but to a chair by the glass-top desk. Tara finishes her goodbyes and joins her there, squeezing her hand hard.

‘Hey, Myriam!’ Tara smiles. Up close her scar seems to Myriam even coarser. ‘I’m glad you could make it. How are ya?’

‘Um, okay.’

‘Hey, no shame in being a bit nervous. You’ll be fine.’

‘I dunno. I mean, I guess.’

Lilly descends on them, patting their faces dry and retouching their makeup.

‘Don’t worry. There’ll be less props – no screen blaring at you, none of that crap. Just you and me, having a chat. I have your blog, by the way, you OK if we bring it up?’

‘Uh... sure?’

'It's nice, isn't it. The internet, it can give you a whole community when everything around you fails.'

'Yeah, well,' says Myriam, 'There's also a bunch of trolls.'

'Oh, believe me, I know all about trolls. See? We're already cool with each other. You ready?'

Myriam takes a deep breath. 'Sure.'

A man calls to re-start the shooting, signals for silence, and counts ten seconds before giving a signal. Light falls on Tara, Myriam is kept in shadows.

'And we're back, it's Thursday, the T on *WTF!* For those just joining us – why so late? We've been talking about the third eye, what does it do, what does it don't, why dudes keep it and ladies don't. But our guest is special: her name is Myriam Pinto, she is thirteen-years old, and against family, society, and some would say God, she's decided to keep her third eye.'

Light shines down on Myriam and expands to the rest of the studio. There are gasps and exclamations from the audience. Myriam keeps her eyes on Tara Byrne.

'Hey Myriam! Great to have you here!'

'Thank you.'

'Look at you! Well, you probably know what you look like. You've kept your third eye!'

'Yeah,' Myriam answers. She feels very stupid, unable to say anything over one syllable. She takes big long breaths when she can, and hopes no one can see that on T.V.

'When did you decide to keep it? Right after it sprouted, or later?'

'Uh, pretty soon after, I think,' Myriam starts, 'Like when it appeared one morning I was pretty curious.'

'How'd your mom react when she saw it?'

'She just began looking for a plastic surgeon,' says Myriam, and nearly jumps when the audience laughs.

'Mine did the same,' nods Tara, and gestures to her ugly scar. 'Shame she didn't find any.'

Myriam laughs. The audience laughs as well, and the host continues:

'But you didn't go with it, didja? Why?'

'I dunno,' Myriam clutches at the fabric of her blouse, then remembers she is on T.V. and stops. 'At first I was just annoyed that I hadn't been asked about it. No one even cared if it hurt, or if I had gotten any sleep. They were all, like, we need to get it out.'

'If it hurt, why keep it?' Tara insists. Myriam shrugs again.

'I wanted to make the decision myself.'

'Did they talk you about possible complications?'

'Mom took me to a lot of doctors. But they all said, "Maybe it could mess with your hormones", or "It could happen", or "It's possible", but no one... *knew*, for sure.'

'No, I mean complications to your social life.'

Myriam laughs again. 'Yes, that was a topic.'

Tara claps loudly. 'Oh yay! My favourite topic! Myriam, had you been bullied before?'

'Before the eye?'

'Yes, before the eye.'

'A little, I guess? Everybody bullies,' she says. There is noise and giggles from the audience. 'But it got worse after the eye. I got into a fight... anyway, I'm home-schooled now.'

'You've a blog, though, don't you? Hey!' Tara yells at someone in the control panel, 'Can we get the blog up here? Yes? Thank you!'

The blog pops up in the screen behind the bar, in all of it's purple and gold.

'I've been reading your blog, Myriam,' says Tara. 'It's nice, but I don't understand.'

'Uh, what?'

'*Everything*,' Tara laughs. 'Why do you write like this? What does "I can't even mfw puppies" mean? What the hell is...?'

She points at "¯_ (ツ) _/¯". Myriam shrugs her shoulders. Tara shrugs too. Myriam shrugs again.

'Does it actually mean "shrug" or are you just shrugging?'

The audience laughs again.

'OK. Serious question, Myriam. What about cyber-bullying?'

Myriam nods. 'Someone posted my phone number online. And my email. So, yeah. Non-stop.'

'Has it increased since you started this – Myriam's Third Eye?'

Myriam nods. 'It'll probably be worse after this, too.'

The audience boos.

'Why do it, then?' continues Tara, 'Why keep a blog, a twitter account, make yourself even easier to find?'

'I dunno. I think I was angry. I wanted to show them that I didn't care...'

'Show who?'

'My classmates, uh, and the people texting me to kill myself,' says Myriam, 'Show them that I'm not killing myself, I'm eating ice-cream and going out and doing stuff.'

'Doing _(ツ)_/':'

'Yeah! Like, you can't stop me from living my life. I'm not alone.'

'You're not?'

'Er... well, I'm here, right? And I've gotten e-mails, from other girls, or women, who have kept it too.'

Murmurs come from the audience, shy clapping.

'Wow!' Tara Byrne exclaims, her eyebrows shoot upwards and her scar twitched slightly. 'So you're already forming a united front, then.'

'Well... I mean, maybe?' Myriam isn't sure what to do with that line. Her and those four women with whom she's exchanged a few words, united against whom? She thinks back to the emails, the broken English, the constant invoking of Jesus Christ, and the abuse of caps locks that (she thought) betrayed the writers age. She had nothing in common with them except having kept her eye.

'If not a front, then,' Tara Byrne continues, 'You are definitely causing ripples. This is the start of a conversation that society needed to have a long time ago, and you have wedged your foot in the door. How's that feel, to make ripples in history?'

Myriam looks around for a second. She has gotten used to the lights above her, the audience doesn't seem as shadowy as it had initially. She can make out faces, smiles, looks of curiosity. Towards the side her brother is giving her thumbs-up, and she feels pride swelling in her, bubbling out of her mouth to say,

'Good. It feels good to have kept it.'

And in front of her Tara smiles widely, and her ugly scar twitches, like her mother's when she is angry. But there is a bigger movement then: a blink, too quick to notice at first, but followed by another and another. The audience falls quiet; Tara turns to look at them.

The scar opens, and it is no scar, but an eye with no lashes. Plucked, or shaved, or cut, time and again, to disguise it into a scar. Now it opens, slowly, as though the time spent shut had almost glued the lids together. It opens, and blinks, gets used to the light and looks at Myriam. She covers her mouth in disbelief, the public gasps.

Tara smiles, and turns to the camera.

'Ripples, ladies and gentleman!'

They are swallowed by a wave of applause, and Myriam thinks she is going to cry. She is fallen off the tightrope, but the waters rise to greet her, her mind rushes –

And then she sees her brother, and Lilly and others, handing out t-shirts to the audience, she sees women with and without scars putting on the eye, the emblem she created but that is somehow being ripped away from her. Under her dinner jacket Tara Byrne too was hiding the same legend, *OPEN YOUR EYE*. She is waving at the audience who now is a mass of black eyes staring from white shirts, then hugs Myriam and hands her a mug for her to keep as a memory.

‘Thank you!’ the host exclaims, ‘Thank you, Myriam, for coming! Ripples, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you, this was *WTF!*, see you tomorrow!’

Lights dim. There is applause. In the darkness Myriam falls, falls into the water. There are ripples, then there are none.

Year of the Lord 17 --

To the Most Honourable Brother Elías de Tomasa y Mier -

Dear friend,

I pray this letter finds you, by the Grace of our Lord the God Jesus Christ, in good health and sound Mind. I write you in robust health, though perhaps after you have read this letter you shall find yourself doubting the soundness of my Mind. For I witnessed in the past days events that defied my Reason, yet stirred my Heart strongly – and thus the memory surfaced of your own obsession with the core organ of our bodies.

Think of the Heart! so many times you didst tell me, think of the Heart! Like the Mountain reaches for the Heavens so the Heart reaches to elevate our Soul ever closer to the Divine. You hold that it is with the Heart only that we can hope to understand God, only with it that we can practice Truth and Love as the Christ would have us. Therein my disagreement; friend, I value Reason above Emotion, for did God not imbue us so with it to better discern the exercise of His Divine Laws as they are applied to this Earth? I confess, that I long dismissed your words as an obsession arising from your own Heart's weakness, whose halting beats I once heard myself during an examination. I thought your illness advanced your thoughts, now I doubt my own.

I write you in need of advice, at the feet of the Sangre de Cristo mountains far from any goodly abode. The Heart! Beating seat of Life and Memory, where the Law of the Gospel was by God's finger written... It is February, and my hands are stiff. Snow visited before sunset and the Mountains shine red on me as I write; I force the words on the page, Elías, lest I change my mind upon returning indoors.

I came to the foothills of Sangre de Cristo not two weeks ago. I have for a while dwelled in the town of Socorro, where I concern myself with the education of the Pueblo people and the remaining Mejican Indians, many an evening I saw these very Mountains shine red under the Sun-light. One mid-day a man came, from the village of Chupadero, came to tell me that hidden in the Mountain a full day walk from Chupadero, there is the Convent of the Franciscan Sisters of Christ on the Cross. Indeed, I answered, as I too belong to the Franciscan

Order of the Friar Minors, I was aware of their existence and had planned to visit, though many businesses had delayed me.

But these sisters, the man said, had stopped the charitable duties they had always provided their communities. They had “holed up” in their Church, said this man, and let their gardens go to ruins, let the sick languish and Die. And far worse! the Sisters were sick themselves, not an affection of the Body but of the Mind, or else the Spirit: for they had fallen on twisted beliefs and Heresy. They were killing each other! or so said the man, committing acts of Sorcery, hacking the beating Hearts from the bodies of their Sisters and offering them to the old Demons that the savages once worshipped in these lands when the Lord our God was absent.

Whether this malady affected all or just a few Sisters which in turn held the others captive, the man did not know. They would not receive the Priest from the church at Tesuque Pueblo, so would I not, the man asked, in my authority as Vicar of the Misión San Miguel Arcángel in Socorro, as a Man of the Order and their superior, undertake the walk into the Mountain? Would I not talk to the Mother Superior to cleanse the land of the dark rituals, and ease the Minds of the poor souls at Chupadero?

Elías, I thought this was but superstition speaking through a weak man. How often the poor fall prey to these false beliefs, that they see the tecolote owl fly and make a Cross over their chest and say it is an omen of death? How many are there still that burn a handful of sage or kill a black chicken thinking this shall curse a neighbour? I thought, this man has witnessed one Sister die, seen the rest retreat in mourning and incorrectly neglect their Duties, and had likened the two in some Supernatural design. But I left for Tesuque Pueblo, thinking my absence was to fault for these wayward Sisters.

For two days I travelled eastwards by horse. It had been a dry winter, Elías, the land was grey and arid, it seemed interminable. Only the shadows of rocks and skeletal tree-husks interrupted my sight, only the melancholy cry of eagles and other passing birds pierced the winter stillness of the empty skies. This crawling hollowness, under the Sun that so strongly bathes these regions, could twist a man’s path to Fear or Madness. This I saw, when I dared ask the way of a couple of goatherds. Wary men, they had not seen the Sisters for many long days, but did say that “many men” had been hired to help with burials – what burials? I asked, they knew not or else would not say, would not allow their fears to pass through their lips even when asked by a man of the Cloth. These were sombre, poor fellows, and I let them go with my Blessing when they asked.

Late the next evening I came to the Convent of Christ on the Cross, when it was dark and only the owls and the ringtail cats were there to follow my feet. A path of reddish mud led to the Convent of the Sisters of Christ on the Cross: I saw a tall gate made of burnt adobe with wooden doors, and behind I saw the main building two stories tall with nothing to mark it as a convent but a wooden Cross risen atop its façade. The garden amidst the two I could not see in the darkness.

I rang the bell at the door, and for long moments I waited and indeed had to ring again before I saw the inner gate open and a short woman I saw come out. In quick steps she was at the gate, scurrying through the shadows, when I saw her she was a very frail creature to witness. With the coarse accent that many of the Pueblo have she inquired who I was, and what business I had at such late hours.

I am the Vicar Antonio Solis de Juarez y Carranza, said I, of Misión San Miguel Arcángel in Socorro and Santa Fé, and why do you deny entrance to this House, that belongs not to you or your Sisters but our Lord the Redeemer, and should be open to any and all weary travellers that come to knock?

It is late, Father, and few wander from their homes with no sunlight to guide them, the creature answered yet opened the door with no more questions. With few words indeed she did guide me to a room and fetched a humble meal of cornbread ground with the seeds of quelite. A slight woman she was, if a woman at all, her size made me doubt she had yet bled for the first time, she looked to be a child so thin she could soon disappear into the air. The Brothers and Sisters of Assisi take vows of Poverty as do others, but emaciation like this I have never seen enforced. She would not answer any of my questions, and insisted I bring them to the Mother Superior next morning.

Long was sleep in coming, as I lay there barely sated and thinking now about the Sisters, for the vision of this gaunt child had stunned me so. Had I been mistaken, and disease indeed ran rampant within the Convent? Perhaps the Sisters had quarantined themselves to protect the community. For what else could cause such thinness? Through my Mind raced diseases: Consumption, I thought, or Nervous Atrophy, Cachexia, and I recalled hearing that hurtful tumours in the Liver could bring about distaste of all foodstuff.

In the morning light I was awoken once more by this child, Sister Catalina as she now introduced herself, and she brought me to the Chapel where again I found myself agape, Elías. For there should have been a community, but I counted no more than five Sisters in the room, deep in Prayer, every one as gaunt as Catalina. The Rosaries they clutched seemed wrapped

around dry sticks, so frail their hands looked to me! None rose to greet me, I say, nor did anyone ask of me to deliver the Sermon as would have been only polite and indeed expected. But I held it not against them, so clearly their mind was occupied in prayer and so pronouncedly their bodies gone to waste. I prayed with them, and after was finally greeted by the Mother Superior María del Refugio. There were shadows in her face and her skin looked devoid of the natural humours of Life, and I feared I had put my journey off for too long.

There was yet strength in her voice when she addressed me, Welcome Father she said, Your visit is no surprise, I am afraid. No doubt the evil rumours surrounding our Sisters have reached you.

Aye, Mother, said I, And I fear they might be right. Where are the rest of the Sisters? Surely there were more than Five of you, Mother?

Aye Father she said, There were more. But they were taken unto the Arms of our Lord Jesus Christ, they died not long ago and if you visit the garden you shall see their graves with no grass yet growing. But fear not the rumours, we are simply afflicted by disease and have thus closed our gates and given our animals to the people at Chupadero.

Why did you not call for a doctor? quoth I, If it is but disease?

Ah but we Sisters of the Cross know disease, was her answer, And we knew when the first of us died that this was beyond our ability to cure, indeed that only the Lord could save us if He Pleased or else take us into his Kingdom when the time came.

So you call no Doctor, contact no Superior in the Church, but wait for Death to come?

Once more we might hold different opinions, Elías, but I believe that to abandon hope in man is to abandon hope in God, for the Lord did imbue man with the tools to succour himself. It was a grievous Sin these women were incurring by letting themselves die. So I said to Mother María del Refugio, I have trained in the medical profession, Mother, and I shall endeavour to cure whatever affliction has hold over this place.

Very well Father, if that is your desire, said the Superior, But we are but five and we are busy in our day to-day duties. You shall have to start with Sister Catalina, youngest of us, who did guide you yesterday.

And indeed not sooner was the paltry meal finished that the Sisters disappeared with the same faintness I had seen in the girl creature the night before, and I was left alone with the girl creature herself. Come child, I told her, Show me the grounds and tell me of this Illness that so clearly has you in its grasp.

So she did, and guided me to the gardens which I now saw were not anymore gardens but burial grounds, for at least half the terrain was covered in mounds of fresh earth with simple crosses atop them. None carried a name, but Catalina did remember many of the tombs: This is Sister Domitila, the first to join the Lord in His Grace, or This is Sister Candelaria who did leave us but last week, This is Sister Fidelia who was a year younger than me. A sad affair this cemetery, with no candles nor idols to remember the dead, surrounded by a wilderness of shrubs and weeds. The world here seemed brittle, Elías, crashing under its own weight. Yet Catalina was unaffected, and happily explained that the weeds were in fact Quelite and Romeros, which they ate now that they had sent their animals to Chupadero. But her words entered not my ears, and I walked away.

Yet death awaited me anew at the orchard, if in different shape: for all the trees had been torn, and there remained nothing roots pitifully sticking from the overturned earth, and dry leaves decayed on a pile. I cried out then, What is this, Child! You have buried your Sisters and you have torn down the trees, hacked the roots! Is there no respect for Life to be found in this place? Have you no respect for the fruit and sustainment that those trees would bear, nor for those before you that did plant and care for them?

But the creature only said, It is cold Father and the trees would bear nothing in winter, we tore them for kindling and charcoal. As for my Sisters, would you have us not bury the dead, Father? For 'twas not us that killed them but Christ our Lord that...

And then she fell quiet and looked away, as though she had caught herself saying something untoward. I could not see at the time what, Elías, and I despaired for these dying women, that had not called for anyone to administer their Last Rites. What rest could their immortal souls be granted...!

I asked of Catalina to leave me by myself and sat and wept, and thought long about my situation. For I had no doubt any longer that truly a disease had invaded these Walls, and that something wicked was afoot, and these women were indeed misleading me. Long hours they left me to wander on my own, I walked the grounds and the buildings and not saw nor heard the Sisters. I then began a search. Room by room I looked for them and found none, many rooms looked abandoned and to my Eye long untouched. I did not find them in the Chapel, nor in the Mother Superior's office, nor in the kitchens or the dining room.

Only after I climbed the stairs and called in loud voices for the Superior or else Sister Catalina did I hear a noise. Deep in a corridor in the second story I suddenly saw her standing,

had I not turned in time I might have missed the door whence she came from, so silent she was.

There you are, Child! I exclaimed, What about your Sisters? Are they in Prayer, or at Work? Is it not time for some sustenance to be had?

They lose themselves in their work, said the child, But I shall serve you if you desire.

And I asked, What kind of work is it, that they forego feeding? And quoth the Child after a moment, It is the most holy work we can, Father, it is beyond my words to describe it and the Mother Superior would not have me say more. I questioned further but she remained unmoved, whether I pleaded or reminded her of my authority as Vicar, she excused herself always with the same words, that the Mother Superior would not have her say more. So I had no answers, Elías, but I at least knew where to look now for the remaining Sisters. So I said nothing else, and allowed the creature to guide and serve me the same poor meal as twice before now, then took her to my room where I had all my Instruments to examine her Body.

I know you and indeed many of our Order distrust this, but on my life and Immortal Soul Elías when I look on a patient's body or listen to the sounds that come from thence there is no Desire nor Sin to be found but many secrets to be learned. The body talks! If you would but read the wise words of Dr. Hooke and Dr. Auenbrugger, perhaps you too would listen to your heart.

Sister Catalina was indeed reticent to remove her clothes but could not disobey at the end. Sat on the bed she was but bones, you could count her Vertebra and you could count her Ribs. When I applied my ear to her back and tapped the sound came hollow, the breath was ragged, the Heart was slow, but everything was constant, no trace of physical illness beyond the obvious waste could I find. The creature would not let me touch her abdomen (even my authority has a limit) but she affirmed her stool was fine and good as was her urine, though she defecated little which is not strange given the poor diet I had witnessed so far. As for her monthly flow, that too was stopped, but again this I divined to be caused by the wasting that affected her body. So askew her humours must be, I thought, all blood is to be used by the Heart, none to waste in the bleed.

Something else I found: for the tips of her fingers exhibited a pallor unlike the rest of the body. The nails were broken and uneven, and an odd colouration was embedded in the skin around. You must think me a fool to stop on such thing, when these Sisters spend their times labouring they cannot be expected to have gentle hands. But these women had long stopped their work, so what could be the cause?

The cause of the ailment seemed not to be in the body, or else it was kept so deep I would not find it. I did not see the rest of the Sisters until late in the Night when they gathered for prayers again. Finally María del Refugio the Mother Superior showed some deference and invited me to her private chambers. She knew I had examined Sister Catalina and indeed did not look happy, but said I trust, Father, that you have found the source of disease as you had wished? And when I denied so, she continued, Said I not, Father, that what ails us is beyond cure? I mean no rudeness indeed but it may be time for you father to consider returning to your Vicarage as surely every day spent here risks contagion.

No rudeness! Mother, said I, I would be remiss were I to leave without an answer, even more when there is risk that the disease was to expand and leave the confinement of this Convent. When the last of you dies, who will bury the body? Who will pass this illness on?

She bristled, Elías, and said Say now, Father, the true reasons for your visit. You are clearly come to investigate the malicious rumours that accuse my good Sisters of dark sorcery.

Sorcery? said I, to mask my curiosity, Long have I considered sorcery extinct in these lands, blessed as they are by our Lord the Christ. What is this supposed Heresy you mention?

They accuse us, Father, of killing each other and most foully defiling our Sisters' earthly bodies. They say we take the Heart and pull it out to do the Devil knows what, but such action is not one any Sister here would undertake. You are welcome Father to Exhume any of the bodies in the gardens, and indeed see for yourself we are not the heinous beasts that men so say.

If you had looked at her then, Elías, you might have seen a beast indeed, so ravaged she was I thought her nearly Inhuman. But I said instead, I had never heard these rumours and would not believe them, Mother, though I worry they exist at all. Tell me then, what illness assails the Convent, that would cause the spread such falsehoods?

And she stared at me for moments before saying, It truly is the Heart, Father, what kills us. A Sister goes down to Tesuque Pueblo, or Zorritos, her Heart gives out and she collapses and there is nothing to be done. We have no explanation, and as Death claimed more we confined ourselves.

I had nothing to say, for I had not heard any unnatural rhythms in Catalina's Heart. Night came, then Morning, each like its predecessor. We Prayed, we broke our fast, Sister Catalina was assigned to keep me company – or indeed, to distract me, for as she shadowed me I was unable to go into the room where I had seen her come out of, and where I was certain I would

find truth. So my days went by in conversation with this creature, bright for her age and her origin even as she lacked education.

I discovered she knew not to read or write, though she had been a Sister for several years. Had her Sisters not taught her? To my Surprise she answered, they distrusted the written word, and her Sisters too did not read nor write except the Superior. How did they Study, then, I asked, the Holy Word of our Lord? And it was her turn then to show bafflement as she said Why Father we inscribe the Word in our Hearts as the Lord so commanded.

You memorise it? I asked, and she said Yes, Father, all Prayers and Scripture we put in our Hearts and from there we fetch it when we need. And as flood-gates open she began to recite by Heart Proverb after Proverb, Psalms, Verses and Songs. Doesn't the Third Proverb so say, Father, Trust in the Lord with all thine Heart; and lean not unto thine own Understanding? Doesn't the Fourth Proverb say, Father, Let thine Heart retain my Words: keep my commandments?

I confess delight, Elías, that after two days in her company I finally saw in this creature anything like enthusiasm. So said I, Yet Matthew well says Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the Heart; and they defile man. For out of the Heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile man.

And so we fill out Heart with Jesus, said Catalina, we fill our Heart with His Words until there shall be nothing but Godliness in them and thus they shall be cleansed, and His Words shall turn to Spirit and lift us to Him in Heaven.

Even the pallor in her face retreated as she spoke, her cheeks blushed and light visited her eyes. I was sorry indeed to ask her, but I had her turn around and once more applied my ear to her back – and I heard her Heart, which the day before had sounded sluggish, beat as a hummingbird flies! Here is when I thought of you, friend, the palpitations you often describe that affect you in prayers. I asked her, Pray Sister, how do you cleanse you Heart of Sin? How, in practise, do you bring Jesus into you?

But at this she stiffened, and the blush did leave her cheeks and she said, We pray and we fast, like any of our Order, and I could not make her say anymore. So I asked her to leave me to nap, but I did not sleep but indeed wondered; that the reason for my visit was the same word out of Catalina's mouth. The Heart, the Heart that was corrupted and cleansed and fallible, that killed these Sisters and according to rumour was being taken from the Body and used in heresy. I left my room then and in silence I moved to the floor upstairs, to the room at

the end of the corridor to where no doubt Sister Catalina had hurried after I freed her, and I put my hands to the handles, but the door would not move. Movement I heard inside, murmurs, perhaps Prayers: had they bolted the door after I came close the day before?

Mother! I called, Mother Superior, are you in this room? Why is it closed, that I may not see what lies behind this door? And the sounds came to a stop, through the gate came the voice of the Superior Mother, who said, I am sorry Father that this door must stay closed, for Sister Dolores is resting and we are tending to her.

How could I believe that? I offered treatment, I offered my prayers and knowledge, but they would not open the door and they would not allow me to see this purported sufferer. What could they be doing, that needed hiding from any visitors? Elías, I did not believe in sorcery, but weaker minds did, and my thoughts darkened with worries.

Yet nothing changed within the Convent of Christ on the Cross. The rest of the Day I spent in contemplation, and reading the few tomes I found in the Mother Superior's study. I found she kept no ink with which I could write a letter to the Archdiocese of Durango, which I fear might be the closest. No pens, no pencils, and no writing paper were to be found, but then, when her Sisters were dying and disease surrounded her, she would not have wasted time in acquiring these things. I thought no more, and once more shared food and prayers with the women before retiring to bed. The next day, third since I was come to the Convent, held nothing to show me, and on the break of the fourth day I thought I would pick my belongings and set on the journey back to Socorro, from where I would write to the Archdiocese to inform of the Situation and wait for His Excellency the Archbishop's decision. I said nothing, but joined the Sisters for prayers.

We knelt, before the statue of the wounded Christ on the Cross, when one of the Sisters sat up: her face was pale like chalk and her lips were grey, her breath ragged! Immediately she collapsed into the arms of another Sister.

Pray! I exclaimed, and went to keep the woman's head up, What is wrong, Sister? Can you hear me? Are you in pain? But I was pried away by Sister Catalina, who motioned me silence, while the María del Refugio knelt next to the woman and took her hands together.

Sister! the Superior cried, What do you see? And the poor woman spoke, Oh Mother, I see light Mother! It moves, my Lord comes amidst the Light and I see -- I see! He is open, Mother, and I go!

I did not know what to make of it, Elías, of her sudden pain, her words. I have heard of people suffering from Angina Pectoris who are killed by the pain, and on few occasions

massaging of the chest can lessen the pain and erase the symptoms. But none around me seemed to care for treatment, no indeed, instead they knelt around and continued prayers, and held the woman's hand as she raved, and clamoured, Blessed Sister! Your time is come to see the the Lord! Walk now, you are done here, you are called!

I felt repulsed at this glee with which these women answered Death. But the realisation visited then, that I now had an opportunity to see what the Sisters were hiding from me in the bolted room, and I would have no other. I sprinted up the stairs and found the door unbolted, I pushed it open wide: Elías, I was not ready for what I found. Time and again I asserted I did not expect sorcery; I confess I perhaps did. My Mind was ready for shadows, for butchery and strange tools and dark altars. Instead I found the windows open, eastwards with the morning sun painting the cream stucco of the walls gold.

And the walls...!

Everywhere – floor to the Ceiling, around the windows, in every corner, I was surrounded by Hearts. On the walls, in black and blue ink, charcoal, or else etched into the stucco itself: human Hearts, some crude drawings, some anatomical in detail. In flights of fancy some showed Hearts within Hearts, or else showed the Heart like a collection of rooms with wisp-like beings touching each other; other was but a tiny etching surrounded by scripture. A few were in crumpled sheets of paper; most had the Heart surrounded by rays, crowned by thorns, and from thence the Holy Spirit did rise like a flame. I advanced, Elías, as one moves in a graveyard, between Holy and Profane, between Death and Splendour, seeing false idols identical to the ones I worship.

And behind me came Sister Catalina, and calm she asked, You see now our Hearts, Father, as they become pure. Pray say now, what you think of them.

What I think! said I, What is this room Child? What these pictures?

Our Hearts, Father, she repeated, As I told to you before, cleansed.

Cleansed! No, Sister, I exclaimed, This nears Heresy. Is this what you do all day, bolted behind these doors? Waste ink, doodle aimless? Yet she grew incensed and cried, Not aimless, Father! For days with no end we meditate here on the visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ that we have, by His Divine Grace, received for the last months.

She was earnest, so verily so that I found myself babbling, Child! Don't you know you speak Heresy? To say that the Lord Himself visited this place, bestowed on you His private revelations?

Yet she said, He did, Father! To me first, then to the rest of the Sisters, though it has been His Will to keep me alive while taking the others to join him in Heaven. He came to me wounded, like He is on the Cross, to his side where the Spear cut him there he took my face and brought it close to him. And his body opened like a cave, Father! There I walked in peace and came unto his Heart, which shone on me with love. I fell to my knees, and heard the voice of the Lord, who ordered me to reflect on His Heart and His Love, and use mine own Heart in the same way He did His. And the next morning I was seized with pain, and I told my Sisters and none would believe me but that night Sister Dolores too received the visitation, and Mother María del Refugio the following night, and so until every single one of us had received Him. And not knowing how to write, Father, we each explore the Revelation of the Sacred Heart through paint, etch it on the wall, as the Ecstasy takes us to do.

This explained the odd colouring in her fingertips, the missing ink and paper in the study! Yet I could not help but ask, But what is the Revelation of the Sacred Heart?

That we cannot aspire, Father, to Love like the Christ did! For when so much love fills our Heart, it cannot hold: it ruptures! said the child, So large is the love that Jesus had for us sinners, that kills to love so!

Similar tales you surely know, Elías: the “cat” nuns, who meowed for days on end, as well as the “dancing plague” that afflicted many in the old continent. One has but to start a tale, and others will follow: and better ground for these fancies I have yet to see than Sangre de Cristo, that under the sunset dye the land in red and carry such doomed name. Under these Mountains this starving child had a vision (a dream? A nightmare?), to which she ascribed Godly meaning; between hysteria and belief what she said became truth.

I attended to the burial of Sister Rosario, who died not long after her collapse and Ecstasies. At least I can confirm, Elías, that her flesh Heart was still in her breast when she was laid to rest, though her Spirit Heart she had left behind on the Walls of the convent. With the secret exposed I was allowed into the room, into the company of these Sisters in their meditations: perhaps this is what my visitor had seen, this room full of exposed Hearts, and thought them truly an offering to a god he could not recognise. I do not blame him, Elías, for I have now spent two weeks in Sangre de Cristo and I have seen the Ecstasies these women undertake as they paint and they are not to be described. For they are indeed their Hearts, as they perceive them changed by these “revelations” they feel sure to have received. I have now seen one more woman complete her Heart, and that same evening be struck dead in the middle of prayers.

There remain now but three: the Mother Superior, Sister Adelina, and Sister Catalina, who was first to receive the Vision and is sure she will be last to once more see the Face and Heart of Christ. I shall stay, Elías, until she is gone: caught in their undertow, like blood I am pumped out of my Mind, into my sensible Heart. They are gone, no doctor and no priest will dissuade them from their path. But it is my responsibility, as Vicar and Superior in the Order, to see Catalina buried when she goes – and bury too these Hearts, burn the ones in paper, and have the walls re-stuccoed, to cover the signs of the madness.

But... what then, Elías, if I am truly a witness to something exalted? If truly these women received a Revelation, am I doing the Devil's work to destroy it? Am I right to doubt, or is this madness spreading into my spirit?

Perhaps this is why I now write to you, here as the snow turns red like blood, searching for your guidance. These hearts painted into the walls, whence they come from? Are they Divine? Are they but folly?

But your answer no doubt shall come too late, my friend. I shall have burned the papers, stuccoed the walls, and written to Durango to search a more appropriate Mother Superior to take over this place. Someone level-headed, who when the youngest in her care begins making stories, will know to shut her down and remind her of her vows and position.

And I shall carry this decision with me, their Hearts into mine. Shall it grow heavy with them? Shall it grow lighter and be taken upwards? I pray only I will see you before I go.

With my deepest affection,

Antonio Solis de Juarez y Carranza,

Vicar, Misión San Miguel Arcángel in Socorro and Santa Fé.

The Night I Lost my Feet but Sort of Found Them

'Guys,' a transgender woman stopped behind. It was only three of us tonight, Edrian, Aireen and me, sitting on the sidewalk in the gay district of the city drinking wine coolers because we didn't know what else to do with ourselves. Because I didn't know what to do with myself.

The woman who had called us up was wearing a furry pastel pink coat, a platinum-blond wig which clashed with her obviously Mexican skin, and knee-high tiger-print high-heeled boots. I wished I could wear something as hyphenated as that, but my ankles were too weak for heels.

'There's a police car, two blocks or so that way,' she said, 'Don't let them see you drinking here.'

Edrian lifted his cooler at her. 'Cheers for that! We'll hide 'em or chug 'em before they get here.'

'You take care of yourselves.'

'Have a good night, ma'am,' said Aireen. But the moment the woman was out of sight, she added, 'Oh my God. Did you see her boots? Mee-ow!'

'Dude,' answered Edrian.

'What! Don't tell me you liked them. They're the tackiest thing in the world.'

'So what? She's in drag. She's supposed to break beauty standards.'

'Oh please,' Aireen rolled her eyes. 'Gender studies only work in the classroom. Tacky is tacky. C'mon, Mala, back me up on this one.'

I didn't say anything. I thought the boots were hideous, but I thought Edrian had a point too. More than anything, I wished she wasn't here to night. That instead of her it had been Andreyia or Chale, or anyone else. Aireen was very smart but also a complete idiot, or maybe sociopathic, and she did not and would not understand feelings. And Tonah had just slapped me, literally slapped me in front of his mother and called me a whore, but Aireen's answer was to sit there and criticize a drag queen's taste in shoes. No *What a fucking creep, how fucking dares he lay a hand on you*, no *Hey Mala, do you need to go home? Do you want company, do you want wine and The Good Wife and some weed?*

At least Edrian had been there, and he had hug me and said he would help me forget. He had dragged me along Mexico City, looking for a place that would stay open until the morning, while I looked at my feet and said I was fine, asked him to stop worrying while resenting

Aireen's silence. He had made me run into the metro while a guard had cheered us on, *Last train, guys! Run, last train!*, and under the thin soles of my shoes I had felt the world move much faster than I ran. It had made me think of Tonah, in his car which his mom was probably driving, moving farther away from me.

Now Edrian emptied his wine cooler, threw it into a trash can and said, 'Come on, girls. We're going into Stiletto and we're gonna do hard drugs and alcohol and we're gonna forget about men.'

Ladies' night at a gay club: we would be awash in a sea of lesbians. We would definitely forget about men, but only for their absence. Even more so because neither Aireen nor I were gay, so it wasn't the best place to find a one-night-paramour to lick my wounds. To top it off we weren't dressed for it. In that night that felt like continuous post-traumatic shock, I felt like it'd be a lack of respect, to crash a lesbian ladies' night dressed like we were. All the women in there would be dressed up in short skirts or tailored jackets and bowties, wearing makeup and stylish do's, pretty heels or even prettier Oxford shoes to dance; while me, I was wearing beat up canvas boots that I washed but nevertheless showed their age, and a denim miniskirt that hadn't looked so terrible in the mirror. I had been trying to impress Tonah's mother; I had wanted to make her disapprove of me just a bit, so she'd know that I was nice but not too nice, not the daughter-in-law who bends over for her mother-in-law.

I hadn't known she would be an idiot; I hadn't known that after eight months Tonah would turn out to be an idiot as well. Hadn't known he would react to my slight toughness by toughing up, and even more I'd never dreamed he'd choose to prove himself to his mother by slapping me around. Before this, domestic violence was something that happened to other women, to women who did bend over for their in-laws. Maybe I was an idiot like them, too. And now, walking towards the nightclub, under my feet I thought the concrete of the sidewalk gave way, become soft, like moist earth. I had no traction.

And then, not a block away from Stiletto, Aireen gave a yelp. She was still holding her wine cooler, that idiot! There were two policemen behind her, one held her arm in his hand, the other smiled.

'Does that contain alcohol, ma'am?'

I knew where this was going. Aireen knew, too.

'It's – it's a wine cooler,' said Aireen, 'Look, it's almost gone.'

'By drinking outdoors you're in breach of the civil code,' said the policeman. 'We can show you the code if you want, we've a copy. But you're gonna need to come with us, see the district judge.'

'Judge?' Aireen exclaimed, 'Come on, there's like a two sips left in there!'

'Don't you know the law, miss?'

'All we're saying is you need to take responsibility.'

'For crying out loud...'

'Look, guys,' Edrian said, 'Can we solve it some other way?'

'Oh, well, could we?' said the policemen, assholes, like they didn't know. 'You're in breach of the law, however you tell it.'

'Well, how much do you want?' answered Edrian, 'Five hundred? Six hundred?'

And I hissed and dragged him away, just as the policemen's eyes went *ka-ching* and Aireen whispered *motherfucker* under her breath.

'What the fuck, Edrian?'

'What? Did you want to spend the night at the district?'

'Do you have six hundred pesos to drop like that, asshole?' perhaps I was too quick to call Aireen an idiot, when clearly Edrian was pretty stupid himself. 'You fucking start with fifty, y'know, offer them a fucking drink and then negotiate your way up!'

We saw Aireen talk with them and eventually make her way to an abandoned, clearly broken phone booth. She opened her bag, slipped some bills under the receiver, and walked back to us. Behind her, the policemen sneaked into the booth to "find" the money.

'How much did you give them?'

'I got it down to three hundred. Begged them to leave me a hundred to pay for a taxi. But that's all I'm gonna be doing tonight. They drank the rest of the cooler, too. Assholes...'

And she sat back on the sidewalk, and I sat with her and said sorry because I had been the one to bring her here, my shoe-gazing distress that had led her to be here, in the gay district at half past one in the morning, being robbed by cops.

'It's not your fault,' she said, 'Nothing tonight is your fault, Mala.'

Edrian didn't apologise, because maybe Aireen was a sociopath but he was even worse at expressing his feelings. But also at that moment someone called us from above, 'Guys! Hey, guys!', and I recognized the deep lilt of the voice. Above, half leaning from a window, was the trans woman who had warned us first about the police, and she laughed from above,

'I told you the patrol was coming, guys! Why did you go and get yourselves in trouble?'

‘We didn’t see them!’ said I, and the woman answered,

‘You got any money left?’

‘Yeah, some!’ said Edrian, who hadn’t just given 75% of his money to the police.

‘Get me a bottle of something nice and come on up here, we’re having a party.’

So we did.

We walked up the stairs to her flat with pounding, very gay eighties pop like an anthem to our defeat. I had bought a bottle of mandarin vodka, and when we stepped in the gays cheered with commiseration, and handed us red cups filled with tequila and grapefruit soda. Everything around us was warm and tasteful, from the plush carpet in wine-red geometric designs to the tall lamps draped in golden. We blended into the party as a curiosity; the three weirdoes whose hair wasn’t dyed, whose clothes weren’t bedazzled, who had run into a stranger’s apartment to escape the law. Everyone came to hear our story with the cops, and then our story of running down the metro while the guard called *Last train!* just to get to the gay district even though we were mostly not gay. But in the middle of the warmth and plushness of the free alcohol, I felt myself begin to shiver. My feet were cold in the canvas boots, even though the night was warm with sunlight accumulated in the asphalt of the city; before I felt them move through strange terrains that didn’t fit what I saw underneath, but now I felt them still, sad, standing somewhere cold while I walked through a party.

Edrian was looking for the woman who had invited us up, to give her the bottle of mandarin vodka we had chosen as tribute, but she was nowhere to be found. Whenever we asked we were waved off and given more to drink. From outside, the flat hadn’t looked so large. I had expected we’d run into her the moment we crossed the door – but the inside was big and roomy, with three rooms open to the party, and we rotated from one onto the next in our search. Eventually, to make up for Aireen’s lost money Edrian passed a couple of bills to a man and asked us, ‘Do you like mandalas, chakras, or karma?’

‘Karma,’ said Aireen, ‘But since karma is supposedly a bitch and you’re obviously talking about LSD, get chakras for me and a mandala for Mala.’

A mandala: nothing is permanent, all shall pass. Maybe Aireen understood a bit more than I thought. Edrian returned with three tiny cardboard squares painted with intricate designs; we let them grow soggy under our tongues. The party had perhaps grown tired of us, for the first time we were left on our own and we made our way across the flat toward the windows. There was our host and saviour, sitting on a cream sofa in her downy pink coat and a shimmery red dress underneath.

‘Guys! You OK?’ she exclaimed. ‘Are you enjoying yourselves?’

We offered the vodka and she served herself a shot. With her coat open she looked thinner, with willowy legs and shoulders, under her dress she had no breasts. She asked if we felt comfortable, if any of us belonged to the scene, and if we minded that she was only half-way there but still dressed like that. We said Yes, Yes, No, and thank you for letting us in. Then Aireen said,

‘Oh no. Were we supposed to take our shoes off? I just noticed. Shit, man.’

We looked down. Our host was barefoot, her toe-nails painted in the same glittery red as her dress. The tiger-print heels were nowhere to be seen.

‘Well you don’t have to,’ she laughed, ‘It’d be nice if you didn’t track mud into my carpet, though?’

Aireen began jumping on one leg, unclasping her maryjanes, Edrian just stepped on Converse to take them off. The haste was partly joke, partly the acid beginning to hit, but there was no mud tracked behind them, so there was that. Me, I felt my feet far from me, and I was afraid what I’d find when I removed my shoes. I knew, I had suspected it as I ran for the last train, I knew my feet wouldn’t be there: they had gone after Tonah, after the slap, they had left me and walked back to his car, back to the little house where he lived, and were now standing there, on the damp earth that no one bothered to clean. There was nothing in my boots, from halfway down my calves, my feet had left me for Tonah.

I knew it was the drugs, of course. Sort of. If I tilted my head and calmed myself and took a deep breath I could see them there, my feet in my socks that read *Walk like Thunder!*, which I had chosen as an extra jolt of confidence. But I couldn’t feel them, and for the most I felt them gone, knew them gone. Traitors. Here I stood, in front of a woman I had never met before, freaking out when I didn’t even know her name. I looked up to reach for Aireen and Edrian, but he was dancing with some man, flirting his own socks off, while a woman with punk-shaved hair braided Aireen’s hair and listened to her balls-tripped nonsense.

Only our so-far-nameless host seemed to notice. She approached me, and very slowly guided me to her sofa. ‘You’re off your face on something, aren’t you? Should I get you some milk, or orange juice?’

I thought I would cry. ‘I’m so sorry. This is so embarrassing, you invited us in and we’re just being assholes. I’m so sorry, I’m not even here right now, I don’t know, I’m just really sorry.’

‘It’s alright,’ she patted my back. ‘Hey, talk to me. Where are you?’

'I don't know. Can't you see? I have no feet – I mean, I know it's the drugs, but I don't, they're not here. They're not here, they left me.'

She nodded very slowly. 'Do you want to put your boots back on?'

'No, no, they're not there!' I sobbed, 'Oh god I'm so sorry, I didn't want to freak out, I'm being rude, so rude.'

'Hey, it's ok, it can happen to everyone.' She made me look into her eyes. The pink fur of her coat seemed to breath. The patterns in the carpet moved like a kaleidoscope and climbed up to my knees. 'Just think, if not here, where are they? Where did you leave them?'

'It's just my boyfriend slapped me today. He's a sound engineer and we went to a show he was working, and his mom was visiting and for some reason he brought her along and I'd never met her, and she was like, "You're a bit full for that skirt, aren't you" and I answered something like "Well your son seems to like it" or something,' I babbled and babbled and repeated myself. 'And she refused to shake Edrian's hand because he's gay, she was polite about it but still, and I told Tonah off about it, and he said I was no one to insult his mom...'

'And Tonah is your boyfriend? And he slapped you?'

'Yes,' I cried. 'And Edrian and Aireen just sort of stared, and I just could feel my feet going after him. They're waiting for him, outside his house, which is also why I'm so cold!'

She laughed. I vaguely realised I had dumped all of this on her, names and facts and hallucinations, and yet she was helping. I hugged her, felt the pink coat crawling over my skin and her hands on my back.

'Alright, well,' she said finally, 'I think I know what you can do. I mean, you can't go home without feet, right? And I don't want you going to his place just to pick your feet up. That's how they get you, you know? You go see him just to pick up something you forgot, and he tells you he didn't mean to hit you, and you forgive him and you stay with him. And I don't want you to do that, OK? So you come with me.'

She took me through the party, letting me walk as slowly as I needed to because it was hard to balance myself on the strange carpet-stumps I could feel instead of my feet. The smallest room of the flat was her bedroom, and attached to it was a wardrobe, well-lit and uncarpeted. She had shoes and shoes and shoes: trainers, heels, furry boots and kitten-heeled court pumps.

'Ok, so you stay here,' she said, 'And pick some shoes, and you try them on, even if they don't fit. You try them on, until you find your feet in some of them, or enough of them to go home.'

I looked on at the rows of shoes and clothes, feeling a bit like a child whose mother has just told her it's OK to play with her grownup things. I tried to think of what to say before I opened my mouth, but what came out was something rather like 'But what about your feet?', as though I'd be stealing pieces off her by trying on her shoes.

And still this great woman laughed, and told me not to worry. 'Girl,' I remember her saying, 'I've built myself to be the way I want to. If you can take some of that, it's all for the best, and I'll just regrow them anyway. So you go, pick some shoes, and don't go back to that asshole.'

Her laughter bloomed in my stomach: it grew, with each peal of laughter and love for this unknown woman who had talked me out of my bad trip, grew so much that it seemed to push all the worries and lies out, all the sad love I had for Tonah, the distrust and resentment towards Aireen and Edrian just fell off and I felt hollow with melancholy. I had to hug the woman, hug her and cry before trying on some of her furry boots, until my friends rejoined me to hold me while I tried the metallic stilettoes, until my legs regrew out of my knees, like the physical manifestation of the night, the people, the things I absorbed.

She never ran to your side when you cried for her at night. Not for you, the quick footfall on the stone and the sweet humming of lullabies; not for you, the unconditional love that mothers were supposed to profess. Heavy were her steps as she moved to your crib, her hands were decisive, she would ask you questions you couldn't possibly answer. *What now, hadn't you just eaten, why must you be so fussy, you'll be the death of me.*

You grew quickly, all little girls who suspect themselves unwanted do. Love still abounded outside of your home, in other boys and other girls you met. They gave you nicknames and in turn you too baptised them anew, they were stars in the darkness and with them your voice rang like a bell. But your mother never approved, of your friends or of your loves, or of any time you spent outside the home. Perhaps somewhere deep in her there lived the desire to be your entire world, the earth that would ground you and the roof that gave you shelter. Instead she was a cavern, all hard words around you, she was a serpent, coiling the breath from your chest, poisoning the life out of you. *Going out dressed like that? You look like a whore. Don't be surprised when one of your boyfriends rapes you. Slut!*

Men came and went, for the two of you, never stayed too long. That was the one thing you learned from her, how to smile and how to throw them out. Sometimes you wondered why men still bothered to visit her; to your eyes she was old and saggy. Better than they visit you instead, you, firm flesh, clear cheeked, your hair like a dark wing tied with leaves from the willow, you; full of love like spring. But your mother had much to give, even if she gave little to you, and men loved how she put them above everything, above you most of all.

One day she stopped snapping when you came home late, she didn't complain when you drank the beer she kept for her special guests. Men stopped visiting, and her belly began growing: she was pregnant with a boy. This was what she had waited for, the reason you were such a disappointment from the moment you first drew breath. He was the one for whom she had been saving tenderness, the one for whom she will run barefoot the moment she heard crying, the one she would treasure and keep close to her breast. For him she prepared lullabies, *Take this flower, my child, put it in your heart, my little pup, put it in your heart.* Unlike you, she said one day, this baby would be good, would be pure. He had come to her in dreams of sunlight as a ball of feathers, floating down in warm spring breeze, and he fluttered inside her like a hummingbird.

Why did it hurt you so? When you already knew she considered you a lesser appendage of herself? In her face you saw a happiness you could never have created, a happiness you had no wish to replicate on your own face. As she grew happier you grew angrier, in your chest you felt a stone, you felt it grow until it took your heart, your voice. Your body became stone. Until one day you could not take any longer the humiliation of knowing yourself to be only a negative in her life and attacked her as she swept the kitchen clean. You tackled her and sat on her chest with your stone hands around her slithery neck, with your stone face you watched as she began to die.

But then he came: the son, miracle baby, jumped out of her belly. More coyote than pup, he was bigger than you, quick and beautiful like feathers on a hummingbird, no flowers in his heart but blood and war. Dressed and armed to the teeth. He pushed you off his mother, he threw you out from her cavern-life, your stone body broke on the floor. Your mother picked up your face and placed it over the mantelpiece, to remind herself of the darkness that came before the sun that is her son. At night she lights a candle underneath, so your face shines silver over the home. There you are still; in the darkness the house belongs to you. Most of you made it out of the cavern, but your face was left behind, always looking for your mother even as she fails to look at you.

Chapter 1

Bruises and Beauty: Fairy Tales and the Body

Consciously or not, any creative work draws from previous texts that the author has been in touch with. Tolkien, when asked about the origin of *The Lord of the Rings*, would answer that it was impossible to try and trace the origin of tales, for tales grow “not from observing tree-leaves, nor from botany or the science of the earth; they grow like seeds in the dark, feeding from the humus of the mind: everything that has been seen or thought or read, and that was forgotten long ago.”¹

Whatever else I might hold unnoticed in my mental humus aside, when I set out to write short stories which would keep the body at their centre one of my clearest inspirations, by far, were fairy tales. In these, I thought, the body is more than a vehicle for the characters to move through the plot. The body, or to be exact, certain body parts often carry the overarching plot and themes of the story without taking the spotlight: no one would say that “Rapunzel” is a tale about hair, but the heroine’s long mane is what we first think of whenever we hear the name. Similarly, in tales like “The Singing Bone” the titular bone sings only once, but its appearance brings about the climax of the tale. In tales such as “The Robber Bridegroom” or “The Two Brothers”, mutilated body-parts are used as proof of deceit or to restore the rightful champion to his place. If “Rapunzel” makes us think of hair, what can we say of “Bluebeard”, where the beard seems almost a minor cosmetic detail, and yet summarises the malice and danger of the character? And what might we say of tales in which characters lose their voice, or are condemned into silence in order to break a spell, as in “The Wild Swans”?

For this analysis I have chosen three different tales and their usage of different body parts. From the bottom up, I shall analyse feet in “Cinderella”, legs in “The Little Mermaid” and hands in “The Handless Maiden” and other AT706 type² tales. The first two are probably two of the most famous and recognisable tales – Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien. *La comunidad del anillo*. Trans. Luis Domenèch. Madrid: Ediciones Minotauro, 1977.

This quote is found in the back cover of the Spanish translation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, translated by Luis Domenèch for Editorial Minotauro in 1977. Here I had to translate it back to its original language, as I have been unable to find the quote in English.

² The Aarne Thompson classification system is an index used to classify folk and fairy tales in accordance to their motifs and elements. The type I refer to here, AT706, refers to the tale “The Girl Without Hands” and all of its variations.

alone constituted a third of all published fairy-tales across all media in 2003.³ They have also been adapted as films by The Walt Disney Company, which on one hand contributes to their fame while also overshadowing the originals. Thus, when available I will use these films for my analysis. Furthermore, in my own collection there are three stories that were shaped by the ideas I will analyse: “Balance the Earth and Sky” and “Fiona McCool” for arms and “The Night I Lost my Feet but Sort of Found Them” for legs and feet.

1.1

See-Through Nobility: “Cinderella”

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Body and Literature*, David Hillman and Ulrika Maude question whether the “immediate materiality of the body be represented in literary texts,” given the “apparent mutual exclusivity of the body and language – the one all brute facticity, the other presupposing precisely the absence of matter.”⁴ It is precisely in this “brute facticity” where I find a similarity between bodily experience and the fairy tale. These stories, from their oldest iterations to newly-written tales such as Ludmilla Petrushavskaya’s *There Once Lived a Woman who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour’s Baby* depict the brutal reality of life without attempting to dress it up in elegance or disguise it with the subtlety or artistry of “greater” works of literature. Take “The Children of Famine”, from the Grimms’ collection, where hunger becomes so great that a mother “became unhinged and desperate” enough to try and eat her children (Grimm, 456)⁵. Fairy tales see no need to explain the workings of the mind, the desperation that pushed the mother: in knowing she was hungry we can share her desperation.

This ease of identification is perhaps what has made the fairy tale such a beloved genre even in modern culture. If we can know the desperation of a hungry mother, we can know Cinderella’s humiliations and the Handless Maiden’s helplessness. We can share their desires and root for them.

³ Lori Baker-Spacey and Liz Grauerholz, “The Pervasiveness and Persistence of Female Beauty Ideal in Children’s Fairy tales.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, no. 5 (Oct. 2003): 711-726.

⁴ David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) p. 3.

⁵ Jacob & Wilhem Grimm. *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brother’s Grimm*. Trans. Jack Zipes. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Cinderella might be one of the easiest heroines to cheer for, and is in fact the most reproduced and re-written of the classic fairy tales. It has been adapted into every possible form, from opera to telenovelas, and just the name evokes visions of flouncy dresses, of fragile magic that dissipates at the hour the night stops being decent, and of delicate, impossible heels that betray the wearer's inner purity.

The rags-to-riches plot, of course, is not unique to Cinderella. If anything it is perhaps the more common plot to be found in the genre – a great many tales begin with a kingdom facing a problem so terrible that the king offers “half his kingdom” and his daughter's hand in marriage to whomever can solve it. Especially when it comes to the tales collected by the brothers Grimm, the two main subjects are everyday survival (food, sustenance, shelter) and social advancement. Fairy tales are mostly from an age before true social mobility, of course, but an advantageous marriage was still a way to cement one's (and one's children) economic stability.

The treatment that feet and legs are given in Cinderella are very much so related to the literal moving across social boundaries. Feet, and the act of walking itself, are the first tool we earn to fulfil desires that no one else will: out of reach desires for freedom, for independence.⁶ Many tales that place emphasis on women's freedom and transgression also place emphasis on their feet: the twelve dancing princesses are discovered by their shoes worn thin by dancing, the heroine of “The Red Shoes” is deeply chastised for climbing through the social ranks without conforming perfectly to their norms. In certain versions of Snow White, the evil queen is punished by being forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes. Yet there are no feet as famous as Cinderella's.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that the oldest version of Cinderella, or of any Arne–Thompson type 510A tales, hails from China. “Ye Xian”, first recorded in the Hunan region of China around the 9th century, though said to be much older⁷, has all the elements that we have come to expect from Cinderella. Ye Xian lives with her father and his two wives, her mother dies and her father follows her soon after. At this point, Ye Xian becomes enslaved to her father's second wife and step-sister, receives help from a magic fish, and loses a slipper in

⁶ Rebecca Solnit. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, (London: Granta, 2001), Kindle edition.

⁷ Terri Windling. “Cinderella: Ashes, Blood, and the Slipper of Glass.” *The Journal of Mythic Arts*, <<http://www.endicott-studio.com/articleslist/cinderella-ashes-blood-and-the-slipper-of-glass-by-terri-windling.html>> (accessed 13 April 2017)

a dance. The slipper/shoe is sold to the local warlord who, fascinated with the miniature shoe, searches for the woman who could possibly wear it.

Ye Xian, like Aschenputtel or La Gatta Cenerentola of Baptiste's version, is a clever and resourceful girl. She is "good at making pottery at the wheel", and has a memory for poetry. When her step-mother kills her magic helper, a golden fish, she knows to rescue the bones and keep them to use their magic.

But I maintain that this tale is steeped in a tradition here that should not be disregarded: that of Chinese foot-binding, which according to Dorothy Ko was present in most regions of China from at least the 8th to the early 20th century. In her book *Cinderella's Sisters*, Ko explains that while foot-binding is associated with the nobility and high-society of the times, it was actually prevalent no matter the social rank. Of course, higher-class women could afford to keep their binding tighter and possess even smaller feet. But women of the lower ranks did it just as well, as did merchant wives and housewives who worked at the home. Perhaps the only women not engaging in foot-binding were the poorest, or the labourers who had to go out in the field and toil alongside the men – those who could not afford free time. Foot binding suggested higher social status because it suggested leisure and economic power enough to support such leisure.

Paradoxically, well-bound feet were also a sign of the woman's industriousness. In an 1867 interview with a woman regarding her bound feet, the woman remarks that her feet allowed her to marry up: "Match-makers were not asked 'Is she beautiful?' but 'How small are her feet?' A plain face is given by heaven, but poorly bound feet are signs of laziness." (Ko, 3)⁸ To a spectator bound feet suggest laziness/leisure; to a prospective groom they suggest diligence. As Ko explains, the fact that their feet were bound did not stop women from taking part in the household economy. There were always a series of activities that women could do that required their hands and not their feet: weaving, tea-picking, silk-worm rearing, etc., but these activities (and the profits they brought to the domestic economy) were masked. Bound feet made women appear unoccupied even as they were occupied, the ideal woman was as passive and demure as she was industrious.⁹

Marriage, or marrying up to be more exact, is in itself one of the traditional goals in fairy tales. It is hard to say how this motif appeared in the original folk tales, but in his book *Fairy*

⁸ Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*, quoted in Dorothy Ko. *Cinderella's Sisters*. (London: University of California Press, 2005) p. 3.

⁹ Dorothy Ko. *Cinderella's Sisters*. p. 34.

Tales and the Art of Subversion, Jack Zipes argues that marrying-up became the standard method for social mobility. He suggests that most of the fairy tales that have been passed down to us have feudal-agrarian roots: the characters are, originally, nobility and peasants. By the time the Grimm brothers were collecting them, however, the norms and values of a “third estate” (the bourgeoisie) had been added in. Zipes is not suggesting that the Grimm brothers rewrote the tales to make them fit their own worldview¹⁰, but that the tales had already changed to contain a new set of values. Whereas in previous versions of Cinderella she triumphed through her wit and skills, in the variant the Grimms found she instead exhibits the expected qualities of a young bourgeois girl: passiveness, obedience, self-sacrifice, and patience¹¹.

Elisabeth Panttaja goes further, in fact, to claim that this absorption of bourgeois values essentially negates Cinderella’s character and makes her an empty vessel of wish-fulfilment: “The real protagonist is not Cinderella at all but the petit-bourgeois reader who, with the help of the story, is able to do in imagination what she is much less likely to do in fact: she is able to move up the ranks.”¹² (Panttaja, 100)

Just as bound feet allowed women to aspire to a better marriage, Cinderella, in its foot fetishism, betrays much of past class wars and who is and is not allowed to ascend the ranks. This point is, at once, extremely clear to see yet not so easily explained. Of course Cinderella will be the one to move up by marrying the prince: she is demure and hard-working and. While not literally bound, her feet are tiny. And of course the step-sisters won’t be allowed to marry up: they are vain *and* ugly¹³, and their feet so unfit that they have to be chopped off.

But there are many markers in Cinderella, both the tale and the character, that code her as someone who already belongs to aristocracy. Here I would like to stop for a moment to look at the Disney film adaptation, released in 1957. In a chapter in the book *From Mouse to Mermaid*, Elizabeth Bell recounts the incredible amount of work that Walt Disney animators put in creating their heroines. Far from simply sketching them, the company hired Helene Stanley, a classically-trained dancer who filmed many sequences that would go on to be

¹⁰ Although the brothers did re-write many tales, their motives were less political: they simply aimed to embellish and de-sexualise the stories so they could be better received by their readers.

¹¹ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 69.

¹² Elisabeth Panttaja, “Going Up in the World: Class in ‘Cinderella’”, *Western Folklore*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Perspectives on the Innocent Persecuted Heroine in Fairy Tales. (Jan., 1993): 85-104.

¹³ Depending on the material, of course. The Grimms have them as fair but vain, Perrault describes them as simply mediocre. By the 1957 Disney adaptation the sisters have become ugly, vain, *and* stupid, and so they seem to remain.

animated. For Bell the bodies of these heroines are pentimentos, layers and layers of meanings that make up not necessarily a complex character but one with depth. The first layer is that of the folk tale, upon which are layered social expectations of good and bad, upon which the second layer of animation is layered, which itself comes with a third layer of the conventions of cinematic representation of women. And the fact that Cinderella was modelled on the bodies of classical dancers (as were Snow White and Aurora/Sleeping Beauty) shows. For these princesses cannot “escape the pentimento [...] she is rendered as “too much of a princess”, even [...] before marriage/ascension, [they] move through their worlds seemingly *en pointe*.”¹⁴ When Cinderella moves, she dances. When she sings she does so in a neat soprano voice. Ballet and opera – the highest forms of those arts – are coded into Cinderella’s body, making it lithe and elevating it above the rest of the cast. Only the prince can meet her “standards” in their dance, which in fact confers nobility on Cinderella – we might have suspected Cinderella of belonging to a higher station than what we’ve seen so far, but her dancing on equal station with the prince (the only character we know for sure has royal blood) confirms this.¹⁵

The bodies of the stepsisters in the Disney adaptation have as much to say, of course, just very different things. If Cinderella’s body is a reflexion of the higher arts, her sisters’ are a cartoon – not simply because they are animated, they are a distortion of the prescribed, desirable body that Cinderella and her prince present. Every aspect of their bodies is exaggerated – they have non-existent breasts, large bottoms and noses. But again I would like to draw attention to their feet: Cinderella’s feet are rarely ever uncovered in the film (only for a moment, after she has showered, and once more when she puts on the glass slipper), they are diminutive and have no toes. In contrast, the sisters are often barefoot and have large feet with individually animated toes. While Cinderella has male companions (even if they are mice and dogs), the step-sisters interact exclusively with each other, Cinderella, and their mother. This homosociality is presented not as aberrant but peculiar, laughable – and leads the viewers to be judgemental watchers whose main criterion is how closely the characters conform to gender roles¹⁶.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bell, “Somatexts at the Disney Shop”, in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 111.

¹⁵ This is repeated in the 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*, which was in fact recorded with live dancers in its entirety before being animated. The coordinated *pas de deux* between Aurora and the prince confirms that Aurora’s true place is not in forest but in the castle halls.

¹⁶ Sheila Ruzycski O’Brien. “Disney’s “Cinderella” Under Cover: Heads, Butts, Toes, and Gender Woes.” *Studies in American Humour*, New Series 3, No. 1 (1994): 67.

While criticism of Cinderella tends to be focused on gender issues¹⁷, I would propose that another way to “read” the step-sisters bumbling, atypical bodies is to return to an analysis based on class. They are not simply the sexual, quasi-gendered outsiders but the nouveau riche, upstarts fumbling through established customs, trying to buy their way into good society by marriage – but while their positions have been elevated by money, their bodies betray their un-noble nature, rough and rowdy.

Above I quoted Jack Zipes on the feudal origin of fairy tale, and how stories that used to have two classes of characters (peasants and nobility) had a third estate added to the mix as time went on. For some critics, this creates a dissonance within the tale: a conflict between the old feudal values and the emerging bourgeois thought, a difference in what the characters’ desire and how they are expected or allowed to acquire it.

Elisabeth Pattaja argues that the conflict between Cinderella and her stepmother and stepsisters is less about competing for a man and more about class conflict. The tale rewards not inner goodness or beauty (as I mentioned, the stepsisters in the Grimms’s tale are said to be just as beautiful as Cinderella), but innate nobility. In the tale Cinderella is the true bride; she belongs to the “original” family that existed peacefully under the traditional regime. Her mother, even after death, is capable of interfering with the tale: her magic is aligned with an older system of beliefs. In comparison, the stepfamily are ambitious deceivers that would upset the known order and, even worse, attempt to interfere in aristocratic rituals by forbidding Cinderella to go to the king’s ball. The treatment that the new family gives Cinderella is meant to mirror what the bourgeoisie would do with the nobility if given the chance: disrobe them, deny everything that makes them special, set them to work that is below their station (Pattaja, 98).

And, of course, Cinderella’s foot fits the slipper. Like many other lost princesses, her daintiness is revelatory. Just as in “The Princess and the Pea” the girl’s delicateness, so fine that a single legume will keep her from sleeping, is proof of her station, Cinderella’s tiny feet mark her as true nobility. She betrays no ambition and no anxiety about the fitting: compare with the stepmother and sisters, who try and hide their ridiculous feet under their dresses, or else willingly maim their own flesh in their desperation to climb through the ranks.

¹⁷ No matter the version, it is very much a story about women interacting and competing with women for the attention of men – even if men themselves are mostly absent. As Angela Carter has noted in her story “Ashputtle”, the father disappears as soon as he remarries and the prince is there for one scene.

1.2

Walking on Knives: Gender Performance in “The Little Mermaid”

Social mobility is a very clear preoccupation of Hans Christian Andersen. While he was active around the same period as the Grimm Brothers his most famous tales are not re-writings of previously existent folklore but inventions of his own. Andersen was himself a social climber, who achieved fame and fortune amidst the Danish upper class in spite of his proletarian birth. But his concern with class is not only autobiographical, as Andersen was heavily influenced by at least two philosophies at the time: first, by romanticism, and the ideal of individual genius untethered to its social origins; and second by the philosophy of intelligent design. This school of thought became particularly important for Andersen, as one of its main expositors, Hans Christian Ørsted, became his father figure and mentor.

According to Ørsted and the philosophy of intelligent design, the intricacy of the world reveals an intelligent creator: nature is too complex to have occurred without thought. The natural world was arranged by divine law, and these laws were paralleled in the thoughts and existence of human beings. Humans, then, had to learn how to read these laws, but more importantly, how to have faith in God’s designs, and trust that He had positioned them where it was correct for them to be.¹⁸ To do otherwise would be to disrupt this godly design, to go against nature and against God himself. Andersen’s rise into high society and fame, thus, are conflicted: explained and admissible because his own romantic genius pushed him forward and above his contemporaries, but impermissible because he is leaving the social locus where God had initially placed him. As a result, he never felt safe in his position, nor comfortable. His journal in fact betrays a deep anxiety about being “discovered” for who he really was. In an entry in 1850, he writes of a panic attack triggered when he saw “a nasty vagabond stood near the spring. I had the feeling that he might know who I was and might tell me something unpleasant, as if I were a pariah, moved into a higher caste.”¹⁹ This feeling permeates many of his tales, from the famous “The Ugly Duckling” to meaner tales such as “The Red Shoes” and “The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf”, and his most famous story, “The Little Mermaid.”

¹⁸ Jack Zipes. “Critical Reflections about Hans Christian Andersen, the Failed Revolutionary.” *Marvels & Tales*, v. 20, No. 2, “Hidden, but not Forgotten”: Hans Christian Andersen’s Legacy in the Twentieth Century (2006): 228.

¹⁹ H. C. Andersen’s *Dagbøger, 1825-1873*, Copenhagen, 1971-1976, quoted from Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. Trans. Diane Crone Frank and Jeffrey Frank. (London: Granta, 2004): 28.

Interestingly enough, those three stories are centred around the heroine's feet, and two contain the kind of mutilation you would expect as punishment for an antagonist, inflicted on the heroines instead. In "The Red Shoes" the protagonist of the story is a poor girl who is adopted by a wealthy woman. In her new moneyed life she buys a pair of red shoes she loves so much that she wears them everywhere – even to church. This act of arrogance damns her to dance with no end. Society spurns her, an "angel of God" confirms that she will dance until she dies, and her torment only comes to an end when an executioner chops off her feet. She becomes a servant to the vicar, and lives her life in penance, not even able to attend mass. At the end of the story she receives a vision of the church from whence she's barred, which causes her heart to burst with happiness and her soul flies to God. Similarly, "The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf" tells about a poor girl who is adopted into a rich family and one day throws a loaf of bread onto a puddle and steps on it to keep her shoes from dirtying. This literal misstep sends her to the gates of Hell, where she becomes a statue and stays there until the prayers of a pious stranger save her. Forgiveness, these stories seem to say, is only available to those that know their place in society, respect it, and find joy in it. Feet and legs are dangerous things in Andersen's tales: they take you away from who you are and away from the places God has designed for you.

So it happens in "The Little Mermaid". Legs are the crucial point of the story: to have or to not have legs, to be where and who you are or to move away from that. "The Little Mermaid" is a story of pride and reinvention, and the consequences of both. In the tales I mentioned above this reinvention is related to socioeconomic circumstances, of course. The heroines are poor and want to be rich, their pride (and their feet) moves them to struggle for a different class. There is a similar division in "The Little Mermaid", where the world is divided into humans and "merfolk"; the rich and the poor, the above and below.

Andersen codes both mermaids and their world as more natural than humans: they wear no clothes, when they dress up or adorn themselves they use live oysters, pearls and flowers; their castle is made of living coral, thatched with live mussels. Humans, meanwhile, live in a world that is dead in comparison, where the body is covered in cloths and the buildings are made with stone, where artifice rules over nature. But the real superiority of humans over merfolk is that they possess immortal souls and are able to live forever in heaven. Merfolk, having no soul to guide them, re-join the natural world and become foam upon death. This is what the Little Mermaid revolts against in her tale – like Andersen's other unfortunate heroines, she belongs to a "lower" world or caste, and like them she observes and idolizes the

upper world to which she cannot belong.

Her garden is essentially a shrine to the human world and to humans, and it is tempting to believe that her desire to become human originates from this admiration of the human world. After all, this admiration only grows after she turns fifteen and is allowed to visit the surface, as with each visit “fonder and fonder of human beings, and more and more she wished that she could live amongst them.”²⁰ Even more so, she seems to fall in love with the human prince she sees on her first ever visit, and seeks him out on every visit. But neither her longing for the prince nor her love for the human world are enough to spur her into action, and she seems content to keep spying and studying on them from afar.

What truly moves her to take action is learning from her grandmother that basic difference between human beings and merfolk: that humans possess a soul that will live forever in heaven, while merfolk only dissolve into sea foam. Furthermore, her grandmother explains there is a way for a mermaid to attain a soul: if a human being loved her and “let the vicar put his right hand in [hers] with the promise of faithfulness [...] then his soul would flow into your body, and you too could share human happiness.”²¹ It is this “human happiness” – the human soul and its promise of a blissful eternal life – which convinces the Little Mermaid to seek out the Sea Witch to become human. As Zipes would frame it, this changes the tale from an impossible love story or a coming-of-age narrative into “a Christian conversion story based on a miracle: the pagan girl learns all about Christian love and devotion.”²²

This “becoming human” is the key to my analysis of “The Little Mermaid”. A common misreading is that the witch “transforms” her into a human being, but I would argue that she is only given human *form*. To fully and truly become a human being is to receive a human soul; this is the end-goal of the story. The human form that the mermaid takes is a prop with which she can pursue her goal: she is merely *performing* humanity, and performing the certain gender which will maximize her chance of attaining a soul (through marriage to the prince). She becomes as he wishes her to be, but in the process transgresses the natural laws of existence Andersen believed were set in place by God.

Of course, in both Andersen’s tale and Disney’s retelling of the story, mermaids seem to be female. Her gender is especially obvious in the Disney film, where the sea-shell bikini top leaves little doubt. It is less so in the tale, where we have but the pronouns used throughout

²⁰ Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. 81.

²¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, 82.

²² Jack Zipes. *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller* (New York: Routledge 2005): 108.

the narration, as the description of the mermaids in general are short and rather basic. Beyond knowing that the Little Mermaid is “the prettiest of all”, with “skin as delicate and clear as a rose petal”, we do not know much about her physical appearance. Those descriptions, in fact, are only feminine because prettiness and delicateness are associated with femininity, but are not feminine in themselves.

She is a she inasmuch as the pronoun indicates it, but in lacking human anatomy from the legs down she lacks the reproductive organs required to be one: she lacks both sex and gender.²³ Gender, as Judith Butler first explored in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, is not a natural category but a construct born out of performance – not a hastily chosen, gender-of-the-day performance but a lifelong commitment to certain attitudes, elements, and actions that build one’s gender the way it is generally expected to be built. To quote Butler herself,

The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. [...] The performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body.²⁴

I submit that even if the Little Mermaid were to acquire human form, this is to say, legs and a reproductive system suitable to mating with the prince, this would be useless on their own if she did not also acquire gender – or, more accurately, if she did not learn to perform the correct gender as well.

But where does gender come from in “The Little Mermaid” if, as I have argued, the society around her is un-gendered? How does she learn what is needed to perform a female human? Of course she could have learned it from observing the people living in the shore, but whenever Andersen describes what the Little Mermaid spies from the sea it is always the natural world or else men at work. No, I argue that she learns her feminine performance from the sole undersea denizen who possesses gender: the character that is often considered the villain of the story, the Sea Witch. This character is described as feminine in several ways: her

²³ I am taking “gender” to be a wholly human construct, not found in the undersea society. Andersen never hints at merfolk sexuality or reproduction – the fact that upon death merfolk dissolve into foam hints that their birth might also be from nature itself.

²⁴ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1990) Kindle edition.

name is in the feminine (“witch”, as opposed to “warlock” or “wizard”), but she also possesses a “huge spongy chest” upon which she fosters a little toad on which she dotes maternally, as well as “fat ugly water snakes” that she called her “little chickies”. Furthermore, her home is surrounded by a garden of rather phallic sea polyps that “stretch their sinuous arms and fingers” at those that swim by²⁵. It would seem that the very journey towards the Sea Witch is one of confronting gender, of first passing a masculine area to then penetrate a feminine core – but *both* the masculine and the feminine have elements of “nastiness”, of danger and corruption; the one character who is gendered, in fact surrounded by gender, is an outcast in the asexual undersea society of the Little Mermaid.

For all her nastiness, however, the witch is only complying with the wishes of the Little Mermaid herself. She is not the villain of the story, but a donor there to help the hero in her journey by furnishing the mermaid with the ability to alter her shape into a human form. And while she does take the mermaid’s tongue away²⁶, and leaves her mute and unable to express herself, this is simply the cost of the transformation and does not seem to arise from evil. It is clear to me that the cutting of the mermaid’s tongue, the loss of her voice, is a trade-off. Since her voice is the most precious thing she owes it becomes the physical representation of the material possessions that tie her down to the world. If she is to acquire human shape, and if she is to struggle for her eternal soul, she has to let go of what ties to her material origins: her tongue.²⁷

There is one more thing that makes the role of the witch slightly more interesting than most donors in fairy tales, and that is the composition of the magical artefact that will change the Little Mermaid’s body. This artefact consists of two different components: first is the magic potion itself, the second is the behavioural instructions in how to be a human woman. The magic potion consists of the witch’s own blood, which she extracts by cutting her breast:

²⁵ Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. 84.

²⁶ The taking of the Little Mermaid’s tongue could be seen as an obstacle or struggle that the villain creates, but I believe it is closer to a test to determine the Little Mermaid’s determination. In Propp’s formulation, the witch’s function would be expressed as D¹E¹F⁷: the donor tests the hero, the hero withstands/passes the trials, and a magical artefact is acquired/imbibed (Propp, 2009). As for the real villain of the story, I would agree with Ulla Thomsen’s Actantial analysis and say that the villain is the Little Mermaid’s body itself, which cannot be fully changed as she desires. (Pil Dhlrup, Ulla Thomsen et al, “SPLASH! SIX VIEWS OF ‘THE LITTLE MERMAID.’” *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (AUTUMN 1990): 403-429.)

²⁷ There is much to be said of the loss of the Little Mermaid’s tongue. Voice, and in particular women’s voice is a key ingredient in many fairy tales. It can be lost as a punishment, it can be the key to break a spell, it can be stored and kept forever, it can be spread around by the wind, it can hide in bones and be played like an instrument. I decided not to broach the subject in this chapter for lack of space, though I do address voice and fairy tales in one of the short stories of my creative work collection, “Pearls and Snakes.”

she feeds the mermaid the source of her own femininity. As for the instructions on how to be a woman and achieve her goal of marriage (which the Little Mermaid believes she can't do without her voice), the witch quite simply tells her to use "your beautiful figure", "your soaring walk, and eloquent eyes – with all that you can certainly enchant a human heart." If the witch's blood provides the Little Mermaid with a feminine shape, her words illustrate the expected feminine behaviour and actions.

The corresponding scene in the 1989 Walt Disney film puts an even more pronounced emphasis on gender and performance. Here the sea witch is a much more developed character, with aims and desires of her own, who facilitates the Little Mermaid's transformation only because it benefits her. Ursula, as she is called in this version, is possibly one of the most interesting Disney villains, and developing her was a long process that involved many layers. Originally written for soap opera actress Joan Collins (and designed to look like her), the character changed when she declined the role. It changed again for Elaine Stritch, and once more when Pat Carroll finally signed on to voice her. By this time Ursula's appearance had broken free of its interpreter and the artists had instead drawn the character based on the famous cross-dresser and drag-queen Divine. As Laura Sells positions in her article "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?", Ursula is "a composite of so many drag queens and camp icons [...] a multiple cross-dresser; she destabilizes gender."²⁸

It is only natural, then, that her encounter with Ariel (as the Little Mermaid is named in the film) is multiple in its didacticism: Ursula teaches overtly, through the lyrics of her song, and covertly, through the animate performance she carries out. She quite literally puts on a song-and-dance number for the amusement of the audience and for the benefit of Ariel, though it is possible that she schools both mermaid and audience at once. The "lesson" begins as soon as Ariel penetrates the witch's cave: Ursula emerges from a rather uterine seashell and floats toward a vanity mirror where she applies hair mousse and lipstick. She poses in affectedly feminine ways, and constantly shimmies and wiggles her body while her eels hang about her arms as a kind of feather boa. Her body is overtly feminine, spilling out of its dress/animal encasing; her make-up parodies aged divas. In her voice actresses words, Ursula

²⁸ Sells, Laura, "Where do Mermaids Stand?" *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 182.

is “an ex-Shakespearean actress who now sold cars”²⁹, her performance and as effective as it is monstrous.

And the lyrics to her song are, simply put, an awful summary of outdated machismo that tells women to be thin, quiet, and pretty. When Ariel complains that not having a voice might put her at a disadvantage, Ursula reprimands her, while thrusting her hips suggestively: “You’ll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don’t underestimate the importance of body language!”³⁰

She goes on –

They’re not all that impressed with conversation
True gentlemen avoid it when they can
But they dote and swoon and fall
For a lady who’s withdrawn
It’s she who holds her tongue who gets the man!³¹

No one – not Ariel, and not the audience – should fall for these lyrics, so painfully transparent and nasty. But in truth, Ariel falls for it and the audience forgets about the awful messages because the performance obscures the lyrics and imprint the importance (indeed!) of body language into our minds. And more importantly, we forget because it is effective: Disney’s Ariel very nearly gets her prince only through silent gazes and body language. He truly dotes and swoons and falls for a lady who’s withdrawn, and falls in love with her solely on her fish-out-of-the-sea antics. They fail to kiss only because Ursula, as the villain she is in this story, intervenes, but Ariel’s silent performance of woman is so effective it confirms that Ursula’s number was not prejudiced but predictive.

Performance is successful here – unlike in the original tale, where the Little Mermaid’s performance is painful, protracted, and, at the end of the story, utterly useless. Far from the sensual, triumphant scene of the film where Ariel whips her red hair out of the water and falls, half-dressed, into the prince’s arms, the Little Mermaid’s transformation in the tale is painful: drinking the potion feels “like a double-edged sword going through her delicate body”, and as long as she is human, “every step she took felt like stepping on piercing needles

²⁹ Jim Hill, “Why Pat Carrol wasn’t actually Disney’s first choice to voice Ursula in ‘The Little Mermaid’”, Jim Hill Media. <http://jimhillmedia.com/editor_in_chief1/b/jim_hill/archive/2007/06/15/why-for-pat-carroll-wasn-t-actually-disney-s-first-choice-to-voice-ursula-in-the-little-mermaid.aspx> (accessed 13 April 2017)

³⁰ *The Little Mermaid*, dir. Ron Clements & John Musker, (Walt Disney Pictures, 1989).

³¹ It is interesting that, depending on the region, the lyrics of this song are translated to represent the worst of local sexism. Thus, in the Latin American version preaches that “You look prettier when you’re silent. Do you want to bore the men?”, while in Japanese Ursula croons, “Human men hate talkative women, they much prefer those who walk silent behind them!”

and sharp knives”³², so painful in fact that her feet constantly bleed through the exertion. And far from the romance that Ariel encounters in the film, the Little Mermaid of Andersen’s is barely noticed as a woman. Though the prince is affectionate with her, he treats her as a pet, “allowed [her] to sleep outside his door on a velvet cushion”, or as a boy, a page whom he takes along for activities³³. I mentioned before that the only human performance that the Little Mermaid seemed to have observed were men at work – the fact that she ends up dressed and performing as one is not a coincidence, but it is telling of her failure to perform the feminine gender.

In fact, at least by the prince, she fails to be recognised of any gender at all. He does not seem to regard her as a woman: he has a boy’s costume made for her. But he does not regard her as a man either: he clothes her in silk and muslin dresses, and allows her to dance along with his slave girls. Dancing, walking, gliding – things done with legs – are perhaps the most important elements of the Little Mermaid’s performance in the human world, what make her most feminine. She can even be found to “menstruate” through her feet, which bleed with the efforts of dancing and walking after her prince, which everyone notices and she has to dip in salt water to cauterise every night. But none of this “fools” the prince, who at the end of the story is never able to see the mermaid as a woman, but only for her noble heart.

Which is, perhaps ironically, what saves the Little Mermaid from certain death. For when she refuses to kill the prince to return to her original form and leaps into the ocean, ready to transform into foam, she is picked up by the “Daughters of the Air”, who recognise her as kin: “You poor little mermaid – you’ve struggled with your entire heart for the same thing we have”³⁴. And what is that they have, that the Little Mermaid was fighting to get? Only the chance of one day earning an immortal soul and a place in heaven.

Like the first transformation of the tale, this one is all about mobility: as a daughter of the air she will travel the world, doing good deeds to earn a soul. In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit muses that walking is giving yourself to places, and in turn the places give back: walking the world allows to explore one’s mind. But the Little Mermaid, once again, cannot walk: has now again lost her legs, and with them, the freedom of the destination. She is now bound for heaven, unable to experience the dual exploration that a physical form would have afforded.

³² Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. 86.

³³ Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. 88.

³⁴ Hans Christian Andersen. *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*. 93.

But of course, in Andersen's vision of the world, physical exploration literally distances you from the values and rules that make you who you are. It is perhaps only because of his own Christian forgiveness that he allows the Little Mermaid a chance at atonement; though not in her own terms: only through those God dictates.

My feet-and-legs-tale, "The Night I Lost my Feet but Sort of Found Them", has less to do with God or medieval socio-economic classes, but I believe that at its core it retains the value (or the problems) that these body-parts adumbrate: change and evolution, the moving away from what one was into a different vision of one self.

The first draft of this tale was written in one day, under the influence of a fever. It was originally little more than an embellished anecdote, which made me doubtful whether to include it in the collection at all. It was only upon coming back to the research that precedes this that I realised how exactly this story fit with the collection and how to elevate it from anecdote to full story.

By this point I was researching what became the third chapter of this commentary, and was in the midst of reading Julio Cortázar's conference "Some Aspects of the Tale"³⁵. I will, needless to say, delve deeper into this conference in the following chapters – but I found that Cortázar made one key differentiation between those stories that could become literature and those that would never rise above anecdote. A good story, for Cortázar, was one that suggested a theme a theme around which "thoughts, notions, feelings, even ideas, like a vast planetary system of which one had no conscience of until the storyteller, astronomer of words, reveals its existence to us."³⁶ I tried to go back to this story and see if any planetary systems of thoughts and ideas emerged around it. It took a second pair of eyes to tease the theme out: a friend who had offered to read it remarked that the transgender character, with the emphasis I had made on her coat and boots, reminded her of both Glinda the Good Witch

³⁵ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento", *Diez años de la revista "Casa de las Américas"* 60 (1970) <<http://www.literatura.us/cortazar/aspectos.html>> accessed April 13, 2017.

All translations given here are my own. The text has been published in English in Charles E. May, ed., *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 245-255.

³⁶ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

and the Wicked Witch of the East from the *The Wizard of Oz*³⁷; one with her puffy pink dress, the other for her magic red slippers.

The film adaptation of *The Wizard of Us* has become a landmark for the LGBT+ community, but then this theme in particular was already present in the story. These comments, instead made me wonder whether more fantastical aspects could benefit this tale, and I set to work on making this transgender character who opens the story into a more liminal, fairy-godmother-like character.

This in turn opened the door to the conceit of the disappearing feet. I thought of the amount of people I have known that return to bad relationships after a break-up, almost without thinking, truly as though their feet walked them without their heads realising. It occurred to me that this is almost the exact opposite of what feet do in fairy tales: instead of walking them to a newer, improved version of themselves, these feet were retracing their paths. What to do with these unruly, traitorous limbs...?

In a fairy tale, the answer is quite simple: you cut them off, safe in the knowledge that they will re-grow or re-appear somehow. And in this tale, the way to the cure was already present: a fairy godmother that would take the wounded heroine in and provide her with the tools for healing.

This is not to say that I set out to re-write the entire thing as a fairy tale. The structure of the tale remains firmly modern, starting *in media res* and filling in the needed information through flashbacks and memories. However, what truly allowed this anecdote to become a tale, and a tale that could fit my collection, were these fairy tale motifs that I had identified through research; particularly the mutilation of a body part around which the plot then revolves.

But at the end there is one more aspect other than the structure, that differentiates “The Night I Lost my Feet but Sort of Found Them” from a fairy tale is its emphasis on community. Most of our most famous fairy tales are about individuals who triumph over adversity on their own; if they have any help it is often given to them because they already deserve it (like Cinderella) or else they pay for it dearly (like the Little Mermaid). Not so in my story: from the unnamed woman who literally takes her into her home to the friends who support her as she “re-grows” her new feet, this heroine overcomes her predicaments not on her own but through community.

³⁷ Baum, L. Frank. *The Wizard of Oz*. (New York: Puffin Classics, 2008)

1.3

Building New Lives: Forgiveness in “The Handless Maiden”

Given that so many fairy tales can be read as coming-of-age stories, perhaps it should not surprise us that they rely on feet and legs to tell their stories. On them we walk away, for good or evil, from our place of origin.

It always struck me as curious that there are rather fewer tales about hands. Alongside our eyes, hands are probably the most important, useful parts of ourselves. Transportation is achievable without using feet or legs, communication is possible without voice – and hair, the heart of many tales, lacks any practical use. To navigate the world without hands is a challenge on another level. Why, then, are there not more fairy tales in which hands, like feet and legs, take centre place?

I quickly found out that these tales do exist, they simply are not as famous and the importance of the hands not as apparent as Cinderella’s feet or the Little Mermaid’s legs. I have come to separate these hand-tales in two groups: one in which hands are directly related to physical and manual labour, and a second one in which hands come to be a symbol for civilisation.

In the first group I identify tales such as “Vasilisa the Beautiful”, “The Wild Swans”, “Rumpelstiltskin”, “The Spindle, the Shuttle, and the Needle”, and “Sleeping Beauty”. These tales deal not only with appropriate feminine labour (particularly knitting, sewing, and spinning), but also its monetary value and importance in the household. In all of these women use their knowledge of sewing and spinning to extricate themselves from danger or find themselves an advantageous match, or else it is these very skills and their value that get them in trouble. Arguably, these tales are also about many other things: “Vasilisa the Beautiful” has been read as a Jungian parable for getting in touch with the repressed Id³⁸, while “Rumpelstiltskin” deals with names and naming as much as it deals with hands.

My analysis will in fact concentrate on tales from the second group, where hands are a link to civilization. These tales, which mostly fall under the Aarne-Thompson type 706, “The Girl Without Hands”, are not as famous as any I listed above. And no wonder: they are intensely cruel. They feature incestuous brothers who lust after their sisters, fathers who mutilate their daughters without remorse, babies being dismembered and fed to dogs. Of

³⁸ Clarissa Pinkola-Estés. *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman*. (New York: Random House, 1992): 89.

course cruelty is a pervading aspect of fairy tales, but it is often smoothed over or erased without altering the story (in modern retellings of Cinderella, for instance, the mutilation of her sisters' feet disappears and instead Cinderella forgives them, thus also becoming a kinder, forgiving female role model). But in the AT706 tales the cruelty is indelible, indispensable to the story.

Though there are many variants, the plot rarely strays from the following: a young girl is lusted after by an unnatural lover (the devil, or an incestuous father or brother), when she denies them what they want she has her hands cut off as punishment and is subsequently cast out of her home. She wanders the world, living off nature until she stumbles into a castle, whose king falls in love with her and marries her. After living with him for a while, he leaves for war and in his absence the girl is thrown out of the castle along with her baby. She finds a supernatural agent who houses her for several years, until her husband finds her anew.

The question is, of course, why the hands? The mutilation itself is a representation of the sexual violence of which she is victim, but of all the parts of the body that might be taken in revenge or punishment – why the hands? Why not, for instance, something more related to sexuality itself – the breasts? Or why not the feet, to tie the character down to her attackers?

Now, there are in fact some variants of AT706 where the heroine's breasts are cut off along with her hands. With these mutilations she is desexualized, and the father/brother render her unattractive to other men. But in the most widespread variation of AT706, only the hands are cut off.

Of course, there are many examples in literature of mutilated hands – Shakespeare's Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus* is perhaps the first to come to mind, as the similarities are striking. Like the heroine in AT706, Lavinia is sexually assaulted and has her hands and tongue cut off after her rape. However, Shakespeare's text does give us a reason why Lavinia's hands need to be cut off: same as her tongue, her hands are removed so that she may not be able to identify her assaulters. But this does not apply to AT706, as heroine's tongue is left intact, and there seems to be no interest in secrecy. Even more, the characters in Shakespeare's play acknowledge just what a barbaric act this maiming is: the discovery of Lavinia by Marcus after her mutilation is punctuated by a pathetic, sentimental speech, that (while decried by Shakespearean critics) makes clear just how outrageous the actions are.

Not so in AT706, where the maiming is, in true fairy tale fashion, narrated dispassionately, with no description of the pain, sensation, or thoughts that the heroine might be having; and no explanation of why the hands are chosen. Few authors even try and come up with an

explanation, the most successful perhaps is Giambattista Basile in “La Penta Mano Mozza”: he makes the incestuous brother a hand fetishist, and has him fall in love not exactly with his sister but with her hands. When she asks him what about her is so special that he’d be willing to forget the family bonds, he answers,

Your hand, serving fork that pulls my entrails out of the pot of this chest; your hand, hook that lifts the bucket out of my soul from the well of this life; your hand, vise that grips my spirit while Love flies it! O hand, o lovely hand, ladle that dishes out sweetness, pincer that tears out my desires, stick that sends this heart spinning!³⁹

With this extraordinary passage out of the way, Penta immediately has her hands cut off by a servant and sends them to her brother, with a message wishing “that he should enjoy what he most desires, along with good health and baby boys.” In wishing him good health and baby boys she is essentially announcing her intention to not be present to witness either of this – and by saying he should enjoy himself, she mocks him by suggesting he may sexually enjoy the hands as long as they are separate from the body. In a twisted game of one-upmanship, she breaks the family bonds which her brother had weakened by lusting after her.

Hands, I argue, are here representations or symbols of civilization: the first things we use for exploration and creation, the tools we use for everyday survival, and how we discover and hold onto the people around us. To hold hands is perhaps the earliest sign of affection we consciously take, and how we create and enforce bonds between each other.

That is the reason why hands are cut off in these AT706 tales: with the bonds of society and family crumbling under the transgression of the father or the brother, it is only logical that the heroine would be bereft of hands, of the very representation of those bonds. This is also why the heroine *must* leave her home, even in versions of the story when she is not cast out as violently as in Basile’s tale. Take the nameless girl in the brothers Grimm version of the tale, whose father accidentally exchanged her for riches to the devil. When the devil comes to take her, she cries so much that her tears purify her hands, which prompts the devil to order her father to cut them off; yet even after he obeys, the girl is too pure and the devil leaves without her. The cowardly father then asks her to stay and let him care for her –

Now, since the miller had gained so much wealth thanks to his daughter, he promised her he would see to it that she’d live in splendour for the rest of her life. But she didn’t want to remain there.

³⁹ Giambattista Basile. *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones*. Trad. Nancy L Canepa, (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2007): 225.

“I want to leave here and shall depend on the kindness of people to provide me with whatever I need.”⁴⁰

Arguably, the girl could have stayed home – even more so in this variant, that tries to obfuscate the incest by having the devil as the villain. But the circumstances are not that different: she has been betrayed by her immediate family, hands and bonds are cut and she chooses to leave.

In fairy tales, running away from home is nothing new. When women do it, however, it is often as a desperate last resort, to escape from abuse (sexual or otherwise). The Aarne-Thompson category: 510B Unnatural Love covers most of these heroines persecuted by their own kin. It is here that we find tales such as “The Three Dresses”, “Donkey Skin”, “Allerleirauh”, “All Furs”, and a slew of other protagonists who cover themselves in plants, mud, and animal hides in order to avoid sexual persecution from their father.⁴¹

I submit that the hiding of one’s identity through donning some ugly costume is parallel to the cutting of the hands. Both are undertaken somewhat willingly to escape an even worse fate, both foreshadow leaving home and being cut off from society. If in the *Girl Without Hands* hands symbolise civilisation, then 510B tales use skin or appearance as the same. Like in “The *Girl Without Hands*”, the heroine’s fault (as in many fairy tales) is that she is too pretty, or that she looks too much like her dead mother, and so attracts her father’s unnatural love. Instead of cutting off her hands to spite the would-be rapist or having them cut as a punishment, she acquires a costume so unsightly or harmful that no one in their right mind would wear (the hide of a donkey, a leather burka, a cap made of brambles). Donning this second skin she is so transformed that even her father/brother fail to recognise her. Just as Maria Tatar considers that in the *Handless Maiden* the heroine “has been moved, through a double violation [...] into the realm of nature”⁴², Marina Warner writes that *Donkey Skin* “changes into a beastlike form that simultaneously seals her connection with nature and splits her off from the society in which such an offence as marriage with her father was proposed

⁴⁰ Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm. *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brother’s Grimm*. 100.

⁴¹ This is also a motif found in many other genres – think of Daphne, the nymph who in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* pleads to be transformed into a laurel tree rather than suffer Apollo’s “affections.” Perhaps more surprising, it appears in several hagiographies: Saint Agatha of Sicily, for instance, refuses to marry a Roman prefect and has her breasts cut off from her body.

⁴² Maria Tatar. *Off With Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1992): 123.

and urged.”⁴³ Both heroines, then, become animal-like, or else lose some of their humanity to their attackers.

But I would argue that Donkey Skin and all the 510B heroines never become as beastly as it is suggested. She might look ugly, animal-like or monstrous, even, and she might be cut off from society; but she is always quick to re-join it, finding employment in the first kingdom she stumbles upon. In this “new” civilisation her second skin becomes not a disguise to escape but a tool with which she shapes her future. In a land where no one knows her, where she has no reason to keep hiding, instead of discarding her costume she uses it to place herself in an advantageous position (or retake her rightful position as princess). In a paper in *Western Folklore*, W. F. H. Nicolaisen argues that the second skin the heroine covers herself in possesses two functions: first, that of disguise/marker of cut family ties, and second, a protective cocoon under which the heroine develops abilities and wit that she could not have learned at home⁴⁴.

Through donning a second skin, then, the heroine is set free of her past self; she severs ties not to civilisation but to her own past being and history. She makes use of her filthiness and apparent harmlessness to get close to the prince, and when he spurns her she appears again before him in magic regalia to teach him a lesson that many fairy tales impart painfully onto their heroines: treat everyone with kindness, for even the unnaturally ugly scullery maid might be a princess in disguise. To once more quote Nicolaisen, the vast majority of the AT510B heroines “despite their demeaning and inappropriate lowly position, begin to lose their tag of unpromise and start shaping their own lives and futures”⁴⁵. No longer a victim, she becomes an active character in her own story, and if contact is renewed with her fathers or other family members, it is on her own terms – and sometimes, they fail to recognise her even without the animal skin on! The second skin, that precipitated her growth, has in a way fused with the first.

In contrast, the AT706 heroine truly becomes “beastly” and removed from human civilization. Not by association with any particular animal, not even by association with nature itself (some variants of AT510B, like Mossycoat or Katie Woodencloak dress in plants or bark) but by how truly helpless she is left. With no hands to fend for herself, the Handless Maiden

⁴³ Marina Warner. *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1994): 354-355.

⁴⁴ W.F.H. Nicolaisen. “Why Tell Stories about Innocent, Persecuted Heroines?” *Western Folklore*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Perspectives on the Innocent Persecuted Heroine in Fairy Tales. (Jan., 1993): 66.

⁴⁵ W.F.H. Nicolaisen. “Why Tell Stories about Innocent, Persecuted Heroines?”, 67.

wanders for days on end, drinking from streams, foraging from nature. When she finally finds an orchard, or a king's garden, she needs to crawl through a hole to then try and shake the trees with her body and eat the apples from the floor – and, when discovered by the guards, is beaten and thrown into jail. She is so pitiful that it comes at no surprise that, in certain variants, the Virgin Mary or God himself are moved to help her:

And as she had walked the whole day and not eaten one mouthful, and hunger tormented her, she thought, "Ah, if I were but inside, that I might eat of the fruit, else must I die of hunger!" [...] And suddenly an angel came towards her, who made a dam in the water, so that the moat became dry and she could walk through it. And now she went into the garden and the angel went with her. She saw a tree covered with beautiful pears, but they were all counted. Then she went to them, and to still her hunger, ate one with her mouth from the tree, but no more.⁴⁶

There is no lack of characters in fairy tales expelled from their homes or forced to wander, but their plight is rarely narrated as pathetically as this. Even in tales where the characters end up truly becoming dependent on nature, like Marie-Catherine d'Auloy's marooned protagonist of "The Bee and the Orange Tree", their suffering is usually skipped over, mentioned but not described. I believe that this emphasis on the heroine's suffering is there precisely to stress how separate she is from all her fairy tale cousins, how far from human civilisation she has come.

Even when she is taken in by the king or the owner of the orchard, this estrangement endures. Her adoptive family and eventual husband do all they can to take her back into human society: in Basile's telling, for instance, she is given a place as handmaiden for the queen, and does "every imaginable job with her feet, even sewing [and] threading a needle"⁴⁷. Even more telling, in the Grimms' variant the king has "silver hands made for her"⁴⁸, artificial prosthesis meant to cover her deficiencies and restore her into the fold of civilization. But in all the variants, the moment the protective husband absents himself from the tale the Handless Maiden's double mutilation surfaces again: after giving birth to her first child, she is accused of birthing something inhuman (a changeling or monster, animal-children), or else of devouring her new-born child, and cast out.

That this second exile coincides with the act of giving birth is no coincidence. Pregnancy, as the culmination of fertility and all the cycles that reign over the female body, is perhaps the time when a woman is most fully seen as a "natural" thing. For a character like the Handless

⁴⁶ Jacob & Wilhem Grimm. *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brother's Grimm*. 101.

⁴⁷ Giambattista Basile. *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones*. 227.

⁴⁸ Jacob & Wilhem Grimm. *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brother's Grimm*. 101.

Maiden, who already inhabits the borders of civilization, pregnancy only pushes her further away from human society. It is no wonder then that her husband is willing to believe that she birthed a monster, or that she cannibalised it: he knows her to be not quite like him, her beastliness does not need an unnatural cloak to be known. That he is also willing to forgive her is further confirmation of his understanding of his wife; Basile's king goes as far as exclaiming, upon hearing the news, that "These things happened by license of the heavens and a respectable man must not try to rearrange the stars."⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the Handless Maiden has to once again leave home, this time with her baby, to live off nature. In the Grimm's tale, she leaves behind her silver hands: what civilization had been instilled into her during her sojourn is once more abandoned.

But unlike the Donkey Skin tales, the goal of "The Girl Without Hands" is not to re-join civilization, but the building of a new one. In this second exile the Handless Maiden avoids all civilization – she no longer searches for gardens or orchards to sate her hunger, but instead wanders off into forests or lakes, relying on strangers to help her nurse her child, and waging, as Basile beautifully puts it, "a fiercer war with the stumps of her arms than Briareus with his hundred arms."⁵⁰ It is through this determination that she is noticed, for the second time, by her would-be savers – only this time they are not humans, but supernatural helpers that come to her aid by creating a liminal space for her and her child to grow. Angels lead her to a cabin in the Grimms' version of the tale, while Basile has a sorcerer welcome her into his kingdom. In the first instance she sees in front of the cabin she finds a sign reading "Here anyone can live free"; in the Italian variant the sorcerer is so moved by her tale that he invites all who have suffered to his kingdom to tell their story and earn a place there.

These are the new civilisations that the Handless Maiden creates: kinder societies that welcome all who have suffered. Unlike the places she leaves at the beginning of the tale, where sisters could be attacked and daughters were chattel to sell or ransom, she creates a kingdom where suffering might be healed. And indeed, it is in this place that her arms heal and regrow, and in many variants they seem to regrow out of love: when her child falls into a river and, instinctively, she tries to catch him, her missing arms grow as if to reach the baby and protect him. She has created new bonds between herself and the world, between herself and her child, her husband, and those who took her in.

⁴⁹ Giambattista Basile. *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones*. 228.

⁵⁰ Giambattista Basile. *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones*. 229.

This healing, this kindness that the Maiden herself announced she was going to look for when she first left her home, is for me the core of the story.

It is also what modern retellings often focus on. Susan Gordon, a professional storyteller, writes of her experience retelling this story, and how it resonates both with those who see it as a tale of extreme abuse and those who see it as a tale of the less visible wounds that everyone carries into adulthood. “Handlessness”, she writes, “occurs when we are too young to prevent it”⁵¹. The Maiden loses her hands because she could not prevent her victimization, but in gaining a “handless” charge of her own – her baby – she regains her hands and works to create a situation in which he might grow hand-full. The need for healing is even more apparent in Chilean and Argentinian retellings of the story, in which a spurned brother throws the Maiden into a ditch overgrown with thorns and cuts off her hands when she tries to climb out... to find himself stricken with a terrible illness that his sister’s hands alone can heal, or to find his lands afflicted by a drought that only ends when his sister returns to plant the lands herself⁵². These tales present a double journey: of the Handless Maiden, who is betrayed and pushed out, and of her attackers who are finally in need of her. Only when she heals can they heal. Hands are, after all, not solely for using tools but for holding on to one another.

If ever there was point in which I had to stop my research and go back to my tales, it was when I read “The Handless Maiden”. I had written the tale that opens this collection much earlier; it was in fact the very first tale I wrote, and thus was rather untouched by the reading and study that came after.

However, upon reading “The Handless Maiden”, and understanding its commitment to rebuilding a more accepting community, I knew I had to go back to my own hand-less tale. The idea of a winged child had been simmering in my head for many years, but when I finally wrote the tale I could feel something missing, or at least not quite right. The drafts that preceded the version in this collection had the mother essentially deciding that her daughter’s wings were not that big of a deal, and moving to Ireland only because she’s looking for large empty areas away from the city. But “The Handless Maiden” and its accompanying research forced me to rethink what it truly meant to be “handless”. I quoted Susan Gordon, above,

⁵¹ Susan Gordon. “The Powers of the Handless Maiden.” *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*. Ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993): 276.

⁵² Ana Basarte. “‘El cuento de la doncella sin manos’: versiones hispánicas medievales y la tradición oral en América.” *Letras*, 67-68 (2013): 36.

saying that handlessness is something that is inflicted on people when they are too young to prevent it: it is an abandonment of a kind, a failure by the community to prevent the loss of hands; the loss of bonds. Thinking about “handlessness” in this way made me realise that the truly handless in my tale was not the child born with wings instead of arms, but the mother. She was the one who had been abandoned by someone she trusted, who had been kicked out of the life she wanted to lead. The baby had been born into handlessness; into distrust and rejection, but it was the mother the one who had suffered it first.

I went back to my tale and rewrote the second half accordingly. Instead of having the mother essentially shrug her shoulders, I wrote her worrying that her daughter’s wings meant she would grow up not knowing how to love, or how to “hold on” to people. As the story comes to an end, she realises that love is both holding and knowing when to let go, and decides to move to the “United States National Radio Quiet Zone” and build a life where her child might learn to balance her more literal handlessness.

My other hand-story in the collection is also related to motherhood. “Fiona McCool”, though originally based on the Irish legend of Fionn mac Cumhaill, stars too a single mother who finds herself suddenly exiled from the life she had been leading. This is not a coincidence: by this point of my writing I had been reading about “The Handless Maiden” and was on more sure territory when it came to hands in fairy tale and legend. However, I wanted to focus this story on what follows handlessness; on the community that is born after the Handless Maiden regains her hands. My Fiona McCool has already “regained” her hands, has escaped her exile and is a budding social leader in her community, we revisit her past only to show that she has earned (or is earning) her place. In fact, “Fiona McCool” stands out from the rest of my tales in that it does not narrate a moment of instability or change: it is instead a rather small tale of an afternoon in the life of a woman who has already conquered adversity.

This allows hands to work both as tools (McCool being a landscaper is a play on the idiom of “having a green thumb” as much as a synecdoche for manual labour) and as representation of the knowledge gained during adversity – during the “handless” period of our lives. McCool sucks on her thumb, as in the myth, to extract knowledge of the future gained from the salmon of knowledge, but also to extract calm and patience from her past and root herself in the present that she has constructed.

Many post-modern re-writings of fairy tales like to play with the “happily ever after” coda that punctuates the traditional narratives, and address the impossibility of everlasting happiness by counterpoising it with the mediocrity of everyday life. I chose to go the exact

opposite way: take a completely average, everyday activity (pick up your children from school, deal with other mothers you might not like) and transform it into a triumph of legend rooted in the character's own past and the future promised at the end of the tale.

At their core, fairy tales are about the evolution of the human character, and the particular desires and wishes that drive this evolution forward are often encased in their bodies. Ambition or greed are coded into feet and legs, which are then either mutilated or awarded shoes befitting their new life. Forgiveness and truth can be found in hands, and the desire for a new life is seen in the strange skins that characters use to hide their identities.

There is, however, a certain bodily change that I have avoided talking about in this chapter: the "full body" transformation, in which a character is changed into something else through a magic spell or a curse. This metamorphosis, more complete than the transformation undertaken by the Little Mermaid, is a popular trope in fairy tales. Whether it is a curse to be broken in tales like "The Beauty and the Beast" or "The Wild Swans"; or as a last consolation in "The Juniper Tree", I believe metamorphosis is less fanciful magic and more an invitation to question one's own humanity.

Chapter 2

Pigs, Wolves, and an Education: The Body in Magical Realism

It has at times seemed to me that fairy tales present humanity and say, “This is what we are, for good and evil.” The tales might contain a moral dimension to them (as I argued about many of Andersen’s stories), but they do not criticize society as much as simply present it “as it is”. Even tales which propose the creation or discovery of kinder ways (“The Girl Without Hands”) suggest forgiveness over criticism.

Needless to say, this is not the case in more modern texts. In this chapter I would like to comment on two texts that I consciously revisited a number of times throughout my research: Marie Darrieussecq’s 1996 novella *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*⁵³, and Karen Russel’s 2005 short story, “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves⁵⁴” from the eponymous collection. These two texts deal with metamorphosis, as I will argue, as a way to question humanity itself: what humans are in relation to other humans and animals, how humans are and how they should be.

To round off my analysis of these two narratives, I will be making use of two of Angela Carter’s famous 1979 collection of stories, *The Bloody Chamber*⁵⁵: “The Tiger’s Bride” and “Wolf Alice.” This collection was perhaps the first to look back on classic tales to subvert them, and played a key role in my own development as a writer.

I chose the texts I mentioned above, *Pig Tales* and “Saint Lucy’s...” because I feel they share certain facets with my own work. They are clearly not fairy tales, yet deal with magical or else supernatural occurrences, metamorphosis, and the way bodies change and are changed. I would argue that they, as my own work, can be seen as examples of contemporary magical realism that challenge our everyday reality by presenting the reader a realistic world where laws are bended but never broken, and where the characters’ willingness to accept the impossible offers a sharp critique of Western society.

⁵³ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, Linda Coverdale, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

⁵⁴ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* (New York: Vintage, 2008)

⁵⁵ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1993)

2.1

Moods and Probability: Of Fairy Tales and Magical Realism.

I would like to start by discussing where these two genres meet and drift apart.

The fairy tale, to begin with, is a traditionally tricky thing to describe. It seems almost customary, when writing about the subject, to have at least a few pages dedicated to the many characteristics and problems of fairy tales. Must fairy tales be certifiably old, and originating from the oral tradition? Must they have fairies in them? Are folk tales the same as fairy tales? What about animal tales, wonder tales, or literary stories about fairies?

In practical terms, I have always felt that “fairy tale” is a mood, or a feeling that washes over as one reads. If it feels like a fairy tale and reads like a fairy tale and ends like a fairy tale, it is likely one is reading a fairy tale. Moods, however, seldom lend themselves to literary analysis, so throughout this chapter I will be using Marina Warner’s five basic characteristics of the fairy tale that she delineates in *Once Upon a Time*⁵⁶. First, she states, a fairy tale is a short narrative, perhaps several pages long but never novel-length. Secondly, fairy tales are stories that exude familiarity – they are either certifiably old or else they seem to resemble other, older stories. The third point, related to the previous, is what Warner calls the “necessary presence of the past”, felt through the mixing and re-combinations of plots, characters, devices, and images. Fourth, fairy tales possess a kind of universal language; a symbolic Esperanto, where recurrent motifs communicate similar meanings and strike visceral recognition in the reader. Lastly, fairy tales have a recognisably sparse language and describe often cruel acts in such a matter-of-fact way that makes them look one-dimensional, even shallow⁵⁷.

Magical realism has proved just as nebulous a term. It first appeared in 1925, in an essay by art critic Franz Roh as a pictorial technique⁵⁸, but the first to apply the term to literature is probably the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. In two essays, published in 1967⁵⁹ and 1975⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

⁵⁷ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, xvii-xx.

⁵⁸ Franz Roh, “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism,” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995): 15-31.

⁵⁹ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America,” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, trans. Tanya Huntington, eds. Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995): 75-88.

⁶⁰ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvellous Real,” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, trans. Tanya Huntington, eds. Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995): 89-108.

(but written many years previously) he proposed magical realism (or the marvellous real, as he called it) as a nativist movement that would express the innate fantasy of Latin America. The same “old clichés of the Brocelandia jungle, the Knights of the Round Table⁶¹”, he wrote, can be found in the flesh in America –

The Latin American returns to his own world and begins to understand many things [...] He opens up Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s great chronicle⁶² and finds himself before the only honest-to-goodness book of chivalry that has even been written [...] where unknown animals are real, unknown cities are discovered, dragons are seen in rivers and strange mountains in snow and smoke. Without realizing it, Bernal Díaz bested the brave deeds of Amadís of Gaul. [...] The marvellous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still carry, from those who searched for the fountain of eternal youth and the golden city of Manoa to certain early rebels or modern heroes of mythological fame from our wars of independence.⁶³

More importantly, Latin American writers have to realise (he argues) that their style is reaffirmed throughout their history: if their continent and world was founded on myths and marvellous beliefs, from El Dorado to the fountain of youth, then it should follow that their literary style too should be marvellous.

I find the nativist origins of magical realism particularly relevant to fairy tale in light of the 19th century nationalist push that led to many writers and scholars “re-discovering” fairy tales and putting them in writing. Like Carpentier, W.B. Yeats and Speranza Wilde, Lady Gregory in Wales, the Grimm brothers in Germany, and many others, were concerned with salvaging national traditions and language. Marina Warner writes that the Grimm brothers sought, through their collection, to “assert cultural riches and distinctiveness [...] to retrieve a record of the German spirit, through an encyclopaedic account of the German language, myths, history, customs, beliefs, and knowledge.”⁶⁴

In contemporary days, however, magical realism has freed itself of its geographical shackles. It is no longer considered a movement, to start with, but a mode that can be applied to other types of fiction. This has led to many things being mistakenly labelled as such – Angela Carter herself, for instance, complained that the name had been abused so much and applied to any writing “in which something out of the way happens”⁶⁵. Defining magical

⁶¹ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America,” 84.

⁶² Carpentier refers here to *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, or *True Story of the Conquest of New Spain* by Spanish explorer and soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo.

⁶³ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America,” 83-84.

⁶⁴ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 57.

⁶⁵ Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016): 392.

realism as a mode or style is indeed further complicated by its emergence during the so-called “Latin American boom”, when writers such as Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes were producing writing that was fantastical (even marvellous) but at once different from magical realism.

In her book *Los juegos fantásticos*⁶⁶, Mexican academic Flora Botton Burlá uses the term “paradigm of reality” to explain the differences between three genres that deal with the supernatural: fantasy/science fiction, the fantastic, and magical realism. Each narrative has an internal paradigm of reality, independent of the reader, to which they conform and which cannot be broken. Fantasy and science fiction extrapolate from the known world but in fact create a secondary world with its own intradiegetic expectations of reality. The fantastic, meanwhile, originally presents a paradigm that seems realist, but it is broken or interrupted by a problematic supernatural in a way that the characters cannot accept. One of the best examples of this genre is perhaps the short tale “The Dinosaur” by Augusto Monterroso, which I quote here in its entirety (my own translation):

And when he woke up, the dinosaur was still there.⁶⁷

In a sentence we have a character (was asleep, then woke up) with a paradigm of reality (no dinosaurs should be there) that is changed or transformed irredeemably (it wasn't a dream, the dinosaur was still present). In comparison, magical realism has a flexible paradigm of reality – characters might express surprise at certain events or episodes, but they are capable of reconciling them with their perception of reality. Thus, when in *Cien años de soledad* the women of the Buendía family are hanging out sheets to dry and Remedios la Bella is suddenly spirited into the heavens, no one is more than momentarily surprised, and no one expresses any disbelief at the miracle that has happened. The only one to express anything other than acceptance is Fernanda, who “gnawed by envy, finally accepted the prodigy, and for a long time kept praying to God to return the sheets”⁶⁸ (García Márquez, 280). In other words, her problem is not with the fact that a woman disappeared into the sky, but with the fact that this woman stole her bed sheets.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady summarizes this magical realist attitude towards reality:

⁶⁶ Flora Botton Burlá, *Los juegos fantásticos* (Ciudad de México: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM, 2003): 57-59.

⁶⁷ Augusto Monterroso, *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)* (Ciudad de México: Ediciones Era S.A de C.V., 1990): 77.

⁶⁸ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe S.A., 1985): 280.

Magical realism is characterised first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an “enlightened” and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality. [...] In magical realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic. Although the educated reader considers the rational and the irrational as conflicting world views, he does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world.

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Where in that scale of belief, however, do fairy tales fit?

There are some who argue that fairy tales, like fantasy, present a secondary world independent of ours, with its own rules and expectations. I disagree with this – even if fairy tales took place “In a kingdom far away,” I always understood them to take place in my own world.

Even more so, I would argue that this kind of phrase (“In a kingdom far away”) is a textual pointer that indicates that fairy tales take place not in a secondary world, like fantasy narratives, but in our very own. These traditional opening and closing lines are found in many, if not most, fairy tales. The most famous phrase that announces a fairy tale, “Once upon a time...”, moves the reader across diegetic time, but not across space. Other openers, such as the Slavic “Beyond the hills, beyond the valleys...” or the Polish “Beyond seven mountains, beyond seven rivers...” do the opposite: they move the reader not through time but through space; yet this space is separated from us only by perfectly normal and crossable obstacles. Similarly, many fairy tales have closing lines in which the narrator affirms to have witnessed the events narrated in the fairy tale: “I was dere when de owld son comed of age, a-playing de fiddle,”⁷⁰ says the narrator in “Mossycoat”, an English Gypsy version of Donkey-Skin collected in *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales*. In the Russian version of “The Armless Maiden,” the narrator informs us that he was present at the closing wedding: “I was there and drank mead and wine; it ran down my moustache, but did not go into my mouth.” Not only present, but sober enough to tell the tale!

Perhaps a more important aspect that separates fairy tales from both fantasy and magical realism is the degree of verisimilitude with which they wish to narrate the world. Realism, as Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris remark in their introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History,*

⁶⁹ Amaryl Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland, 1985): 21-23.

⁷⁰ Angela Carter, Ed. *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 2005): 60.

Community strives to establish its narrative as “an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities.”⁷¹⁷² Magical realism does something very similar: it begins by presenting an apparently objective representation of the world but, by introducing a supernatural element that is accepted into the narrative, it disrupts the very “objective” representation they had introduced. To further quote Zamora and Faris, “Its program is not centralizing, but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity.”⁷³

Traditionally, fairy tales share this eccentricity while completely eschewing verisimilitude. I say “traditionally” because today traditional fairy tales might be seen as a more conservative force, peddling and preserving traditional values, gender roles, and plots. However, the vast majority of fairy tales are eccentric; they open space for the downtrodden and underdogs to speak truth to power, or offer possible worlds where things work differently without much concern to how realistic it might seem. What matters is not how plausible it is that an emperor might not realise he’s naked and being made a fool of, but that the possibility of the powerful being mistaken – and being called out on their mistakes – exists. And as representation of that possibility we have the emperor’s nude body: what in any realist tale would be a place of immovable power is “reduced” to being a body, identical to everyone else’s.

Like in fairy tales, the body in magical realist texts is malleable and heavy with meaning. But because of the commitment that magical realism has with verisimilitude, the changes inflicted on the human body in these narratives often have more complex origins than those in fairy tales. There might be beasts in magical realism, and they might fall in love with maidens, but the transformation rarely (if ever) happens as punishment for angering a fairy. In *Cien años de soledad*, for instance, the whole narrative can be said to begin and end with a boy born with a pig’s tail; but in this tale it appears not through the intervention of a magical outsider, but as a physical marker of incest and sin. Similarly, the metamorphoses in *Pig Tales* comes about not through a third party, but because of the internal changes the character is going through.

⁷¹ Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995): 3.

⁷² Fantasy, I would say, does exactly the same thing but for a secondary world – thus in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien developed entire languages, cultures and histories to make his world verisimilar, while a cursory read of R.R. Martin’s series *Game of Thrones* shows a deep commitment to a realistic portrayal of politics and warfare. These world might not exist but they are *plausible*.

⁷³ Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 3.

I believe there are, broadly, two ways in which magical realism approaches the body: through metamorphosis and through re-discovery. The first one entails, of course, a physical change that questions what we are – the very essence of being. In the second, the body itself might not look different but it is treated and written as abnormal, and addresses not so much what we are but *how* we should be. I will aim to address these two approaches through analysis of the texts I mentioned above: Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* will be my main example for magical realist metamorphoses, while Russel's "Saint Lucy's School for Girls Raised by Wolves" will be my main texts to analyse the re-discovery of the body. As a supporting text for both instances I will use the tales from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, as it offers examples for both and it is certainly a founding text for fairy tale-magical realism.

2.2

Cork-Screw Tales: Magical Realist Metamorphoses

Metamorphosis – an inexplicable change in the shape of a body – is a motif passed down in history. It is present in myth (think only of all of the different shapes Zeus takes in Greek myth, from animate to inanimate, from animals to rain drops), in folktale (werewolves, zombies), and in more "literary" works, from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and beyond. Of course, there is a difference between the metamorphosis we see in Ovid and the one we see in modern and contemporary writers, from Kafka to Cortázar to Darrieussecq. In both philosophy and execution, there is a gulf between what I would call "classic" metamorphoses – Apuleius and Ovid, principally – and the texts I will touch on in this chapter.

In Ovid and Apuleius's works, metamorphosis is itself a reflection of metempsychosis: the belief that the undying essence of a being migrates from one being into another, species, form, or matter notwithstanding. In this view, the universe is so brimming with creative energy that life can be awakened in anything. So Deucalion and Phyrria "give birth" to a number of humans by throwing stones behind their bodies, and a woman turned into a mountain creates daughters in the shape of rivers. It is perhaps because of this that many (the majority, I would say) of transformations narrated by these authors are rather joyful, even picaresque in the case of Apuleius: each one is an opportunity for life to spring forth, in new ways and shapes. Even the most questionable ones seem to say, "Something terrible might have happened – but go on, in a different shape, life continues." And when joy is out of the

question, when you reach Actaeon and Arachne, then at least the metamorphosis has been didactic for the reader: avoid pride, obey the rules.

But it would be hard to maintain that metempsychosis is behind any contemporary examples of metamorphosis. In fact, the more we move away from Ovid and Apuleius, the less metamorphosis is about the force of life driving renewal, the less didactic or cautionary. It can seem, in fact, arbitrary: Gregor Samsa, for instance, has done nothing to deserve being turned into a giant verminous bug, and at the end of his tale he learns nothing nor is he saved – he dies, with the bittersweet knowledge that in his death he is alleviating his family’s burden. In “Axolotl⁷⁴”, a short story by Julio Cortázar, the metamorphosis from man into axolotl seems to happen only as a result of continuous observation: if in Ovid the hunters sometimes become hunted, in Cortázar the observer or scholar can become the subject of study.

Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation, Marie Darrieussecq’s novella published as *Truismes* in 1996, tells the story of a young woman who transforms into a sow. Unlike many other tales of metamorphosis, it concentrates less on the life after the transformation and focuses instead on the process of how her body changes from human into animal.

For the unnamed main character, the story begins as she finds herself unemployed but stunningly beautiful: “[in] the flattering reflection of the gilded mirror, I thought I looked – forgive me for saying so – incredibly gorgeous, like a fashion model, but more voluptuous.⁷⁵” It is this incredibly voluptuous body that sets her tale in motion: quite literally, as she has to use her body to sneak into the metro by allowing a ticket-holder man to squeeze up against her. It is thanks to it that she gets a boyfriend (the ironically-named Honoré, who stalks her in a resort until she agrees to have a drink with him) and manages to move out of her mother’s house, and through it that she gets a job at a parfumerie/massage parlour/brothel. She recalls her job interview, with the director of the firm pawing at her breast, and then having her practise oral sex on him.

Pig Tales presents a world quite similar to our own, but dystopian in how radically separate and unequal the genders are. These opening pages (what I summarised above happens in the first five pages of the novella) set the tone for the rest of the text: we are reading of a world where sexual harassment, rape, and stalking are not only commonplace but accepted as normal.

⁷⁴ Julio Cortázar. “Axolotl,” *Final del Juego* (Ciudad de México: Punto de Lectura SA de CV, 1953): 161-169.

⁷⁵ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 4.

And yet this novella deals with more than gender. Hidden in the deceptively simple narration and apparently straightforward tale, there are questions about higher education and fair employment, feminism and sorority, consciousness and instinct, body image and consumerism, the relationship between humans and nature, and many others.

As the above quote from page four might suggest, the body has a terribly important part to play in this book. Before realising how beautiful she looks, the narrator (I shall follow Sanja Bahun's example and call her Pig) is worried that she is gaining weight – “four or five pounds, perhaps⁷⁶”, and frets about being constantly hungry. This constant battle with weight and hunger remains a fixture throughout the first half of the novella, when the metamorphosis is incomplete and (for the most) unnoticed by the narrator. Some have suggested this represents a literal eating disorder, in which Pig's ongoing physical transformation correspond to the various stages of the condition – denial, dieting, bulimic bingeing, purging, etc.⁷⁷

It is possible – likely, in fact – that Pig suffers from an eating disorder. But I believe that the antagonistic relationship she has with her own body is actually rooted in the fact that her body is the only thing she truly possesses to get ahead in life. Many times in the novella we are told that she has no education to speak of – in fact the narrative itself, simplistic and peppered with truisms and platitudes, accounts for this. Given that the novella contains at least three women who are not employed in the sex industry (a dermatologist, a well-to-do lesbian, and Pig's mother, a farmer) we can assume that even in that dystopia, education is one way for women to escape into a better position. Thus, once her transformation is more or less complete and it is clear for Pig that she can no longer go back to her job, she mourns the missed opportunities to educate herself:

The only thing I regretted was not having trained to become a *chiromancer* [...] Since I hadn't had much education, the director had promised me to have me get [a] diploma at least, at the City Centre University, where he had connections. Salesgirls with diplomas would have brought increased prestige to his firm. That was one good thing about the business, at any rate, sound professional training, and when I think about it, it wasn't a bad career.⁷⁸

To the reader, the situation is not only incongruous but ridiculous: how could a diploma in palm reading be helpful in any way? We can see this purported “help” from the director as

⁷⁶ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 2.

⁷⁷ Julie Rodgers, “Body Politics in ‘Truismes’: ‘The Tyranny of Slenderness’,” *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 98, Marie Darrieussecq (Spring 2012): 29.

⁷⁸ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 66. (cursives in the original)

the ruse it is to keep his employees satisfied and pliant; but Pig's sadness is real. This is not to say that she has any lofty intellectual aspiration: what she yearns for is independence.

Often in the book Pig seems to take decisions that are a bit mystifying to the reader, but which (I argue) are taken for the sake of her independence. Why head back to the boutique after her abortion? Why remain in that job at all, when she could move to the suburbs and do something less strenuous? Why, when the option presents itself, not become a mother and be economically maintained by Honoré?

Pig is aware of other possibilities in her life, at a certain point she even goes on to say "It would certainly have been simpler if I'd agreed to stay at home, have a baby, and all that."⁷⁹ Yet she always tries to keep her job, to avoid being "stuck with Honoré"⁸⁰. It is only through her job that she can access three things that she values more than her body: economic independence, closeness to nature, and sexual gratification.

However, this leaves Pig stuck not with one man who does not respect or value her, but with many. She is effectively trapped in the Mother/Whore binomial, where these "opposed" figures (as though a whore could not be a mother or vice versa) are literally her only options of being. Her body, too, begins to exhibit signs of this contraposition. She alternates between the Mother and Whore phases, first exhibiting signs of pregnancy, which she constantly writes off as weight gain, and suffering from amenorrhea; then suddenly (and apparently for the first time) enjoying sex to a degree that scares away half her customers at the boutique. I'm not suggesting that the character suffers from nymphomania; it is simply clear that she had never before enjoyed sex – with either her clients or with Honoré. Of course, prostitution is rarely (if ever) about the prostitute's enjoyment, but interestingly even Honoré seems turned off by her pleasure. The majority of men in *Pig Tales* want to fuck the Mother, and they would rather she did not become the Whore in the middle of it. I would go as far as saying that every man in this book (except Yvan and, perhaps, the African marabout) would rather rape than have sex, never mind make love.

Still, Pig's newfound enjoyment of sex seems to advance her transformation and stay it at once. For a while she remains human – fatter, with a bigger behind than what she would wish for, but human. And when she looks at herself in the mirror, during office hours (this is to say, during sex) she remarks: "I thought I looked beautiful in the mirrors: somewhat flushed, true,

⁷⁹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 59.

⁸⁰ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 18.

a little chunky, but savage – I didn't know quite how to put it.⁸¹ As her body becomes more pig-like, or sow-like indeed, her behaviour becomes more "bestial" – which is to say, freer of her social inhibitions. In turn this allows her to find herself beautiful even if her body does not look or behave the way her society expects it to.

Even more interestingly, this starts to have a similar effect in the people around her. More exactly, she begins to have a metamorphic effect on her clients. The ones she beds during her sexual phases end up "wild-eyed", as though they were "in the jungle." But even before that, when extra weight first starts to appear on her body, she notices that her customers

gradually fell into barnyard ways with me. [...] their new inclinations turned the massage table into a sort of haystack out in a field. Some of the clients began to bray, others grunted like pigs, and little by little, most of them wound up on all fours.⁸²

Later, she confirms: "Their desire turned bestial, so to speak."⁸³ It is difficult to judge whether Pig considers this to be a particularly bad thing: whether bestial or human, the abuse remains the same. However, I submit that in *Pig Tales* to turn bestial is presented as a positive change: in this novel nature and culture are as radically opposed as the genders, but nature is generally held in a better light than any of the genders are. Given that Darrieussecq herself has said she considers this novel to be about the "metamorphosis of a female object into a conscious woman"⁸⁴ it is understandable that many would read this novel simply as a feminist dystopia, parable, or dark fairy tale about a narrator finding "her voice". Even the very first pages of *Pig Tales* seem to hint this: the narrator is desperate to set her story down in paper before she forgets these events. However, as Sanja Bahun points out in her paper on this text "The Ethics of Animal-Human Existence", there is one element that suggests that becoming a conscious woman is not necessarily the end-point of the narrative. That is, of course, the pig-body itself. As Bahun writes,

Pig becomes increasingly convinced that, for one reason or another, she needs to bear witness to the abuse she has seen and experienced. Contrary to what happens in

⁸¹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 28.

⁸² Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 17.

⁸³ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 23.

⁸⁴ Marie Darrieussecq. Interview with Jean-Marc Terrasse. University of Rhode Island. <<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/fr/terrasse.pdf>> (accessed 14 April 2017)

parables, however, this realization and the ensuing reading-and-writing process do not “cure” Pig or release her from her grotesque animal form.⁸⁵

Bahun is right here: if the novella was only about escaping abuse and becoming a conscious human, then (as it happens in parables or fairy tales) the act of narrating would have worked like therapy and returned Pig to her original form. That this is not what happens is due to unresolved nature-vs-culture issues.

These issues are not found only in Pig’s metamorphosis into an animal. They can be found in the actions of different characters, in the description of spaces, and in how humans treat what few animals (other than Pig) appear in the novella. The importance of nature seems to me deeply linked to Pig’s desire for independence – indeed, one of the reasons she wishes to keep her job is because for her it “was like a window, I could see the park, the birds.”⁸⁶ (Darrieussecq, 18) Being employed afforded her a vision into nature that she would not be able to enjoy otherwise. The park close to her office becomes a stand-in for nature as a whole: this is where Pig takes refuge from her clients when they treat her unkindly, and also where her transformation is “completed” for the first time after Honoré throws her out. Pig’s metamorphosis, interestingly, comes with a new heightened awareness of nature – almost from the very start of the text she remembers that “whatever nature was left” was really affecting her and “[her] few moments of leisure, off in the little park with [her] apples, surrounded by birds, were just about the joy of [her] life.”⁸⁷

The characters around her blame this appreciation of nature either on her being in love or on her being pregnant. We readers, of course, suspect that the real cause of this attraction is the metamorphosis she is undergoing; but truly it is a symptom of the deepening rift between Pig and human society itself. What companionship and understanding Pig fails to find amongst humans she seems to find in that little park, where even after her gruelling transformation she feels welcomed by and, more importantly, connected to what few animals are left:

Birds landed on me and pecked at my cheeks, the corners of my mouth, behind my ears, where scraps of food remained. That tickled me, and I laughed in great fluttering of wings.

[...] I heard sparrows in the treetops, ruffling their feathers as they went early to bed, batting their eyelids silkily in a final reflex before sleep, and I felt their dreams glide

⁸⁵ Sanja Bahun-Radunović, “The Ethics of Animal-Human Existence: Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*”, *New Cassandras: Myth and Violence in the Contemporary Female Text* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011): 57

⁸⁶ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 18.

⁸⁷ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 12.

across my skin with the last rays of the sunset. The dreams of birds were everywhere in the warm shadows of the trees [...] I slipped off the bench and slept there, on the ground, until dawn. In my dreams were the dreams of the birds, and the dream the dog had left for me. I was no longer so alone.⁸⁸ (Darrieussecq, 58, 68-69)

As Bahun rightly notes, it is only in these moments of interspecies and natural kindness that the narrative shows some beauty, or takes a break from the otherwise relentless violence, butchery, and abuse that are the norm of the text. Passages like the above question the limits of human companionship, and instead propose a hybrid camaraderie in which individuals meld into one another, sharing thoughts and dreams and love with each other and with the natural world around them. Pig seems to be aching for this kind of connection since earlier in the novel, when she buys two animals, a dog and a guinea pig, looking explicitly for “a companion, someone to understand and comfort⁸⁹” her (Darrieussecq, 45). This does not last very long, as Honoré kills both before kicking her out, but this hybrid companionship is more fully explored with the introduction of the character of Yvan, the handsome werewolf CEO with whom Pig falls in love in the second time of the novella.

The inclusion of a werewolf seems at first to pull the tale back into more traditionally mythic context. Yvan seems to be quite a traditional werewolf in every sense of the word: the light of the full moon transforms him into a wolf, his transformations are violent and romantic (“His clothes split apart all down his spine [...] his body swelled, ripping the material across his shoulders”,⁹⁰), and most importantly, he seems to lose his human mind when undergoing his transformations. The relationship seems almost like a forbidden romance – in a text where all the men (so far) are attackers and all women victims, how could a wolf-man and a sow-woman relate in any other way at all?

Yet it is precisely this shared dual nature that makes them compatible as a couple. While both of them feel tempted to slide fully into their animal behaviours (Pig by eating mealworms and mice, Yvan by devouring anything in his way), this predator-and-prey couple teach each other not to simply remain human in shape and thought, but to make the most of their combined four modes of being. Pig even learns to control her metamorphosis, and is able to shift between sow and woman (more or less) at will. In a paper for *Women in French Studies*, Jeannette Gaudet has argued that the appearance of a second shape-shifter in the

⁸⁸ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 58, 68-69.

⁸⁹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 45.

⁹⁰ Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*, 105.

novella, as well as Pig's ability to control the changes in her body indicate that metamorphosis, in this book, is "paradigm of change for characters motivated by opportunism or simple survival attempts to adapt to the unpredictable [...] by taking on different identities⁹¹". Under this view, Pig and Yvan get together simply because they have no other, or else because they are both useful for the other, and Pig's metamorphosis is only meaningful inasmuch as it helps her avoid misfortune. I disagree with this view: I believe that the romantic union between a literal carnivore animal and a pig challenge the consumability of the female body which was prevalent in the first section of the novel. Furthermore, the fact that Pig spends more time as a sow than as a human should not be read as a "defeat", a giving in to the metamorphosis to avoid persecution in the human world.

Pig's ultimate decision to eschew human civilization and join a group of wild boars is, first and foremost, a *choice* that she takes; and the culmination of her search for autonomy and independence. By this moment she has lived as both a human and a hybrid creature, and has been mistreated by civilization in both guises – but mistreatment is not necessarily rejection. Even after Yvan's death there could have been feasible ways for Pig to continue living in civilisation: by inheriting Yvan's fortune, for instance, or by escaping to the suburbs and working once more as a salesgirl. Even after she takes the decision to kill her mother and her lover (who happens to be Pig's former boss at the salon), there were surely ways to do away with their bodies and take over her mother's farm. Yet Pig chooses to turn her back on all of these possibilities, and to live as a hybrid being in nature. This freedom – from civilization, from parental obligations, from species obligations, the freedom to be autonomous and oneself, is what I consider to be the grand theme of the book itself. To quote Darrieussecq herself:

One is always supposed to "kill the father", in an oedipal way, but this character kills her mother – she has no choice, in the logic of the narration. She has to do it to be herself – she's at the border of species: neither human, nor animal. So she can't have parents, she chooses her own destiny and even her own body. She owes nothing to genetics, to family: she's herself she's free.⁹²

⁹¹ Jeannette Gaudet, "Dishing the Dirt: Metamorphosis in Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes*", *Women in French Studies*, Vol. 9 (2001): 7.

⁹² Marie Darrieussecq, *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme Colloquium at University of Rhode Island, USA: Marie Darrieussecq's Pig Tales* (online forum comment) posted at <<http://www.network54.com/Forum/597226/thread/1199744043/last-1203382632/Marie+Darrieussecq%27s+Pig+Tales>> (accessed 15 April 2017)

In many (most, perhaps) tales, metamorphosis is a socializing process: through losing his or her human shape, a character undertakes a journey to learn correct humanity, or else re-achieve it. Becoming an animal is taken as a humiliation, a way for the character to forcibly learn the advantages of being human in both shape and spirit. This particular journey, at least in fairy tales, is usually reserved for men⁹³: the frog prince, the wild swans, the bear in “East of the Sun, West of the Moon”, and the Beast in “The Beauty and the Beast” are all men “translated” into animals to atone for a sin or a slight, deserved or undeserved. What makes the metamorphosis in *Pig Tales* all the more interesting is that though the character undergoes a number of humiliations, the metamorphosis itself is not humiliating and it does not lead to her “learning” about humanity, but instead to a re-wilding of the self.

There is something particularly odd about a pig, or a sow to be more exact, taking control of her destiny and sexuality. Smart though they are, few animals around us are as maligned as pigs. No other animal used as an insult quite captures the idea of filth and self-neglect that comes with the pig. Even worse, the sow hints at moral failure – as Bahun notes, in French “*la truie*” denotes not only a sow but also a woman who has “neglected herself physically, psychologically, and morally⁹⁴”. But then, the very title in the original French⁹⁵ hints that everything we might think true and easy are nothing but truisms. Darrieussecq offers no easy answers: leaving civilization behind and becoming an animal is neither good nor evil, the would-be victim is capable of turning the gun on her victimisers, and the flesh we would consume (as woman or as pig) talks back to us. This seems to me an appropriate metamorphosis for the confusing times we are living, where female sexuality and its commodification have been once again made problematic by the rampant capitalism that surrounds us.

But it would be naïve to think that this is a new issue – it springs, at the very least, from the sexual liberation of the sixties, which was not necessarily the hippie paradise that it is sometimes spoken as. It is no wonder that second wave feminism ended in the so-called “feminist sex-wars”, with the anti-porn and sex-positive camps neatly delineated. Rebecca Solnit writes of the time,

⁹³ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 38.

⁹⁴ Sanja Bahun-Radunović, “The Ethics of Animal-Human Existence: Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*”, 61.

⁹⁵ The idea of the sow is lost in the “official” English translation – which is a shame, given that most other languages seem to have tried to keep it. Darrieussecq herself comments on the Swedish translation for the title, *Suggestioner*, a mixture of *sug* (sow) and *suggestion*. Similarly, the title was translated into Spanish as *Marranadas*, a play on the word *marrana*, which is at once a sow, a libertine woman, and something generally filthy. Phillip Terry suggests, in my view, a better translation: *Sow What?*

1978 was a notably terrible year, the year in which the fiddler had to be paid for all the tunes to which the counterculture had danced. The sexual revolution had deteriorated into a sort of free-market free-trade ideology in which all should have access to sex and none should deny access. [...] Sex was good; everyone should have it all the time; anything could be construed as consent; almost nothing meant no, including “no.”⁹⁶

It is in this context, just a year after “the fiddler had to be paid”, that Angela Carter published what is perhaps her most famous work, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, her collection of re-written fairy tales. Curiously, she was not the first to think of fairy tales in the context of feminism: *Woman Hating*, published five years before by Andrea Dworkin, addresses fairy tales as one of the media forms that uphold women’s oppression in western society, creating a divide between the active male and the passive female⁹⁷. The sudden interest in the area might also be attributed to Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*⁹⁸, which was published in 1976. Fairy tales had been the object of study since much earlier than that, but Bettelheim popularised the notion that fairy tales might be more than nursery stories⁹⁹ and opened the conversation around the “meaning” of the tales and their significance for the psychic and sexual growth in children and adults. In this same year Angela Carter had been requested by Gollancz to translate Perrault’s own collection of fairy tales, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des moralités*. She read Bettelheim as part of research for the translation, while at the same time working on the “moral pornographer” essay that became *The Sadeian Woman*.

Is it any wonder that the combination of those three sources would result in the birth of *The Bloody Chamber*? Though she was given some amount of freedom as a translator (and her translation of Perrault is the bawdiest, least moral I have encountered), there were limits to what she could modify. In her journal she copied lines from Bettelheim and researched how “the animal is repressed sexuality”; she dreamed up a collection of fairy tales in which “sexual

⁹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *The Encyclopaedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2015): 35.

⁹⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Penguin, 1974): 33.

⁹⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Penguin, 1991)

⁹⁹ *The Uses of Enchantment* received the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism and the 1977 National Book Award for “Contemporary Thought”. In 1991, however, folklorist Alan Dundes accused Bettelheim of plagiarizing key passages from himself and other folklorists. See Alan Dundes, “Bruno Bettelheim’s Uses of Enchantment and Abuses of Scholarship”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 104, No. 411 (Winter, 1991), pp. 74-83.

imagery would rise uncomfortably to the surface [...] its effect would be the very opposite of consoling.¹⁰⁰

The most overt metamorphosis in *The Bloody Chamber* is probably found in the Beauty-and-the-Beast story “The Tiger’s Bride”. In this sensuous tale, a young woman is lost in a game of cards by her father to their host, the Beast – who is quite overtly a tiger in human clothes, wearing a mask to pretend humanity. “Can one say more clearly that identity is an artefact?¹⁰¹”, quips Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, but interestingly, the identity that proves to be problematic is not that of the Beast, but that of Beauty. True to the source, she is as her name announces, beautiful. “Always the pretty one, with my glossy, nut-brown curls, my rosy cheeks.¹⁰²” But she is also a reversion of the traditional Beauty figure: in both the “original” tale by de Villeneuve and in Carter’s first re-write of the story, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”, Beauty is a martyr who resigns herself to be companion to the Beast out of filial love. In this tale, however, “Carter reverses the child’s willingness to sacrifice everything to the loved parent into the parent’s own willingness to sacrifice all [...] to his mad egotism and childish pleasures-seeking¹⁰³”. This reversion also comes with a certain roughness – a certain lack of finesse that we see at different points in the story. This Beauty rips her white rose “petal by petal¹⁰⁴” and pricks her finger on a thorn to smear blood on the flower her father asks as a sign of forgiveness¹⁰⁵ (55); she says of her childhood that she was “wild wee thing” that her nurse could not “tame” into submission, and her laughter is a guffaw – “no lady laughs like that!¹⁰⁶”

And yet she has been tamed, enough that her guffaw elicits a self-reprimand, or at least she has been made into a “woman of honour”. This is what the Beast’s valet calls her whenever she threatens to escape her confinement (either through suicide or by riding away on horse): like her father was honour-bound to give her to the Beast, her own honour keeps her a prisoner. The weight of this honour becomes even more keen when we take into account the very conditions of her captivity:

¹⁰⁰ Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography*, 266-268.

¹⁰¹ Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, “The Logic of the Same and Différance: ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’,” *Marvels and Tales*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen (1998): 126.

¹⁰² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 52.

¹⁰³ Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, “The Logic of the Same and Différance,” 126.

¹⁰⁴ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 53.

¹⁰⁵ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 58.

‘My master’s sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress and that only for the one time after which she will be returned to her father undamaged with bankers’ orders for the sum which he lost to my master at cards and also a number of fine presents such as furs, jewels and horses – ’¹⁰⁷

For a modern reader, these conditions might seem laughable: what is a moment of nakedness, if it leads to freedom along with the restoration and augmentation of material wealth? But nudity contains elements beyond itself: it is a call for veracity, to disclose what is authentic. See the thrice repeated insistence: unclothed, nude, without her dress. As though the Beast suspected that she, like him, hides an animal under her clothes. And she might suspect the same, or else distrusts what her nudity might reveal: her answer is, pithily, that she would rather be raped with her upper body and face covered than to uncover herself willingly.

Of course, the narrative does not present her decision in such simple terms. Beauty finds herself at once honourable and humiliated, objectified by her own father who lost her like any other possession; and in being asked to pose naked re-objectified by her captor. What the Beast (and the reader, perhaps) might see as pity or compassion she regards as further dehumanization. And, at least as far as the “dehumanization” part goes, she might be right: for the Beast’s castle and possessions, not to mention the Beast himself and his valet, all occupy a liminal beast-man state into which they (unwittingly?) pull Beauty. She observes, from the moment that she arrives at the Beast’s *palazzo*, that several rooms that should have been used for entertaining have fallen into disuse and in fact are occupied by animals: “The Beast had given his horses the use of the dining room,” Beauty remarks, but in a twist this does not mean that the room was in disrepair. Instead, “The walls were painted [...] with a fresco of horses, dogs and men in a woods where fruit and blossom grew on the bough together.¹⁰⁸” This fresco represents a utopia of fertility, but the Beast’s domains are a utopic wilderness where predator and prey cohabit in peace. The only human connection that remains for Beauty is, paradoxically, not human at all: she receives a robot-maid that looks identical to her.

Interestingly, this automaton brings two things to Beauty: a mirror and makeup powder. These, I argue, work as socialising elements. The automaton (unlike Beast and his valet) is performing humanity, and carries with it tools that Beauty might use to prolong and refine her

¹⁰⁷ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 57.

own performance: a mirror in which to look at her imperfect human face, and makeup with which to cover the imperfections and affirm her humanity (and her name – Beauty). And since the mirror is magic, every time Beauty looks into it she first sees a vision of her father (and his ensuing story, of which she is part) before she gets to see her face: the mirror attempts to link her to the human world. However, the result is opposite: in showing Beauty her father before her own face, “even through the mirror she is denied any recognition of her own personhood.¹⁰⁹” The mirror makes her into an appendage of her own father’s story, not an active performer of her own.

It is only when this itself is acknowledged that the story moves forward. As Beauty will not consent to being further objectified, it is the Beast who offers to become the object instead. During a hunting trip he offers to reveal himself to her, and though she only accepts to look upon him out of pity at how scared he looks at the possibility of her rejection, when she sees the Beast unclothed; “naked” as a tiger, she feels her “breast ripped apart as if [she] suffered a marvellous wound.¹¹⁰” The Beauty is moved to offer her own nakedness in response, different from his – more sexual, perhaps – but no less vulnerable or vehement. This moment of acceptance, fleeting as it is, is enough to earn her freedom back from the Beast; when they return to the palace she is led not to her cell but into a room full of the trappings and decorations that human visitors might expect from Italian nobility.

But when she again looks into the enchanted mirror, and again sees her father (this time joyful at the return of his wealth) before she sees herself; Beauty can barely recognise herself, or her story anymore. “Here, the mirror finally reveals to the young woman the person she has become [...] her story had taken place in the mirror, and now she is leaving that story behind.¹¹¹” Beauty is changed: no longer rosy cheeked and bonny, but pale and rough, she dresses her twin automaton in the new clothes laid out for her and sends her away to her father. Beauty, covered only in a fur coat, climbs back to the Beast’s bedroom and confronts him again, naked, abandoning the “fake” fur she is wearing. With all her ties to her human life cut, the tiger kisses her and reveals a second fur, a true one: “Each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I

¹⁰⁹ Veronica L. Schanoes, “Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: the Significance of the Looking-glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 20 No. 1(75, 2009): 13.

¹¹⁰ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 64.

¹¹¹ Veronica L. Schanoes, “Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book,” 14.

shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.¹¹²” As her last material possessions, the earrings she had caused the Beast to cry, melt into water, Beauty is transformed into a tiger: equal at last with her Beast, after a process of mutual objectification and re-personalisation.

Like Pig, Beauty finds a society of equals only through abandoning human society and metamorphosing into an animal. Carter’s tale, however, seems to me more positive regarding this outcome – more romantic, perhaps. I made reference above to the Beast’s palace being a utopia where predator and prey cohabit together, where the lamb may learn to run with the tigers or even take the tiger’s own shape to be equal partners. This is a far cry from Darrieusecq’s distrustful novella, where everyone – male, female, stranger and friend – is a potential predator with no patience for any lamb learning to run. And while she seems happy and safer as a sow, living free with wild boars in the forest, it is hard to say that she is among equals, not as Beauty is in “The Tiger’s Bride”.

And perhaps that is the case also with most of the heroines in *The Bloody Chamber*. They might start off frail or dispossessed, in positions of weakness – but by the end of their stories they are empowered by their own hand or that of her mother, surrounded by equals. Illustrative of the collection, perhaps, is the line that closes “The Werewolf”: “Now the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered.¹¹³”

2.3

Wolves, Mirrors, Clothes: The Correct Body

Comparing two modern tales of metamorphosis, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Harold Skulsky makes an appropriate and beautiful description:

Unlike Gregor Samsa’s abrupt descent into the bondage of the carapace, Orlando’s transformation is the initial stage of a gradual unfolding of comprehensive personal freedom [...] Transformation in this extended sense has much the rhythm of an organic process – the butterfly’s evolving declaration of independence.¹¹⁴

This, I think, could certainly be applied to the texts I examined above. After all, Beauty’s transformation is as sudden as Samsa’s, though of course not quite as nasty; while Pig’s transformation is most definitely of a more organic quality and is governed by rhythms – very

¹¹² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 67.

¹¹³ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 110.

¹¹⁴ Harold Skulsky, *Metamorphosis: The Mind in Exile* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981): 195.

organic rhythms, in fact, as by the end of the novella Pig is using the moon to regulate her fluctuating shape.

A fluctuating metamorphosis might sound strange when talking about pigs or other type of animals: why, like Samsa or Beauty, is Pig not staying in one fixed shape? But if we simply give this process of transformation a different name, we might understand. If we were to call Pig a weresow, for instance, we would immediately understand the suggested duality that exists in were-creatures, shape-shifters with a “skin within a skin” to quote folklorist Fransico Vaz da Silva.

In this section I would like to address werewolves – after all, these are beings in constant flux, unstable in both body and mind. Unlike with *Pig Tales* and “The Tiger’s Bride”, I will concentrate less on the animal side of the equation and more on the *were* of the werewolf, the *man...* or, in the case of the texts I selected, the woman. Through what education, accoutrements, or thoughts, does the beast become un-beastly? Both tales I will analyse here, “Wolf-Alice” (the last tale in *The Bloody Chamber*), and “St. Lucy’s School for Girls Raised by Wolves” feature magical realist werewolves, girls in need of an education whose metamorphosis is more of image and identity rather than of body.

These tales are also relevant because they both play on what is correct and incorrect for young women to do. “Wolf Alice”, which I will analyse first, is one of Carter’s three “Red Riding Hood” re-inventions. Lest we forget, “Red Riding Hood” is considered an “initiatory tale”, both in Perrault and the Grimms’ re-telling of it; even if each of these authors concentrate on different aspects. While the original folk tale has a bawdy Riding Hood stripping for the wolf¹¹⁵, Perrault presents his as both “victim and seducer” in her devilish red cap but “bans the flesh and the body from the scene of seduction¹¹⁶”; and the Grimms concentrate on the more pragmatic “always listen to your mom” lesson.¹¹⁷ Both the first two of Carter’s werewolf tales are faithful to the original source, though they (of course) take liberties with the “moral” or the lesson imparted. “Wolf Alice”, however, shares only the presence of a flesh-eating man-wolf, and its fixation with mirrors and reflective surfaces seem

¹¹⁵ Bacchilega argues that even previous, more folkloric versions of the tale were meant to be initiatory in a generational-magic way: the wolf kills the grandmother and offers her flesh and blood to Red Riding Hood, who eats and drinks in an act of sympathetic cannibalism through which she incorporates the grandmother’s knowledge into her. The tale represents, then, a young woman’s initiation into the mysteries of adulthood, and the cycle of death and revival of feminine knowledge. Traces of this idea can be found in my own tale, “The Head and the Winds”, though I would not position it as a Red Riding Hood offshoot.

¹¹⁶ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales : Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 57.

¹¹⁷ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales : Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 58.

to nudge it closer to its other textual parent, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*.

The second tale I will analyse takes the idea of educating the werewolf quite literally: “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” presents a school where girls born to wolves are taken to be made into proper humans. Proper here, connotes both “correct” and “polite”: the girls are not only taught how to speak and stand upright, but how to make sensible dinner party conversation. Unlike Carter’s oeuvre, this tale is not tethered to a previously existing narrative, though it might owe its existence to many an aunt’s expression – “Eat with your mouth closed! Were you raised by wolves?”

Were-creatures appear in folklore and legends all over the world. Their metamorphosis is ingrained into the body, from birth or through misfortune, and rarely something that appears in their lives unexpectedly, like the transformations in *Pig Tales*. They are liminal beings, whether animals capable of taking human form or humans with an unstable form, and they are not capable of fully taking part in either society. Above I mentioned the folklorist, Francisco Vaz da Silva – for his book *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales*, he researched Portuguese and Spanish werewolves, and most interestingly found that a werewolf usually springs from surplus. “Individuals who have been born in a caul,” for instance, with a kind of surplus, unnecessary skin, were feared to be werewolves. In other cases, the surplus was said to be more fantastical: a double set of teeth, two hearts, or (of course!) too much hair¹¹⁸. But more tellingly, he finds that in practise it is surplus births who are most feared: seventh children, twins, and children for whom no godmothers or godfathers can be found, are all in risk of “running a fate” (which is to say, turn feral) for seven years. These are creatures that due to the circumstance of their births were not fully integrated into their community and thus could completely turn away from civilisation¹¹⁹.

Carter plays with this in the introduction to “The Company of Wolves”:

Seven years is a werewolf’s natural span. But if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life, so old wives hereabouts think it some protection to throw a hat or an apron at the werewolf, as if clothes made the man.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Francisco Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2002): 43.

¹¹⁹ Francisco Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales*, 32, 45.

¹²⁰ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 113.

Clothes make the man – they are of the things that Vaz da Silva identifies as useful to bring a werewolf back into the fold: his or her own clothes, to be exact, left for the creature to slide into them and return to civilisation.¹²¹

This return to humanity – the rehabilitation of the werewolf, as we might call it, is a running theme in Carter’s wolf trilogy. Though she seems to appreciate certain aspects of the werewolf (its animal ability for sensuality, its power to break the fences between civilisation and nature) Carter knows it as a monster. In her tales the werewolf is there to be killed (in “The Werewolf”), or else as a lonesome creature to be rescued. So in “The Company of Wolves” we are told that the werewolves “would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition [...] [they are] mourning for their own, irremediable appetites.¹²²”. For Cristina Bacchilega, Carter creates an outside/inside, wilderness/hearth conundrum, in which her Red Riding Hoods work as an “external mediator” that balance both sides. In “The Werewolf”, the girl has a bit of wilderness in her that she excises by killing her witch-werewolf grandmother and taking her rightful place in the “inside.” In “The Company of Wolves”, the two sides are brought inside: to quote Bacchilega, “cold and warm, the wild and the hearth are no longer separate. This “wild child” recognises that simply because he has been on the outside the hunter/wolfman need not have deadly appetites¹²³”. She thus seduces him into tameness, makes him into a tender wolf capable of living in the indoors with her.

But I would like to leave Carter for a moment and talk instead about Karen Russell and her all too human werewolves in “St. Lucy’s School for Girls Raised by Wolves”. For, if Carter the inside and outside pollute each other and need a mediator to balance it, Russell presents the two very clearly separate and needing not mediation but full extrication. Her writing is witty and sharp, less concerned with the folklore behind the werewolf and more with how education shapes (or misshapes) who we are.

Russell’s tale is a great example of contemporary magical realism: we are presented with a world where werewolves are a possible, but not everyday, occurrence, something of a

¹²¹ Werewolves are not alone in needing their clothing to re-take their original form. This feature is shared by a number of other folklore creatures: selkies, in Scottish myth, could take off their animal skin to bathe in rivers, and in Japanese legend of *Tsuru no Onnagaeshi* (Crane-Woman, also known as the Crane Wife) a crane leaves her wings in the shape of a robe to bathe as a woman in the river. Their tales are often grouped together under the Aarne-Thompson type 413, “Marriage by Stealing Clothes.” As the name implies, there are tales in which a man steals and hides an animal-woman’s clothes to force her into marriage. Years later, after having several children together, she finds her stolen clothes and takes off, abandoning her human life without regret.

¹²² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 112.

¹²³ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales : Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 63.

supernatural medical condition. The narrator, a werewolf named TRRRRRRR, renamed Claudette, tells us

Our mothers and fathers were werewolves. They lived an outsider's existence in caves at the edge of the forest, threatened by frost and pitchforks. They had ostracized the local wolves by having sometimes-thumbs, and regrets, and human children. (Their condition skips a generation.)¹²⁴

Werewolves they might be, but their parents have an all too human desire for their children to have something better, to be educated and polished and bilingual (wolf and English, in this case). So the cubs are shipped to religious boarding schools, brothers and sisters separated at the start of their trip to undertake their segregated education in humanity. And though their instructors are nuns and priests, the education the were-girls receive is not solely religious. The concern of these educators is not with the were-girls' soul but with moulding these young bitches into proper young women, with not a trace of wilderness left in them.

Though Russell might not be alluding directly to any particular text, it is clear that "St. Lucy's School for Girls Raised by Wolves" should be read with certain literary traditions in mind: "initiatory" or educational fairy tales, as well as any number of novels where, even if the moulding of the female body and behaviour is not self-evident, it is an ongoing concern in the text. In her book *Moulding the Female Body*, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas proposes that this type of book became particularly abundant in Victorian times, where the cult of the angel of the hearth and the sensationalist reporting around fasting girls created a worry about girls and women's necessary education. These concerns, she argues, can be seen in both fairy tales (or Victorian fantasies) and in sensation novels, often through an emphasis on the characters' appetites. Under her analysis, George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* exposes how problematic female desire and wilfulness is: the Light Princess is so rebellious that she defies the laws of nature themselves, and thus her family must look for a way to make her unhappy. This tale has a relatively happy ending, however, as the princess finds someone who understands her and agrees to stop floating. *Alice in Wonderland*, meanwhile, is a significantly sadder tale for Talairach-Vielmas: for her, Alice's voyage is into powerlessness, and marked by a lack of control around her body. Her experiences with food are essentially punitive: every time she eats or drinks anything, she grows, shrinks, and ends up accidentally exposing her

¹²⁴ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 227.

inappropriate body to a number of creatures, as if the “luring treats which pepper her adventures were devised to tame her appetite from within.¹²⁵”

Similarly, in “St. Lucy’s...” too there is an ideal form of womanhood that must be achieved, and a number of (in this case literally) wild desires that need to be curbed. The wolf-girls first arrive at St. Lucy’s wild and rambunctious, spraying urine all over the place to mark their territories and massacring the squirrels that run around the school garden. The excitement of being somewhere new, and so foreign to their caves and forests, makes them forget the promise they had made to their wolf-mother to be “civilized and lady-like, couth and kempt¹²⁶”. Like these words (couth, kempt, possible but alien without the negative prefix) it is as though the girls themselves would be incomplete were they to be anything but uncouth and unkempt.

In this tale becoming human means becoming an individual. When they arrive at their school the girls do everything as a pack: they mark their territory together, they hunt together and play together, and even more, they dream together, through some kind of shared subconscious. During a lunch-time nap, the narrator comments: “The pack used to dream the same dreams back then, as naturally as we drank the same water and slept on the same red scree.¹²⁷” Even as they are woken from their nap, remnants of dreams hang around the pack’s consciousness.

But as humans do not possess this ability, this interconnected psyche must be done away with, and the first step to force individuality on them is to assign names to the girls. After their nap the girls have nametags of the “HELLO! MY NAME IS _____!” variety glued to their clothes and become individual beings called Jeanette, Lavash, or Claudette. The only one to resist is the youngest sister, who tries to run away but is shot with a tranquilizer dart and renamed “Mirabella.”

The erasing of the pack mentality continues with the constant cleansing of their “pack musk”. Every morning, the narrator tells us, the pack soaks their rooms in urine to make the “blank, chilly bedroom feel like home.” And yet every night they return to the smell of sterile ammonia. “Someone was coming in and erasing us [...] We couldn’t make our scent stick here; it made us feel invisible. Eventually we gave up.¹²⁸” (Russell, 230)

¹²⁵ Laurence Talarach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007): 10.

¹²⁶ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 225.

¹²⁷ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 228.

¹²⁸ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 230.

At the same time the pack unity is being erased, the girls are enrolled in human behaviour classes, beginning with walking in shoes, on two legs, and keeping their mouths shut. “Shoes on feet, mouth shut” becomes, in fact, a mantra of sorts amongst the sisters; “mouth shut” in particular stands as a shorthand for the repression of various desires – from the violent (wrestling racoons or other small critters) to the affective (licking each other) to the sexual (committing frottage against the organ pipes).

The combination of the expected new behaviours, new clothes, and the constant erasure they suffer every night has the fractured pack on edge – and with the convent leaving its doors open and the walls being quite low, the possibility of escape is always present. But that in itself feels to them like a “sly, human taunt” which they cannot yet understand. They cannot escape because they know their parents escape them to be civilised before they return: without being able to name it, the girls are experiencing shame.

This does not escape the nuns’ notice. Though unsaid by the narrator, it is clear that these are not naïve, cloistered sisters. They know about the wolf-girls’ biological instinct to know their place in a pack, and with the original pack unity broken down they know how to become the new “alphas” and exploit this shame the girls are feeling. They teach them how “unnatural” and “ridiculous” their previous movements looked, how improper it was to pump their backsides to wag invisible tails. Through these lessons, shame starts to twist all of the girls’ actions – most noticeably the way they treat their youngest sister, Mirabella.

Just as she had resisted receiving a human name, Mirabella is the only wolf-girl in the pack who refuses to be re-educated. By the time her sisters could stand on two legs and control their desire to kill small animals, Mirabella was still slouching on all-fours and strangling mallards with her rosary beads. When the others are learning polite language, Mirabella can barely say her name. This apparent weakness of the youngest sister is exploited by the nuns to further break the pack apart. After failing to control Mirabella’s instincts, the narrator, Claudette, is shown a slide show, consisting of

former wolf-girls, the ones who had failed to be rehabilitated. Long-haired, sad-eyed women, limping after their former wolf packs in white tennis shoes and pleated culottes. A wolf-girl bank teller, her makeup smeared in oily rainbows, eating a raw steak on the deposit slips while her colleagues looked on in disgust. [...] The final slide was a bolded sentence in St. Lucy’s prim script:

DO YOU WANT TO END UP SHUNNED BY BOTH SPECIES?¹²⁹ (Russell, 235)

¹²⁹ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 235.

The threat works, and every time the sisters hear the nuns sigh, “Whatever will happen to Mirabella?”, the girls worry instead, “Whatever will happen to me?”.

Eventually, as the sisters near the end of their education, the nuns organise a dance for them to once again meet their brothers. Under pressure to learn the steps to the Charleston and the “Sausalito”, the sisters finally turn against Mirabella and against their old instincts. The dance party, in fact, can be read as an ultimate test for the wolf-children’s nascent, problematic humanity. Keen to fit in and avoid disappointing the alpha nuns, the girls allow their hair to be done in puffs. The narrator, for the first time conscious of her “natural, feral scent”, rubs a pumpkin muffin over her body in an attempt to smell less wolfish. She is satisfied when one of her brothers (BTWWWR!, now renamed Kyle) remarks she smells agreeable, and yet feels dejected because she knows she smelled “easy to kill.” In truth, so do her brothers – only Mirabella smells like wolf, like something that would still put up a fight.

But these same instincts that once had made her part of the pack now mark Mirabella as an outsider; and when she follows her instincts to try and protect the narrator (who has forgotten the steps to the Sausalito and is literally howling in embarrassment) the now nearly-human pack turns on her for ruining the dance. “Mirabella cannot adapt!” they cry, foaming at the mouth with fruit punch. “Back to the woods, back to the woods!” For one last time, the pack rallies together, wild over the human lives and structures that were disrespected by the ruining of a dance. Mirabella is expelled the next morning, and though the narrator is offered a chance to say goodbye, she declines and instead simply packs a lunch for her wayward sister consisting of two jelly sandwiches and a chloroformed squirrel.

In turning the rest of the wolf-children against one of their siblings, it seems that their education is nearing completion. Nothing else of interest happens for the rest of their studies (though they had yet to cover, we are told, five out of the twelve units the Jesuit handbook indicated) and the next time we see the narrator she has graduated and has received a special permission to visit her family in the woods. She is the only one doing so; neither her sisters nor brothers are with her, and she needs a woodsman to lead her to her family’s cave, as she’s forgotten both the way and the skills necessary to find it. To highlight how removed she now is from her kin, she mentions that she packs a lunch to share with her family – but instead of a chloroformed squirrel, Claudette chooses prosciutto and dill pickles in a picnic basket. Her family barely recognises her at first, dressed in white and without any of her smell. Her mother bites her ankle, her “littlest brother” begins whining in terror. When,

eventually, they recognise her and wait for a display of her new skills, she (in what she calls her first human lie) simply says, “I’m home.”¹³⁰

And of course she is not home – we know that not only by the fact that she admits she is lying, but from the fact that at the beginning of the tale she comments that, “though we would go to St. Lucy’s to study a better culture [...] We didn’t know at the time that our parents were sending us away for good.”¹³¹ Their re-education is so thorough that what once home is completely unrecognisable, the girls are now so comprehensively “inside” human society in body, behaviour and aspirations, that in no way can they ever re-join their “outside” lives for anything other than an awkward visit.

This inside/outside, however, is much more complicated in Carter’s “Wolf Alice”, the tale which closes *The Bloody Chamber*. While Russell, mostly for comedic purposes, depicts an inside so insulated that no trace of the outside can or should be found in it; Carter’s protagonists struggle with balancing the two. The struggle is even more pronounced in this tale as, unlike the two other werewolf tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (The Werewolf and The Company of Wolves), the main character here is not human but an outsider, a truly beastly child that does not belong in civilisation. How is she to eliminate or redeem the werewolf when she herself does not belong to the very group she is supposed to save?

We are not told how Wolf Alice came to be raised by wolves – only that she, perhaps, had always an animal side to her, which the wolves recognise. For Veronica Schanoes, whom I quoted above from an essay on mirrors in Carter’s tales, this beastliness of children is a feature found both in Cater and Carroll. Children, she suggests, are animal-like in that they do not understand the “seemingly arbitrary, nonsensical rules of the adult world” where their autonomy and power are disregarded by the incomprehensible, monstrous adult¹³². Beastly they are, yet unlike real animals they depend on that monstrous adult to survive. This, I would argue, is what the wolves recognise in Wolf Alice: an incompleteness that makes her vulnerable. “[They] had tended to her because they knew that she was an imperfect wolf”¹³³, we are told, though that imperfection is not one that she will outgrow with time.

¹³⁰ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 246.

¹³¹ Karen Russel, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, 226.

¹³² Veronica L. Schanoes, “Fearless Children and Fabulous Monsters: Angela Carter, Lewis Carroll, and Beastly Girls”, *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2012): 30.

¹³³ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 122

If Wolf Alice will never be a perfect wolf, could she, upon being “rescued”, become a perfect human?¹³⁴ The idea seems possible enough when she is dropped off in a convent by her rescuers. The nuns there do their best to reach her, both kindly (with food) and unkindly (poking her with sticks). They find her “not intractable” in her wolfishness: they clean her and brush her hair, and begin their attempt at education. With the nuns, Wolf Alice begins to roughly learn certain human concepts: property (she recognises her own dish), as well as how to use human tools (she drinks from a cup). Even rough communication seems possible: she learns to sit up and beg for her food.

Granted, these are all doggie tricks, but what doggie tricks in themselves do is anthropomorphise the dog. The first step in changing a wolf into a human might just involve making the wolf into a dog first: by these silly tricks Wolf Alice is lifted from dumb beast into capable companion, and potential pupil. However, there is one feature of humanity that the nuns simply fail to inculcate in Alice: language. When Wolf Alice first gets to the convent, she does not talk: instead she whines and “bubbles” like a puppy.¹³⁵ Worse, whenever the Mother Superior tries to “teach her to give thanks for her recovery from the wolves” – this is, when they try to force language upon her and through language make her a speaking subject¹³⁶ – Wolf Alice violently retakes her animal habits, urinating, howling... she reverts to an existence that is once more exclusively of the body.

Kimberly J. Lau sees this “resistance to language” as what keeps Wolf Alice on the “outside”, and I would emphasise that what Alice is resisting here is not only language but Christian language. After all, she is expected to give thanks to God, not to any human. And her rejection of God’s language is, to say the least, sacrilegious: she trembles, soils herself, and flails as though the idea of God was repulsive. This reaction moves her closer to the folkloric werewolves upon which Perrault based his re-telling, demons that had to be chased with holy water and crucifixes to keep children safe.

It also moves her out of the convent and into the realm of the other main character in this tale: the Duke. Nameless except for his title, he is “sere as old paper”, a character that would probably find himself at home in the castles in Otranto or Udolfo. He prowls graveyards at night, dressed in a wolf’s pelt, stealing corpses to devour. Villagers fear him and treat him like

¹³⁴ Sadly, most feral children (whether “raised” by wild animals or survivors of extreme childhood abuse) who miss out on the first years of language and motor skill development never manage to catch up to their peers.

¹³⁵ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 119.

¹³⁶ Kimberly J. Lau, “Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter’s Wolf Trilogy,” *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 22, No. 1, *Erotic Tales* (2008): 90.

a vampire – placing garlic round the corpses, trying to scare him with crosses and holy water. But on top of this, what truly makes him monstrous is his apparent intangibility: he no longer casts an image in mirrors, and nothing can touch him.

He at once has no body to hurt or reflect and yet he seems to be all about bodily desires. The Duke is appetite; he lives only to devour the world that no longer reflects him. And yet there is an unhappiness in him, an unwillingness: the narrator tells us he is cast into his role, as though he had not chosen it; his appetites – his cannibalism – show how much he yearns to live again in human society. I'd venture to say that devouring human bodies is how he seeks to regain his own corporeality, to once more cast an image on the mirror.

Needless to say this is not a character that would think of anything but himself and his own needs. Wolf Alice is sent to him not to be educated, but to be placed with her own devilish sort after she has rejected God's language. But if the nuns failed to recognise the human in her, the Duke, too, fails to recognise Alice as an equal or even a similar being. While she lives in his castle they never interact, and she seems to be there only to do the menial tasks the nuns taught: sweeping, making the bed. Other than that she lives as she always had: "without a future. She inhabits only the present tense [...] a world of sensual immediacy"¹³⁷ that the Duke neither corrects nor teaches her better.

However, this eternal present tense is broken by the appearance of her first menstruation, and we find out that neither the nuns nor the wolves have prepared her for it. The wolf side of her fears it is a wound; a playful one, maybe caused by the full moon or a ghostly wolf who had nibbled her. The human side of her knows to look for rags to clean the blood, and knows (thanks to the nuns) that though she might not know what it is, it is a shameful thing that needs to be hidden. Her reaction to her period, then, is testament to what an unfinished state she is in: animal enough to care only about self-preservation, human enough to feel shame.

But it is thanks to her periods that she is introduced to three other transformative elements: time, clothes, and a mirror.

The first she discovers as her periods stabilise: where her first bleeding only startles her the monthly (or, from her point of view, lunar) repetition "transformed into a vague grip of time [...] she understood the circumambulatory principle of the clock perfectly"¹³⁸. Circumambulatory is key here, for in learning to understand time on her own Wolf Alice never

¹³⁷ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 119.

¹³⁸ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 123.

sees the passage of time as the linear movement which humans generally think of. I will return to this at the end of my analysis, for the moment suffice to say that for Wolf Alice time will always be cyclical, marked by the moon and her own bleedings.

Looking for rags with which to clean herself, Wolf Alice bumps into a mirror tucked away in the Duke's room. The mirror introduces her to her shape: it informs her of what she looks like. The mirror, too, is where her existence first crosses with the Duke's: where he fails to see his shape, she discovers hers and discovers the similarities between their bodies. Of course, this does not happen immediately after her finding the mirror – at the beginning, like any small animal, Alice confuses the reflection on the mirror for another being. She nuzzles this new creature and invites her to play, and while she is confused to see this new being mimicking her every action she is so relieved to have company that she cannot understand the reflection for what it is.

Understanding what the shape in the mirror truly is coincides with Wolf Alice's adolescence. If during her prepubescent years she thought it was a separate being, it is seeing that this mirror-creature shares her growth (her breasts and pubic hair) that "finally woke her up to the regretful possibility that her companion was, in fact, no more than a particularly ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass.¹³⁹". As if to fully convince herself, she looks behind the mirror to look for her friend one last time, but finds only a wedding dress. Immediately she recognises it as something she must wear. On her body, clothes become the "visible sign of her difference from [the wolves]¹⁴⁰": they force her to stand upright, and the whiteness of the dress moves her to wash and groom herself. In accepting that what she sees in the mirror is a shadow of her own self, Wolf Alice finally confronts the fact that she does not look like wolf, and therefore that she is not one. In taking the dress, grooming herself and wearing it, she accepts this fact. This marks the beginning of her self-awareness; but this is neither a human nor a wolf awareness.

We cannot disregard that the dress she happens to find and wear is at once wedding and funeral attire: it belonged to a woman the Duke disinterred and devoured. The white dress marks at once the "death" of a previous version of Wolf Alice and her rebirth or, indeed, her metamorphosis into a new, fertile being. She is a bride, though neither her nor her groom-to-be yet know it. It is with that dress that she first leaves the castle on her own, and it is the dress itself what saves both her and the Duke from being lynched or drowned by villagers

¹³⁹ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 124.

¹⁴⁰ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 125.

angry at the desecration of their cemetery: on the evening of her first outing, the Duke is shot with a silver bullet. Alerted by the smell of gunpowder, she runs into the castle followed by the wounded Duke, and the villagers confuse her with an angry ghost there to punish the Duke herself.

What happens, instead, is that she recognises the Duke as something quite like herself: neither human nor wolf, the only other who is kin to her. She climbs on the bed next to him, in an echo of her tale's opening scene: she once laid next to her dying mother in a wolf's den, now, thanks to her own new conception of cyclical time she becomes "as pitiful as her gaunt grey mother"¹⁴¹ and licks the Duke's wound. Tenderly, she cleans it of blood and dirt, and continues to lick his face until, slowly, the face of the Duke once more appears in the mirror.

In a way, Wolf Alice here has grown from cub into wolf-mother, giving birth through her care to the Duke's missing corporeality. In this action, as Schanoes says,

she is not only her mother but also an older, more competent version of herself. In his turn, the duke is not only an infant Wolf Alice being tended by a pitiful creature but also Wolf Alice's bullet-riddled mother [...] he "howls like a wolf with his foot in a trap or a woman in labour, and bleeds."¹⁴²

At the end of the tale these two characters – aborted transformations, incomplete mysteries, to quote Carter – take on a number of roles and personas. Wolf Alice is herself as well as her wolf-mother, teen and mother at the same time, the Duke is at once old beyond time and new-born, man and wolf. When once they were unique to the point of solitude, or incomplete to the point of incorporeality, together they move to occupy many of roles possible and necessary within their world; in contrast to the girls at "St. Lucy's School for Girls Raised by Wolves" they need not worry about the outside world barging into the inside, they have created a pocket space that encompass the two.

For Cristina Bacchilega, the ending of "Wolf Alice" is one that through celebrating difference gives new value to life. "Though humans believe they have rescued Wolf-Alice, she proves to be the saviour. "We" have language, but her "gentle tongue" has other powers. "We" judge and spill blood, while she [...] redefines what "human" is."¹⁴³

And what are humans? In the text I have examined in this chapter, I am afraid to say that "we" do not come off very well. At the end of Russell's "St. Lucy's...", one thing is clear above everything: to be human is to lie, to be an individual that put her own needs over those of the

¹⁴¹ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 126.

¹⁴² Veronica L. Schanoes, "Fearless Children and Fabulous Monsters," 33.

¹⁴³ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales : Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 65.

pack. Similarly, in Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales*, to be human is to be exploitative and cruel, only those with some animality to them (or else absolute outsiders, like Pig's lesbian client) seem capable of kindness; in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" humans again lie and cheat and gamble each other away.

I am not arguing that animals are inherently better or kinder than humans, nor am I arguing that this is what these authors believe. But as I argued in my introduction, these authors use metamorphosis to question what makes us human – and, I would argue, all of them conclude that what truly makes us humans is both an innate blindness to those things that are valuable, and an ability to find or build our equals and with them build a better world.

For these characters, metamorphosis or transformation is not an isolated occurrence but an ongoing process. To once more quote Harold Skusky, "transformation is an ordeal of a persisting awareness [...] this awareness is not only a physical process¹⁴⁴", but of course also a psychic one. Skusky is talking about Ovidian and Homeric metamorphosis, about the need and emergence of humanity, of a mind capable of containing the depth of creation, but it applies too to the tales I analysed here. A physical metamorphosis triggers a new, nascent awareness of who the character is and what do they expect of their life from that point on. Their mind might not be one to contain the depth of creation as it is, but instead contains the depth of a new creation, of a world that is unique to them.

None of my stories feature metamorphosis such as Pig's: for the most, my characters remain human. Only the main character in "The Face of the Moon", perhaps, has her body transformed to stone by her mother's abandonment, but it is more of an image of bitterness turned real than a metamorphosis.

My collection, however, does include two tales that address the topics I analysed in this chapter: the moulding of women's bodies into a proper, society-accepted shape, and the need for education or control over their minds. I am thinking of "Myriam's Third Eye" and "Hearts in the Mountain", which feature young women trying to use their bodies to express themselves in ways that put them at odds with characters that safeguard and/or enforce the norms of traditional society.

¹⁴⁴ Harold Skusky, *Metamorphosis*, 27.

Neither of these tales were conceived with these ideas in mind. "Hearts in the Mountain", in fact, truly came to adopt this idea when I began to develop the letter-writer narrator from just a visiting priest into one that was there to supervise the nuns, and even more, as one who had dabbled in medicine and therefore had strong ideas of what women (and their bodies) should like and how should they behave. From the moment Vicar Antonio arrives to the convent where these nuns are living he begins to judge their bodies: he finds the women too thin, too idle. He does not bother to wonder if perhaps the convent is being affected by drought or famine but instead decides that their thinness has to be an illness, "cachexia", to be exact.

As the tale progresses he is shown inspecting the nuns' bodies and passing judgement on their actions. Most importantly, refuses to believe the nuns' testimony regarding "their hearts." The women in these tale are poor, the kind of women that would have joined religious life not out of vocational calling but because it was their only option in life. In spite of this, they have begun to experience religious ecstasies and visions that they believe are related to their heart, which (as they are illiterate) they try and express through painting. The reaction of the narrator to this is, as before, to first pass judgement and then to control and conceal the nuns' artistic and religious expression.

I struggled with how to finish this story. My first instinct was to make Vicar Antonio slightly more benevolent: he would take the paintings and sketches, and keep them for himself as a reminder of how religious "truth" can reach even the "simplest minds". As the character evolved, however, it became clear that this would be a man who would protect his preconceptions and social standing before offering any respect to these women. He, therefore, has the walls of the convent re-stuccoed to cover the paintings of the nuns' hearts, and prepares to search for new sister to re-populate the convent, women who will respect the boundaries he represents.

"Myriam's Third Eye" addresses the shaping of women's bodies more directly. The original idea was a dream, in which a third eye sprouted in my forehead full of gore. Other than that, I could only remember another detail: the fact that my father too had one but not my mother. This led to the world-building that becomes apparent in the first couple of paragraphs: the third eye as a supernumerary organ, its relative uselessness, and the fact that women removed it while men kept it.

The third eye is, of course, an image full of meaning in and of itself. It is a symbol in Hinduism, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and New Age mysticism. Even Christian thinkers have

adopted it as a metaphor for non-dualistic thinking, and the gaze of the metaphorical third eye is thought to be wiser, one that builds on the sight procured by the other two. However, I tried quite consciously in the tale to have a de-signified third eye, one that as much as possible had no connection to any of these ideas. This is because I wanted the emphasis of the tale to be not on the third eye, but on what the main character, Myriam, *does* with her third eye. In a way, I could have used any other supernumerary organ – an arm, a wisdom tooth, an extra finger, any would do as long as women are meant to remove it and Myriam refuses to¹⁴⁵.

The true focus of the tale, as in *Pig Tales* and “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”, is Myriam’s agency over her own body and her fight to enforce it. What is the correct body for Myriam (or any of the characters in these texts) to have? Is it her “natural” body, as it develops and grows, without any outside intrusion? Or is it a more “artificial” body that follows societal norms?

This divide between natural and artificial bodies is present in both texts I mentioned above. Interestingly, neither text seems to proclaim one superior over the other: Pig’s most stable and optimistic moments in her tale take place precisely when she is able to switch from Pig into Human at will. And though the wolf-girls in “St. Lucy’s...” become tame, they fight and show grief over the loss of their “natural” being. This grief is telling: neither type of body might be superior over the other, but balance is also impossible. Both Pig and the wolf-girls have to choose one definite form and join one definite society. This is less apparent in “Myriam’s Third Eye”, since it takes place fully in human society, but is nevertheless there. The characters in the tale associate the third eye to hormone control and the development of sexuality: it heralds Myriam’s puberty and passage into sexual maturity, which (as I argued in my previous chapter) is traditionally regarded as an exclusively female link with nature. In my tale, women are anxious to sever that link. Their reasons might be, on surface, different from the ones found in the text I analysed. They might do it out of aesthetic reasons; because a third eye might be regarded as manly or ugly, or medical reasons; because they are told that the third eye might affect their hormonal cycles. But more than anything, I regard the extirpating of the third eye in my tale to be most similar to women shaving their legs or

¹⁴⁵ And yet, the third eye has obvious advantages over a wisdom tooth or an extra finger. It is more visible, to begin with. And the fact that, as I listed above, it is associated with mystic notions, clarity of thought, and enlightenment helps: Myriam’s fight is further elevated, from “simply” protecting her bodily autonomy to choosing enlightenment, vision, and wisdom.

armpits, or applying skin-whitening creams: not necessary by any measure, but done without thinking, a small price to pay for the benefit of fitting in, of not challenging the status quo of beauty instated by the patriarchal society that surrounds us.

And yet, deciding to keep it is major enough that she receives an invitation to talk about it on television. This was the scene I struggled most to write: I had originally wanted it to be triumphant, a moment when Myriam finds companionship in her rebellion and also finds herself celebrated for her non-conformism. The tale begins with Myriam, but in this first draft ended with a moment of positive questioning and re-imagining of the third eye: the live-studio audience claps, not boos, at Myriam and Tara Byrne's third eyes.

As I carried on with my research, however, I began to doubt whether an ending so pure could make sense. Rebellion must cost something, or else it is not rebellion – but also, I began to wonder about this Tara Byrne, the show host that invites Myriam to her show. What was her reasoning? What her ambitions? The character had evolved into a witty, quirky television personality with a show that attempts to breach important issues through silliness, not unlike the many late-nights shows in the United States of America (hence why the tale is set there). How had she gotten there, a woman in a world that clearly attempted to control and sculpt women into a certain form? Even more so if she had kept her third eye. Would she not be punished for it?

I came to see this character as someone who had been rebellious in her teens; too rebellious for the times – and who had come to regret this rebellion. She hides her third eye as best she can, giving the impression of a bad scar. Ambitious, she allows people to think that maybe she waited too long to remove it, and plays the role of a chastised woman for her own advantage and advancement. Now, at the narrative present of the tale, she has her finger on the pulse of the issue and knows that the time for re-examining the third eye and women's freedom is nigh. I realised that, for a character like that, Myriam would be another excellent tool to use for her advancement: that for Myriam the moment would still be one of triumph and acceptance, but at the same time it'd be marred by Tara Byrne's selfishness (which I see as a representation of the collusion between modern feminism with capitalism).

Thus I re-wrote these scenes to have Myriam grow increasingly unsettled. She finds merchandise with third-eye slogans ("OPEN YOUR EYE"), and realises that when she accepted to appear on the show she was not as informed as she thought she was. I allow her to forget her fears temporarily, during the interview – Tara Byrne would be a great host, would make her feel comfortable. But at the end of the tale, Myriam sees once more her rebellion

transformed into a watered-down pseudo-experience for an otherwise disconnected audience, flogged as cheap merchandise, and in turns this alienates her from her own life.

Like the wolf-girls in “St. Lucy’s...”, Myriam embraces her choice, her new body, but this leaves her without a clear space of belonging. Her rebellion has estranged her from her family, and though there is a promise of new connections with the people who support her, the tale effectively ends with her being used and made into a symbol without her consent. I consider it to be one of the darker tales in my collection, and this darkness is born, as I adumbrated above and will expand on in the following chapter, from my own shifting perspective of feminism and the culture it creates.

Chapter 3

Hindsight: The Form Things Take

When I started this project I thought I would write a novel. It would be semi-autobiographical, a novel of windows opening into different years in Mexico City, revisiting different versions of certain events. It would open in 1981, when the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre held my father hostage for a couple of days: this, oddly enough, led him to meet my mother. The narration would then flash to 1985, year of my birth but also year of the worst earthquake ever to hit Mexico City, then to 2014, to dwell on the fictional “me” and the troubles of writing family truth. It would question how we build our selves through narrating our families, it would also be a novel of violence in which my birth perhaps would be presented as one that came out of that violence, after a kidnapping and an earthquake.

After a term of working on it, however, I simply felt I was not up to the task. The novel I wanted to write felt too complex for my current abilities – and, as I later came to realise, I was not ready to write about my family. Mine is a large family: counting both my father and my mother’s side we number well over seventy. As is perhaps normal in such a large family, we are riddled with secrets, occasional infighting, and a few illegitimate children... I simply could not yet write about that.

But if I was not writing this, if I *could not* write it, then what *should* I be writing? If I felt that novel was beyond my capabilities, what then, should I be writing in order to push myself closer to that novel, or simply to become a more accomplished writer?

I realised I had never tried my hand at writing short stories before. I had written a couple, but never invested much time into polishing any or truly exploiting the genre. Furthermore, the common criticism I tended to receive of my writing was that it was too “baggy” – that I needed to cut down, tighten my prose, economize in language. The short story seemed the perfect area to explore and practise all of this, and therefore the short story was also the type of writing I should be doing in a Creative Writing postgraduate dissertation.

The project changed accordingly: my favourite genre of short story at the time were fairy tales and myth, and I had particular interest in how writers like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood worked with them in order to produce new text that interrogated both past and future. On re-reading the Russian fairy tale, “Vasilisa the Beautiful”, I was impressed by the use given to the body in the tale: different parts seemed to be detachable, a character might take the bones from her little fingers to pick a lock made out of teeth, and Baba Yaga rewards

good behaviour with a flaming skull that shine light on Vasilisa's path but burns her evil stepmother to death. I decided I would write short stories that borrowed that body-plasticity from fairy tales: stories where the body would not carry the plot, but dictate it.

By Knock-Out: The Short Story

Once I had decided I would write a collection of short stories, and once I had decided what the unifying topic would be, what followed was for me to decide exactly what I had to write. This is not to repeat myself, but to say that I had to research exactly what made the short story form different from the novel; which was the only genre I had tried my hand at.¹⁴⁶

The difference, I knew, had to be more than just the length. Length seemed to me almost cosmetic in comparison to what should truly differentiate the two forms. Of course, I was familiar with Poe's famous 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition". This essay famously presents a theory of how a writer should approach literary creation. Far from writing being conceived in "a species of fine frenzy – an ecstatic intuition"¹⁴⁷, he suggests that a writer should have certain a certain effect in in mind before writing, and then ascertain that everything she writes works toward ensuring that that effect. Length, therefore, should be short (lest the effect is diluted and lost), and the topic should be chosen only for how well it should serve the effect.

But, at least in my experience – and definitely in the tales I presented in this collection – though the effect of the tale was taken into consideration, it was by far not the first thing I gave any thought to. Many were born because I wanted to tell a story – an ongoing desire to write a story about a woman who somehow produces enough salt to transform her flat into a desert gave birth, obviously, to "Salt". Tales such as "Fiona McCool" and "Pearls and Snakes" were inspired by fairy tales and myths, and I dreamed "Myriam's Third Eye" almost in its entirety. The story, characters, and the role their bodies would play always came first – the "effect", for me, is a second goal (though not secondary) in order to best tell the tale.

I found more help in a 1970 talk fellow and beloved Latin-American writer, the Chilean Julio Cortázar gave for Casa de las Américas in Havana, Cuba, titled "Some Aspects of the Tale"

¹⁴⁶ Perhaps like many women my age, I wrote fan-fiction throughout most of my teens – long, multi-chaptered, melodramatic monsters that nevertheless resembled novels in progression and length.

¹⁴⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition", *Graham's Magazine* (April 1846)
<<https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>> (accessed April 13, 2017)

¹⁴⁸. Given the political situation of Cuba, Argentina, and Chile, this conference brought together many writers who perhaps knew each other by name but who had not been able to access or read each other's work. Cortázar opens his talk by acknowledging that this means that talking about his work is futile, as no one will know what he is referring to. Instead, he decided to present what he thought were the key features of the universal short story.

Before following on Cortázar, it is worth mentioning that though the term "short story" is considered to be a nineteenth century creation, short narratives have always been present in literature under many guises. Fables, folktales, myths, parables, and fairy tales have been how people around the world set their stories to memory. The common element of all these, however, is absent from the modern short story. I am referring to the oral component of the previous examples, which we might simply call "tales": "the tale is a *spoken* form that, consequently, implies a speaker and a listener"¹⁴⁹, to quote Paul March-Russell from his book on the topic, *The Short Story: An Introduction*. The speaker and listener will be found in different contexts, and the context itself will dictate how the tale affects the listener.

In comparison, says March-Russell, the short story is an artefact of the era of mass production: always printed, free of external context other than the one the circumstances of its printing might give it (is it in a magazine? An anthology?). March-Russell goes on to argue that, because the short story eschews orality it can also afford more complex plotting, narrative devices, and styles. As such, while he considers that there are five possible types of tales (parables and fables, creation myths, novella, fairy tale, and art-tale)¹⁵⁰, the short-story can be infinite in its shapes and topics.

Cortázar marks no difference between "tale" and "short story", partly due to language¹⁵¹, but partly because he sees no difference. What differs, for him, is the philosophy behind the types of things that are to be narrated. Of his own writing he says

Almost every tale I have written belong to the so-called "fantastic" genre, by lack of a better name, and they are opposed to that fake realism that consists in believing that all things can be described and explained, as the philosophical and scientific optimism of the eighteenth century so assumed, within a world governed more or less

¹⁴⁸ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento", *Diez años de la revista "Casa de las Américas"* 60 (1970) <<http://www.literatura.us/cortazar/aspectos.html>> accessed April 13, 2017.

All translations given here are my own. The text has been published in English in Charles E. May, ed., *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 245-255.

¹⁴⁹ Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁵⁰ Paul March-Russell, 3-10.

¹⁵¹ Cortázar uses the word "cuento", which can be translated as both "story" and "tale." The phrase "cuento corto", "short story", does exist in Spanish, but its use does not necessarily mark a difference.

harmoniously by a system of laws, principles, of cause and effect relations, of defined psychologies, or well-mapped geographies.¹⁵²

I share Cortázar's misgivings here: there is, for me, a general unknowability about the world, and about ourselves; and any narrative of mine which failed to reflect this would be conceited and hollow. This is also, perhaps, why my own reading is often drawn to the fantastic and to fantasy itself: I look for alternative ways to understand reality, even if those are more often than not not grounded on reality itself. Much of the materials I used as inspiration or research were myths, fairy tales, legends, and folklore. The title of this collection/thesis comes, as I mentioned, from the Hávamál, the second poem of the Elder Edda.

But many of the more modern and contemporary authors I read to get my mind into short-fiction frame, too, write tales removed from that well-mapped defined reality Cortázar mentions above. Cortázar himself, in his tales from *Historias de Cronopios y Famas* (Santiago de Chile, 1962), alienates everyday actions and feelings by mapping out instructions on how to cry, how to feel fear, or how to kill ants while in Rome¹⁵³. Argentinian literary giant Jorge Luis Borges, meanwhile, at once questions reality as we know it, suggests new ways in which this same reality could be truly structured or re-structured, while at the same time questioning the limits of language to describe reality (the best example of this is without a doubt "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" from the collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941)¹⁵⁴).

The possible representation of reality aside, Cortázar proposes three fundamental points for the writing of a short story: length, theme, and style.

Length for Cortázar, is the fundamental element of the tale, which in itself is born from the concept of limit; punctuated by the very literal reduced physical space they can occupy ("In France," he says, "When a tale exceeds twenty pages it is called a nouvelle"¹⁵⁵). This limit, however, should work as a fuse to spark creativity: like a photographer, the writer must see the reduced "field of action" and use it aesthetically for her own work, to cause on its public a sense of aperture that will "ferment" intellectual curiosity.

¹⁵² Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

¹⁵³ Julio Cortázar, *Historias de cronopios y famas* (Ciudad de México: Alfaguara, 2013), 14, 16, 22.

¹⁵⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Ciudad de México: Random House Mondadori, S.A., 2011)

¹⁵⁵ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

In one of the wittiest summaries of the importance and effects of length in literature, Cortázar comments on its similarities to boxing. "In that fight between a thrilling text and its reader, the novel wins always by points, but the tale must win by knock-out."¹⁵⁶

Regarding the theme, Cortázar states that a good theme must not necessarily be extraordinary, mysterious, or unusual. A good theme, he says, "is like a Sun, a star around which revolve thoughts, notions, feelings, even ideas, like a vast planetary system of which one had no conscience of until the storyteller, astronomer of words, reveals its existence to us."¹⁵⁷ If an idea fails to spark this web of connecting relations, any attempt at writing it down will fail or lead not to a tail but an anecdote.

The last aspect Cortázar makes note of is that of "style". Style refers to the two possible approaches to narration in a short story: one he dubs "intensity", and a second one he dubs "tension." The first, "intensity" consists in presenting a rather bare-bones narrative, where "all intermediate ideas or situations, all filler or phrases for transition are eliminated [...] by the third or fourth sentence we are in the heart of the drama."¹⁵⁸ He suggests Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" as an example, as both theme and plot are contained within a single idea (revenge) and description is minimal in comparison with action.

On the other hand, "tension" makes use of description and settings to create a mood or atmosphere that will trap the reader. The writer might take time to reveal the plot and theme of the story, but "even though [the reader] is far away from knowing what will happen in the tale, he cannot extract himself from the atmosphere."¹⁵⁹

Both these tenets and his comments of the unknowability of the world stayed with me during the time I spent writing my own tales; particularly when it came to intensity vs. tension. I found this aspect particularly important given that so many things compete for our attention: phones, computers, screens of all kinds are constantly within reach. It is true that not every reader will be as distracted a person as I or my peers are, but it is perhaps wiser to write with the distracted reader in mind, and thus catch as wide an audience as possible.

In many tales I chose tension, or "mood" over intensity. This can be appreciated in tales in this collection such as "Salt", "The Head and the Winds", and "The Heart in the Mountains." While the three of these present unnatural phenomena, from the weird (a woman exudes

¹⁵⁶ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

¹⁵⁷ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

¹⁵⁸ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

¹⁵⁹ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento."

salt) to the fantastic (a talking head) and the simply unexplained (what was really killing the nuns?), most of my writing efforts went into constructing mysterious, oneiric, or gothic ambiances. In the case of the two latter examples, I do believe that the mood of the tale is very much what drives the reading forward.

On the other side of the spectrum, the best example of my tales of one that aims for intensity rather than mood is “Myriam’s Third Eye.” Both its opening sentence and its present-tense narrative immediately introduce the reader to the abnormality of the world presented: third eyes and gender disparity. Though it is one of the lengthier tales in the collection, I decided against a balance between action and description, and instead tried to have almost every sentence be an action or at least structured grammatically as such.

Thematically, too, it might be one of the strongest tales in the collection. Though the story came to me in a dream, there is no denying that the third eye is a powerful motif that ignites many ideas and possibilities. The third eye is an element of Buddhism and Daoism, it has links with mystical Christianity, and New Age spirituality has taken it as symbol of enlightenment. A third eye also has biological connotations (as the story explores), a third eye would be an aberration, keeping a third eye would be stubborn but defiant, having one born during the teenage years could represent budding sexuality, independence, gender identity... an idea that springs from a dream might be interesting, but the potential constellation that grows around it is what allows it to become a tale.

Of course, I did find that this happened very often when the female body was my basis. Historically the female body has been a white canvas, a space for any values and meanings to be projected.

The Form of the Body

On the first draft or proposal for this PhD, I wrote the following:

Finally, I believe this collection will allow me to comment on how the female body is represented in the world. Modern society seems to have whittled the possibilities of existence for women seem to one: thin, white, and young. If any section of one’s body fails in this mission, it can be enhanced through artificial means: lips, breast, buttocks, and foreheads might be pumped to regain firmness, chemicals might be applied to the skin to whiten it, noses and bones might be re-shaped for a more agreeable symmetry.

Re-reading this paragraph now that my collection is complete, it seems rather obvious that my writing changed direction during the years of research. The emphasis I made on plastic surgery, skin colour and race, suggests a different project altogether.

These issues above, though largely absent from my present work, were most definitely present in my mind when I began to write. I felt that both myth and fairy tale gave the human body a value that was rather lost in modern society: a symbolic value, that allowed every part of it to stand for something. The desperation with which Cinderella's step-sisters cut off fragments of their feet seemed to me barbaric not only because of the violence inherent in the action, but because it was a symbolic punishment meted out exclusively to women who tried to cheat their way into a better social position. That Vasilisa the Fair has to break off her little finger to open the lock into Baba Yaga's hut seemed to me an allegory of resourcefulness and sacrifice. That she returns from the hut with a flaming skull to incinerate her abusive stepmother seemed an allegory of the eventual triumph of knowledge over suffering.

Compared to that, the world around me seemed to have lost any kind of regard or respect for the body except as a commodity – one more of the things that the modern world allows you to own and use. I wanted to address this through my tales in the same way, I thought, that Carter addressed sexuality through hers. If, as Hélène Cixous had written in "The Laugh of Medusa", we had as a group been "turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty"¹⁶⁰, I would try and reclaim the female body through my tales.

I believe that the first tale I wrote, "Salt", exhibits this quite strongly: the story has a woman struggling with the more functional aspect of sexuality – she has gone through infections, vaginal dryness, perhaps infertility. Her doubts, loneliness, and medical conditions themselves manifest in her life in the form of a desert of salt that forms in her flat. The ending is intentionally ambiguous, dwelling at once in the beauty of her desert and the loneliness and harm it inflicts on the character. Similarly, in a tale like "Myriam's Third Eye" the main character's nascent third eye is presented not as an impossibility nor a deformity in the biological sense of the word, but as a multifaceted symbol that could stand in for her sexuality, fluctuating gender, or quite simply for women's struggle against society over the control of their own bodies.

¹⁶⁰ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohan, trans. "The Laugh of Medusa." *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875-893.

And yet, during the second half of my PhD I began to distance myself from these ideas, and the strong – almost militant – tone that can be appreciated in my project proposal all but disappeared. In fact, I began to wonder whether I would call my collection a “feminist” one at all.

Of course, I identify as a feminist, and during my research I engaged with a number of feminist writers. Collections such as Aimee Bender’s *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*¹⁶¹ updated my notion of what a fairy tale could look like. Marina Warner’s *Mermaids in the Basement*¹⁶² helped me rethink the way I would approach mythic narratives. And tales like “Flâneuse¹⁶³” and “Colette Looks Back” in Michèle Roberts’ *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*¹⁶⁴ showed me how a tale about love, attraction, and growing up could be told through hair (first plaited, then cut) or feet (nails painted, in jewelled sandals unapt for walking) without either taking centre-stage. And needless to say, Angela Carter books, from *The Bloody Chamber* to *Fireworks*¹⁶⁵ and *Nights at the Circus*¹⁶⁶, has been one of the key influences on my writing. It was through reading these collections, these women, that I found the building-stones for my own tales.

But what makes one into a feminist writer? It is not enough to say, because I am a woman and read women and write about women this is a feminist text. Nor is it enough to say, I think, I am a feminist therefore what I write is feminist. There are many women whose women-writing only serves to preserve traditional gender roles or else fails to engage in any ways with the ideals of feminism.

The Hélène Cixous essay I quoted above is often held as an example of feminist writing, as it advocates for the creation of an *écriture féminine* – texts and narratives which would break with a history of writing which is “at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis” of phallogentrism. For Cixous, this phallogentrism has transformed the female body into an uncanny stranger, one which is impossible to write in any terms but those dictated by men themselves. To practise *écriture féminine* is to, as a woman, write one’s own self and one’s own body, to de-censor her sexuality and re-attain one’s “pleasures, organs, and immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶¹ Aimee Bender, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (London: Windmill Books, 2012)

¹⁶² Marina Warner, *Mermaids in the Basement* (London: Virago, 1994)

¹⁶³ Michèle Roberts, “Flâneuse,” *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (London: Virago, 2010): 47-65.

¹⁶⁴ Michèle Roberts, “Colette Looks Back,” *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, 9-25.

¹⁶⁵ Angela Carter, *Fireworks* (London: Virago, 2004)

¹⁶⁶ Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006)

¹⁶⁷ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa”, 880.

The main problem I perceive with this *écriture féminine*, however, is that it risks becoming rather essentialist. Its insistence in women writing themselves through their bodies could, in fact, work against women by re-enforcing the belief that women are, in fact, nothing more than their body. This worry came to my mind particularly when I came upon Cixous's concept of "white ink", again in "The Laugh of Medusa": "a woman is never far from "mother" [...] There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink."¹⁶⁸

This phrase interested me for a number of reasons. First, because she seems to present this as a positive aspect of womanhood: men (with the exception of poets) stockpile defences against their own bodily drives, but in being closer to a mother women are open and accept pleasure, and are in touch with the "first music from the first voice of love"¹⁶⁹, with their own unconscious. I find this kind of feminist mysticism completely unacceptable – and while Cixous might not go as far as talking about mother goddesses, to suggest that women are more attuned to nature or love is simply misguided. Angela Carter put it excellently in *The Sadeian Woman*: "If the revival of these [beliefs] gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life."¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, the idea of women writing in "white ink", while poetic, seems problematic. To write in white ink is to write invisibly: white ink does not read on paper. Milk dries and disappears. I know, of course, Cixous is not suggesting this literally, but nevertheless: if the white ink derives from the mother's breast, it again invokes the idea of women's natural benevolence, or else, of women's ineffable difference from men.

In an interview with Christiane Makward¹⁷¹, Cixous does propose a different origin for this white ink: in the page of a written text, two things exist: the ink and the space in between. In the black ink we find the history of literature as set down by the patriarchy; the "empty" space in between is where women's writing is found: invisible, in the margins, but present. And not only women: the writing of postcolonial writers, homosexual writing, any kind of writing done by the Others is pushed into those margins. White ink, then, is "squeezed" from those palimpsests, from the "invisible" writing found between the lines of patriarchal texts¹⁷².

¹⁶⁸ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa", 881.

¹⁶⁹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa", 881.

¹⁷⁰ Angela Carter. *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979): 6.

¹⁷¹ Hélène Cixous. Interview with Christiane Makward. "My text is written in White and black, in 'milk and night'." *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Texts, and Politics*. Ed. Susan Sellers. (New York: Routledge, 2008): 58-78.

¹⁷² Hélène Cixous, *White Ink*, 75-76.

Here my “problem” is not a disagreement with Cixous’s philosophy, but the fact that she seems to be describing a writing that prioritises form over content; how things are said over what things are said. It might be no surprise that one often-cited example of *écriture féminine* is James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, an avant-garde book written in a stream of consciousness of multilingual puns. Another (perhaps less extreme) example Cixous gives is that of poetry, which she in fact positions at complete odds with prose: “There have been poets who would go to any lengths to slip something by at odds with tradition – men capable of loving love [...] But only poets – not the novelists, allies of representationalism.”¹⁷³

I am not a poet; my writing has always been prose – and, to be exact, a prose that I have always thought was more concerned with content than with form. And yet, upon looking at this collection, there is certainly more “form” than I had expected to ever see in my writing: my starting point was the female form, to start with. It was, as I explained in my introduction, society’s obsession with it – its weight, its colour, its appearance, its changes.

And the different tales in this collection show how, perhaps without consciously noticing it, I was aware of the different forms that narrative can take. I was concerned, of course, with the short story as form, with the form of the short story and the form of the fairy tale – and how to follow both without just re-writing fairy tales. As I wrote, I was also conscious of the different forms and registers I could use to differentiate each tale from the other. In this way, a tale like “Balance the Earth and Sky” is written as a fairy tale but uses mostly bird-related idioms to establish its themes and settings. Meanwhile, the other fairy-tale story in the collection, “Pearls and Snakes”, is written as two individual dialogues that might be read alternatively or on their own. One re-tells the original tale, the other works as an essay or commentary on the re-written tale itself. “Fiona McCool” was quite consciously written as a mock-epic, with a myth-like narrative register but a rather mundane topic: I knew that the clash between the two – between form and content, indeed – would be comedic.

And finally, I suppose that my worries over the form/content balance can be seen from the very beginning of this project. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this collection is in fact my second attempt at a dissertation: the first idea, a novel, proved too unwieldy to write at the time. Looking back on it, I wonder if perhaps the scales had tipped too much: there was too much content, too many stories at once mingling, diverging,

¹⁷³ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa”, 879.

entwining. At the time, I could not find a way to shape them into a single narrative, or what form this narrative should take.

Looking at my writing now, it seems that a certain *écriture féminine* crept out without me consciously realising. Though it very much remains the prose that Cixous so declared an ally of patriarchal representationalism, it is a prose whose concerns, both in form and content, are very much informed by what exists in the margins. Women, their bodies, from the sexual to the every-day, but also “minor” literary styles, such as the fairy tale, are what built this collection. My concern with form, I see now, is not as absent as I thought: it is simply one that will never overwhelm content, but, as I will try and show in the following section, will prop it up and boost it.

The Path: Hearts in the Mountain, a case study

In the introduction to this dissertation I mentioned that I had chosen the title *The Head Knows What Lies Near the Heart* because it gave a sense of completeness. With a head and a heart, the body seemed, in a way, complete. Perhaps with this in mind, I wrote the “head” story, “The Head and the Winds”, early into the PhD. Strangely, perhaps, the heart-tale was slow in coming to me – it was nearly the last to be written, in fact.

As ever with projects this long, however, this is not completely true: I had originally jotted down a very short tale regarding hearts, that first came to me a few years ago. It was titled “A Woman’s Heart”, though it actually followed a man. The story opened like this:

Once upon a time a man broke a woman’s heart. Shards in hand, she demanded compensation. ‘I can’t live without a heart. Give me yours in place of what you shattered.’

‘But what will I do, with no heart of my own?’

‘Go find a new one! And return not ‘till you get it.’

She took his heart, and heartless he went, off on his quest.

The man goes on to follow a true-and-tried fairy tale tradition of encountering animal assistants with whom he “exchanges” hearts over and over to learn something new on each occasion. On taking an old horse’s heart he learned resilience, on exchanging that with a rabbit’s he learned meekness, on exchanging with a stray dog he learned independence, and finally by exchanging the heart of the dog with a young woman’s heart he learned to understand things from the perspective of the other gender and was welcomed again by his

lover – who had taken *his* heart, and thus could understand men’s perspective from the very beginning. It was a rather feel-good tale: everyone gets something, or learns something, and in exchanging their hearts they are better off than they were to start with. The horse learns calm, the rabbit gets resilient, the dog becomes meek to be taken in by a family, and the young woman learns to be independent and leaves to see the world. And, of course, at the end the lovers are reunited in mutual understanding.

I still feel proud of that little tale, and beyond a couple of details that I would like to iron out before looking for publication, I am happy with how it develops. However, there are three reasons why I decided not to use it for this anthology. First of all, it was not a tale I had originally conceived as part of this dissertation, but rather one I had written before that happened to fit the theme. Second, it had required almost no research, but rather had sprung into my mind after reading a line about how mythical tricksters often exchange organs/body parts with heroes or other characters. Third and last, I already had a story in the collection written in a fairy-tale register: “Balance Earth and Sky”, the tale of a young woman who gives birth to a baby with wings instead of arms. Though lacking in fairies per se, “Balance Earth and Sky” most definitely possesses the fairy tale mood of possibility that I talked about in previous chapters. From the opening line, “There once was a woman...” to the promised happy ending, I knew it was a fairy tale and I didn’t want a second tale in the collection written in the same style.

However, I only decided to replace that tale in the third year of my studies. The new tale began when I attempted to visit the Wellcome Collection in London, only to find it was closed for refurbishing; only a tiny “educational” space remained open. They had a few heart-related exhibits: a standard plastic model of the circulatory system, an audio recording of the dissection of a corpse which ended with a young medical student taking the dead man’s heart and raising it over his head while crying “By the power of Greystone!”... but my attention was drawn to a painting, called “Rockies Karakoram¹⁷⁴” by the artist Chris Drury. The piece depicts a moon-like figure with strong, jagged blue-black lines over the entire canvas, crossing over and into the “moon”. A card next to it explained that it was in fact an echocardiogram of the artist printed onto two interwoven maps, one of the Rocky Mountains, the second of the Karakoram Mountains in the borders between Pakistan, India, and China.

¹⁷⁴ Chris Drury. *Rockies Karakoram*. 2000. Two maps overprinted with an echocardiogram, cut into strips and woven into a bowl, set within a larger digitally printed echocardiogram. Wellcome Collection, London.

Upon researching Chris Drury's work I learned he considers himself a "land artist", who explores the systems of flow in the body and compares them with similar patterns in the natural world. On more than one occasion he chose to overlay echocardiograms with images of mountains: in "Landscapes of the Heart"¹⁷⁵, for instance, he uses maps of the Pyrenees to create an effect similar to "Rockies Karakoram." A later work, "Heart of Reeds"¹⁷⁶, built in East Sussex, uses many natural elements to illustrate the patterns of blood flow in the heart: water, soil, naturally growing plants, and time. Photographed at different moments of the year of time the heart appears to be vibrant green, deep blue, yellow with withered vegetation, and frozen-white during the winter of 2006.

This was the first time I thought about the similarities between the natural world, and more specifically a mountain, and the human heart – not in shape, so much, as in its movements and organization. Blood, according to Drury, moves the same way in the heart as water moves in the planet. Thus, he says, there is no difference in contemplating an echocardiogram and an echogram: they both show the beating of life, whether human or mountain or glacier¹⁷⁷.

Like a heart, a mountain has interconnected grottoes through which life flows, I thought. In one they might be called vesicles, in the other they might be actual caverns, one might have blood pumping while the other has rivers or streams, as well as animals of all kinds making their home there.

More so, I remembered reading many years ago in *The Elizabethan World Picture* by E.M.W. Tillyard the assumed order of the world. The Chain of Being established that the divine order, in which God was at the top and simple organisms at the bottom, was replicated in every aspect of the world: thus, as man was the "king" of the creation, so the lion was the king of land animals and the eagle sovereign of those that flew. Though there is no mention of the order of landscape in the Chain of Being, I thought it would quite logically apply in the same way, and positioned the mountain as sovereign, as of all natural formations it is the largest and – being rather poetic – the only to truly stretch and reach for the heavens, which might be seen as something religiously commendable.

¹⁷⁵ Chris Drury. *Landscapes of the Heart*. 2001. Echocardiogram monoprinted onto watercolour paper and maps of the Pyrenees. Conquest Hospital, Hastings.

¹⁷⁶ Chris Drury. *Heart of Reeds*. 2005-Ongoing. Natural outdoors installation, Lewes, East Sussex.

¹⁷⁷ Chris Drury. Interview with Gillian Parrish. *Spacecrafts*, <<https://spacecraftproject.wordpress.com/chris-drury/>> Accessed April 14, 2017.

But after that burst of inspiration the idea was relegated to the back of my head while I worked on other tales. I worked first on eyes (“Myriam’s Third Eye”), on hands or fingers (“Fiona McCool”), and a story that was meant to be about joints or articulations but ended up being called “The Face of the Moon.” It was while re-writing this story that I came upon the second piece of inspiration for the heart story.

“The Face of the Moon” takes elements from the story of Coyolxauqui, the Aztec goddess of the moon. In this myth, Coyolxauqui is a goddess of destruction who, when she hears her mother the snake goddess Coatlicue is pregnant, tries to attack and kill her, believing that the baby Coatlicue carries will take her place and power away. Yet the moment she attacks her mother, the baby, Huitzilopochtli, is born in full battle armour and throws her off a pyramid. She shatters upon impact, and he cuts her off at the joints and throws her head into the sky, where it became the moon.

The story I had written had a dreamy quality to it: I had intended it to feel oddly modern, and yet without a clear time period. It had the Coyolxauqui (referred to as “Bell” in the story, as her name in náhuatl means “Face Painted with Bells”) waking up in a hospital, apparently after a long coma, coming to terms with her brother having taken over her people and her place in the sky. I liked the atmosphere, but I realised that it wasn’t very clear at all for the readers, and that it had very little to do with joints, with a woman being shattered, or with the moon and the sun.

While researching the myth of Coyolxauqui I decided to look into the collection of art history books, as Essex is in possession of ESCALA it struck me as obvious that I would find something. And while I found very little on Coyolxauqui (it seems she is a figure forgotten even by my own countrymen and women), I stumbled upon a book that brought the heart back to the forefront. *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*, by Oliver Debroise and Elizabeth Sussman is a collection of essays collected after a 1992 installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. As the title suggests, both the installation and the book centre around the figure of the bleeding heart, mostly in and around Catholic practises, but the first article of the collection (“Haciéndola cardiaca/Making it a Heart Attack”¹⁷⁸), by Olivier Debroise himself, traces the use of the heart metaphors in Mexican Spanish to refer to high-tension situations. Other articles trace the evolution of the representation of the heart from pre-Hispanic cultures through the Spanish colonization and

¹⁷⁸ Oliver Debroise, “Haciéndola cardiaca/Making it a Heart Attack.” *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991): 12-61.

the appearance of the cult of the Sacred Heart amongst nuns, finally going into its place in contemporary Mexico and the re-appropriation of this religious imagery by traditionally marginalised groups.

One of the ideas that mostly intrigued me from this book was the extremes to which certain religious orders would go in the veneration of the Holy Heart of Jesus. The visions of the Sacred Heart are often more visceral and bloody than any other religious visitations: Saint Lutgardis of Aywières, a twelfth century Belgian nun, claimed to have been visited by Jesus, who

broke one arm free [from the cross], he hugged her, he held her tight against his right side and she applied her mouth to his wound. There she drank a softness so potent that from then on she was stronger and alert to the service of God.¹⁷⁹

In later visions of the Sacred Heart this sensuality, as well as the importance of that particular wound, remain present. Marguerite Mary Alacoque, who is credited with establishing the modern form of veneration of the Sacred Heart, reported seeing visions in which the wound opened to allow her to take refuge in and “regenerate.” After a number of visions in which she, like Saint Lutgardis, imbibes the Christ’s blood, Marguerite Mary devoted herself to treat and cure the ill through extraordinary methods: licking any and all bodily fluids, from sweat to tears to pus and urine, eating their excrement and vomit. Her writings of her raptures assert that, of all these, it was blood that pleased her the most, in a way that if it wasn’t for Jesus’s dispensation she would have considered too pleasurable to not be sinful.

Many of these nuns were condemned by the church for both this completely unorthodox approach to charity and their veneration of the Sacred Heart: it was too focused on the physical being of God instead of his spirit, and it has odd sensual, nearly sexual connotations that no woman of the cloth should be admitting to. Fortunately, what endured of Marguerite Mary Alacoque’s veneration of the Sacred Heart was not her “mystic of revulsion” but her veneration of the Heart as an organ itself, which in time was accepted by the church as a whole. Though mentions of blood-drinking and the literal, sensual exchange of hearts with Jesus were scrubbed clean, the cult of the Sacred Heart remains complex. As Debroise remarks, the Sacred Heart is an oxymoron: it is presented open, with arteries and veins

¹⁷⁹ Pierre Deboigne, “Comment et recommencements de la devotion au Coeur de Jésus”, quoted in Oliver Debroise, “Haciéndola cardiaca/Making it a Heart Attack.” pp. 15.

severed, yet it is sealed. It is empty of blood, but overflowing with divine knowledge and emotion. As it is out of the body, it must be dead, yet as it belongs to Jesus, it is alive.¹⁸⁰

Two ideas here sparked my imagination: first, the act of drawing the heart, which I will touch on later. Second, the exchange of the hearts struck me as something worth exploring. This essay also reminded me of how the representation of the human heart has always been a vital piece of Mexican culture: whether as the central piece of human sacrifices, as part of Catholic veneration, and as image of *résistance* for post-modern authors. With the ideas I had developed from the Chris Drury pieces and the reading of this book, the penny dropped (or twenty did, as we would say in Mexico) and the story that had been bubbling in my mind took more solid form.

Between what I had read and seen in Chris Drury and Olivier Debroise I constructed what would be the setting of my Heart-Tale: a convent, or monastery, somewhere in rural Mexico. In the story, I thought, I would like to touch on the holy heart vs. the actual heart, or the mystic heart vs. the medical heart. As for the time period when the tale would take place, that was slightly more difficult to pinpoint: the further back I went in time, the more did society lean towards the mystic side of my proposed equation, the closer to contemporary society the less mystic it was.

It was after discussing this with my supervisor, Elizabeth Kuti, that I decided to set it (although quite vaguely) around the 18th century. During this time the practice of medicine was becoming more widespread, and the conflict between reason and emotion was developing across the world without the scales being tipped in any direction yet. This would give me the balance I desired between medicine/science and mysticism/religion, even more if the setting was to be a rural area in Mexico.¹⁸¹

What/Who: Plot and Narrator

At this point I had the setting, but I was missing two very important pieces of any story: the plot and the narrator. Of course there are cases in which one is born of the other, but at this point I had neither, just the idea of something happening in a convent where nuns would

¹⁸⁰ Olivier Debroise, "Haciéndola cardiaca/Making it a Heart Attack". pp. 19.

¹⁸¹ This is also the reason for the at-times random capitalization of certain words – I wanted to play with the idea that this was written in a time where grammar rules were yet to be set down. In the current draft, it is used only for nouns which I thought my narrator would consider important enough to be capitalised.

be worshipping the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Just as plot and narrator can spring from one another, I thought perhaps they could spring from further research. I thus began reading on the different religious orders and missions that arrived to Mexico after the Spanish conquest. There were, of course, too many: Jesuits, Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Carmelites, Mercedarians, Clarisses, Capuchins, Hieronymites...

Given the time period I had restricted myself to, and as I needed my nuns to be rather contemplative or mystic that they might reach the idea of the Sacred Heart on their own, I narrowed this down to either the Carmelites or the Benedictines, as these were the two larger groups of contemplative nuns existing in Mexico in the 16th Century. Upon learning that St. Gertrude of Helfta, a 13th Bernardine mystic, was an early devotee of the Sacred Heart, I decided to make my own nuns Benedictines as well. It would make more sense if my nuns had read St. Gertrude's *The Herald of Divine Love* and had thus discovered the Sacred Heart than if they just happened to experience the same kind of visions that others had before.

I started writing the tale around here, experimenting in the first person using the voice of what I thought would be the abbess or mother superior. She would be a learned woman, I thought, someone educated enough that she would be able to read *The Herald of Divine Love* in the original Latin. Perhaps she would be *too* educated, too smart: like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who had no choice but to become a nun in order to get an education, my abbess would feel stifled by the restrictions placed on her by monastic life. Perhaps those very restrictions would be what was causing her to receive her visions – to hallucinate religious figures coming to visit. In her hallucinations she would see mountains beyond mountains, each crowned by a crown of thorns and rays of divine light, she would fly into the arteries/tunnels of the mountains until she found the beating heart of Christ.

So my first draft began,

Again they came to me in visions: the Mountain and the Heart; with each passing dream I become more convinced that what I see is no dream, nor a visitation of evil spirits like the ones that visit the Indians when they chew the devil's weed. For when I gaze upon them I am consumed by a sense of peace that I shall never find in the waking world. Crowned in Light I see them, and the light comes upon me like flames...

However, I immediately ran into several problems: where was the abbess writing, and to whom? Was she writing to herself in a journal, or a letter to a friend, a report to her superiors perhaps? The cult of the Sacred Heart was accepted by the Vatican in the early 14th Century,

but my unnamed abbess could remain uncertain about the origin of her visions, and thus could be unwilling to share them.

This raised another question, one I often ask myself before setting out to write anything: why is this story worth telling? And yes, it is arguable that every story is worth telling, or that even the most insignificant tale may become great in the telling. But I find asking this question is always important, even more when one is considering writing in the first person. If this is a character telling her story, why does she want to tell it? Of course, because it is important, or else amusing. I rarely tell people of my morning walk with the dogs, but I often bring up the story of how my parents met after my father was held hostage by a communist guerrilla, or the tale of when I was mistaken for a ghost while visiting Japan.

Why is this story so important to my abbess that she wants to tell it? If it is because she believed in her visions, then why does she need to write it down instead of simply instruct the nuns working under her, as her real-life counterparts mostly did? Extrapolated to the needs of my writing, this read slightly differently: if this was going to be the story of the abbess's visions and her acceptance of them, why did it need to be told in the first person at all?

And perhaps more critically – what is the “big bad” of the story? What is the opposition, the tension driving this character forth? The more I thought about it, the more I became a bit disenchanted with the abbess story, or more so, with the idea of having her tell it.

A turning point came then quite fortuitously when an American friend posted a picture on his Face Book wall, of the sunset over the Sangre de Cristo mountains. I had never heard of that mountain range before – the photo showed a series of crests glowing in near fluorescent red, their peaks almost copper-like in their shine. Immediately I decided to change the setting of the tale, from “somewhere in Mexico” to somewhere in the Sangre de Cristo range: the name was too perfect, too close to my own chosen topic, the image of the red mountainside too striking, to let go.

This posed some problems, of course: the Benedicts were never too widespread in the area that was once northern Mexico and is now southern U.S.A. The biggest orders in the area were the Jesuits and the Franciscans, and the Jesuits are exclusively male. Quite suddenly I was left with a Franciscan abbess, a Poor Clare! This would have been quite helpful, in a way: Poor Clare Sisters, or Franciscan Sisters as they would be called in Spanish, are traditionally a contemplative order.

Of course, many religious orders that were contemplative in Europe tended to be much more extroverted, shall we say, much more involved with the local communities when they

crossed over to “New Spain”. Though I did dither between keeping my nuns contemplative or have them out and about working with a community, I realised they could be both: nuns that once used to work with the community, teaching them and taking care of the ill, etc., before suddenly isolating themselves. Plot-wise, this would cause unrest in the community, and potentially attract attention to the rest of the order.

A friend reminded me here of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, where a friar and his novice travel to a monastery to attend a theological debate and find themselves mixed in what looks to be a string of murders, or possibly suicides. I thought I could borrow the idea, and have the nuns at my own abbey commit suicide one by one, following their awakening to the Sacred Heart. That would warrant a visit by a superior – who could then become my first person narrator, perhaps writing in the form of a missive or a report explaining the events he had witnessed in the abbey.

I thus had the skeleton of a plot: nuns start committing suicide (the reasons why would be researched later), a superior of the order comes to investigate and what he sees shocks him enough to write about it in the form of a letter, either to a friend or to his own superiors in the order.

It is also relevant to mention that I had wanted to write a story in the form of a letter since reading Rebecca Curtis’s story “The Christmas Miracle”, published in *The New Yorker* in the winter of 2013. “The Christmas Miracle” is a rather quirky tale of a family getting together for the winter holidays. The tale meanders through the days leading up to Christmas, covering everything one might write to a friend who is absent: the narrator’s struggle against Lyme disease and the Bartonella bacteria; which caused hallucinations whenever she ate carbohydrates, the presence of the paedophile grand-uncle who everybody tolerated because he is “not a bad man, just a sick one”¹⁸², and finally, the fact that coyotes were stalking the house and eating the family cats.

Many things captured me from this story: how every character seemed to have its idiosyncrasies in spite of it being a short tale, how it dealt with issues such as the paedophiliac grand-uncle in the same offhanded ways that family sometimes does, how the narrator constantly breaks the narrative flow to berate the addressee, a certain “K”, for being “a Russian Communist and a Jewish Person who doesn’t believe Jesus was the son of God”¹⁸³ and

¹⁸² Rebecca Curtis. “The Christmas Miracle,” in *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2013, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-christmas-miracle>>

¹⁸³ Rebecca Curtis. “The Christmas Miracle.”

yet the story does not suffer from these interruptions. More than anything, this tale made me truly think about the epistolary form. I knew before reading this that tales and novels could be written as letters, but this short story was the first to make me realise that the epistle is more than a form starting with “Dear...” and ending with “Yours truly,”. I realised that certain basic tenets still apply even if written as a letter: for instance, Curtis does include the kind of pleasantries that one might expect in a letter, but also announces from the beginning that the letter is not about pleasantries but about “the story of a miracle that happened at Christmas.” Moreover, she peppers the tale with hints of what this miracle is (“I’d also like to say— regarding the Christmas miracle—that it was my elder niece who instigated the Kamikaze Cat Training, not me”¹⁸⁴) even while addressing other sides of the story.

But perhaps more importantly, “The Christmas Miracle” made me realise that, when writing in the epistolary form, the writer is dealing with two figures that are not necessarily present in third-person narratives: an implied author (the letter writer) and an implied reader (the addressee). Knowing their personalities, as well as the relationship between the two, is indispensable to the writing, as it will dictate what they tell and not to each other, and how do they tell it.

So what kind of men (because, in the period where my story would be set, they had to be men) would my letter-writer and addressee be? Perhaps one could be more secluded than the other – which would explain the need for a long letter. I thought to make these two rather rational, religious but grounded by and interested in the scientific development of the era. This, too, would give the narrator a reason to write: to order his thoughts, and think through what he had seen, maybe to convince himself that there was indeed nothing mystical or supernatural going on in the abbey.

The Writing Process

I have redrafted this tale around three times: the first draft, as mentioned above, was in the voice of the abbess. There is not much of that draft to speak of, as I was mostly experimenting with the voice and the possibility of the story.

The second draft already belongs to the tale “proper”, in which a male narrator addresses another through a letter. To compare, it opens in this way:

¹⁸⁴ Rebecca Curtis. “The Christmas Miracle.”

To the Most Honourable,

In the order of things that make up this world, have you considered the Mountain and the Heart? The thought did not strike me of their similarities before, but when I was drafting my first letter to you from the monastery of the Immaculate Conception of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the mountain both at my feet and towering over my head. The sun on its early race blessed my face, but shadows crept across my mind. I had come to this place to dispel rumours from my heart, yet my days here had left me oppressed without knowing why.

Like the very first draft I made, this too opens with a very short meditation on the subjects of the story – the mountain and the heart. My plan for this draft was to have a dialogue-heavy tale, in which the main character (at this point unnamed, as I thought he'd remain) hears of the suicides and travels to investigate what is going on. He was motivated by curiosity, more than anything else, and the climax of the story would be a conversation between the abbess and the narrator about suicide as an expression of divine love, or as an ultimate sacrifice to reach Heaven.

However, the more I researched, the more I became disenchanted with this. Suicide is prohibited by the 6th Commandment, as it is generally regarded that "Thou shalt not murder" includes oneself. It is such an egregious sin that it immediately bars the soul from heaven, as it precludes the possibility of asking God for forgiveness. Suicide was once perceived, in fact, as the maximum expression of the capital sin of sloth. This is in the first list of deadly sins, compiled in the 4th Century by Evagrius of Pontus, was as follows, in descending order from worst to least offensive: Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, Sadness, Anger, Acedia, Vainglory, and Pride. This list is interesting not only because Pride, nowadays considered a much worse offense, is at the bottom while "eating too much" is at the top¹⁸⁵, but because of the two sins that are not to be found in the modern deadly sins: Sadness and Acedia. Pope Gregory eventually

¹⁸⁵ Of course, gluttony is very much related to greed or avarice: to *desire* more food than what you need, or even to enjoy food too much: similar to Lust, where one is allowed to have it as long as it's not too much and too good.

More interestingly, in her lecture of the topic Francine Prose suggests that gluttony was supposed to be read as "general bodily excess": eating too much, but also drinking too much, or taking any substance that altered your understanding. In other words, one sins of gluttony every Christmas, but also every time one has a glass too many of wine, smokes some marijuana, etc. Gluttony is also seen as a "getaway" sin to others: argues Prose, had Lot not gotten drunk in the first place, he would not have had sex with his daughters (or be raped by them). Thus the sin of Gluttony transforms into the sin of Lust, as well as committing the taboo of incest. (Francine Prose. *Gluttony*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

combined the two into modern-day “Sloth”, but then what today we would call depression would be considered a sin.

What both Acedia and Sadness revealed was a deep lack of love: love for oneself, and most importantly, love for God. If Pride/Vainglory stopped us from loving God because our self-love obstructed us, Acedia and Sadness meant we loved nothing. Both of these sins were crowned by suicide, the most extreme manifestation of the sin itself, as committing suicide is tantamount to abandoning all hope in God that He could and would make things better (Wassertstein, 27). To have my characters, deeply religious women commit suicide out of hopelessness would contradict their likely belief in God’s plan and wisdom, and by that point I began to feel that, even if I could find another reason for them to commit mass suicide, it would be too difficult to sustain. Suicide, in fact, seemed now too rebellious an action for women of the cloth to take, or at least for the particular nuns I wanted to write.

A new idea came by when browsing a popular science website. On December 5 they posted a short article about a heart-shaped urn found in the basement of the Convent of the Jacobins in Rennes, containing five embalmed human hearts. The organs, though marked by disease, were conserved so well that, upon examination with modern medical imaging, each chamber, valve, and arteries could still be made out. Of the five hearts found in the Convent, three presented a build-up of plaque around the arteries that suggested, as one of the archaeologists is quoted saying, that the original owner died of a heart-attack.¹⁸⁶

A heart attack! But also, hearts that had been taken from the bodies for burial! The article gave no reason why this had been carried out – was it for research? A *memento mori*, or a rather morbid family keepsake? Whatever the reason, the heart being removed after death struck me as something rather violent to do – and I was reminded that there were many cultures, all over my country, that did the exact same thing but without waiting for the body to be dead. Human sacrifice was commonplace in Latin American cultures, and though the Aztecs are perhaps the most famous for their obsession with the heart, they were not the only ones to hold the organ in such high regard.

¹⁸⁶ Megan Gannon. “400-Year-Old Embalmed Hearts Found Under French Convent.” *Live Science*. <<http://www.livescience.com/52985-embalmed-hearts-discovered-french-convent.html>> Accessed April 14, 2017.

What if, then, the nuns were not killing themselves but dying nonetheless, and word reaches the narrator that they are in fact killing *each other* and offering the hearts as an oblation or sacrifice to the devil?

By this point I had finally given names to both the main character and his addressee, and after researching the Franciscans Misiones that existed around the Sangre de Cristo mountains I made the narrator a vicar in one of the towns around Santa Fé, then part of the Mexican Republic, now in the state of New Mexico. I then started my third draft, like the others, with a short meditation on the Heart and the Mountain, though I added some extra information to describe these characters. The draft went on,

A man came to Socorro to say, hidden in the Mountain a full Day walk from the town of Chupadero, there is the Convent of the Franciscan Sisters of Christ on the Cross. [...] these sisters, the man said, had stopped their Charitable Duty, their Apostolic Onuses and the Christian Instruction they had always provided their communities. They had “holed up” in their Church, said this man, and let their gardens go to Ruins, let the sick languish and Die, and – far worse! The man spoke of twisted Deals and Heresy, that some of the Sisters too were dying, being sacrificed! by the remaining ones in acts of Sorcery. They were Killing each other, said the man! and removing the Beating Hearts from the bodies, and Offering them to the old Devils as savages once did in these Lands when the Lords our God was absent.

The character’s motivations are no longer plain curiosity, but instead worry about the state of his own order and the possible heresy discussed. Yet I still was not sure at this point whether I honestly wanted the nuns removing the hearts from their dead sisters’ bodies. Reading about the clogged arteries of the embalmed hearts, and once again remembering Olivier Debroise’s essay (*Haciéndola cardiac/Making it a Heart Attack*) I had settled that my nuns would be dying of heart attacks, and by this point I had decided that these attacks would be the conclusion of their devotion to the Sacred Heart. In their visions, these nuns would be aspiring to carry out the same exchange of hearts that Marguerite Mary Alacoque and others had done, but they would die because they believed that no human could hold Jesus Christ’s heart – and Jesus Christ’s larger-than-life love – and survive. The metaphysical exchange of hearts was making the organic heart burst, in other words. But to then have them cut their sisters open to remove and preserve the organs...

This rewrite coincided with reading *The Book of the Heart*, a study of the representation of the heart as law and writing by Eric Jager. Ostensibly, Jager says, our technology shapes the

way we think of our inner life. Nowadays we increasingly think of our minds as computers: we “replay” our memories, things appear in “slow motion”, we are sometimes in need of “rebooting”. But for very long the book was the go-to reference for personality: you would “turn over a new leaf”, or distrust things that are not “by the book”. Jager sustains that just as the textual self was represented first by the Neoplatonic soul and in modern days by the secular brain, for all of the middle ages and part of the Renaissance the self was thought to be located in the heart.¹⁸⁷

One of the ideas that I found most interesting, however, was his explanation of the “writing on the heart”, how the gospel or God’s Law was meant to be “written” in one’s heart. There is a very fine line between that and memorising, but it is also related to the distrust of writing, and the distrust of newer technologies¹⁸⁸ (Jager, 6). I thought back to my nuns, whether they would know how to read, how to write. It made sense they would not: they were most likely poor women, taken from the Pueblo communities that dotted the mountains when they were very young and taught only what was needed for their everyday worship. I wondered if they even knew about the human sacrifices carried out in the past, whether they would think to imitate them or even think something like that was possible. Once more, I thought no, they would not know to remove the living heart.

But I still wanted them, needed them to have something of an offering – something that confused the main character, perhaps, that shocked him enough to wonder if there was something there that perhaps was just beyond his understanding.

This is how I came up with the idea of having the nuns paint “their hearts.” Mexico is a highly illiterate country, where drawings sometimes are used instead of the alphabet to ensure full communication. Stations in the underground and public transport, for instance, are signalled with drawings representing the names, so the users know where they need to get off. They might not be able to read “Estación Emiliano Zapata”, but the stylized image of a moustachioed man with a big hat and bandoliers is clear.

The country also has a healthy tradition of surrealist painting. So, when I describe the paintings of the nuns’ heart –

I found myself Surrounded by paintings in the wildest colours and materials, over fifty there were resting round the walls, each and every one depicting a human Heart. Some

¹⁸⁷ Jager, Eric, *The Book of the Heart*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) pp. 4.

¹⁸⁸ Jager, Eric, *The Book of the Heart*. pp. 6.

were but crude drawings, some were anatomical in detail, some in Fights of fancy pictured the Heart as a collection of rooms with nuns like wisps moving from one room to another.

I had in mind the paintings of Leonora Carrington, or the dream-like erotica of Francisco Toledo. I thought painting would be how these illiterate, nearly uneducated women would offer up their hearts before their deaths. It would also allow me to touch, lightly, on how women construct and illustrate their inner selves. The idea to have the hearts painted on the wall instead of on canvas came, in fact, from a board meeting where my supervisors found it odd that the nuns would be buying canvas and paintings. I agreed: if these were women in the middle of a religious ecstasy, they would throw themselves into their work, painting with charcoal, ink, or scratching their testimony into the wall if there were no materials available. I hoped to make the moment of their discovery one of marred beauty, one that the reader could recognise and nevertheless share the narrator's distrust.

I consider the present state of *The Heart in the Mountain* an advanced draft: complete in many ways, but still open to change and evolution. It is one of my favourite tales in the collection, and I fully plan on enter it into competitions and submit it to short story magazines, but this means each submission has to be adapted. Right now the tale sits at around 5,900 words, just under the six thousand that many prizes and magazines have as limit – this of course means I have very limited space to work in, and that if I wanted to expand any aspect of the tale I would have to cut down on others. Whatever else comes from it, in a way I feel that this tale is one that bests reflects what I set out to do in my PhD: research the female body and how it is reflected in fairy tale or myth, and craft a new tale that could stand independent of the original inspiration.

Conclusion

Future Form

As I explained in the previous chapter, the project I had envisioned originally was, without any doubt, a feminist collection. Not only that, but a *strongly feminist* one. I wanted to write tales like Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, like Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*¹⁸⁹, or Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg"¹⁹⁰. I would not re-write fairy tales, like Carter, nor write fables like Namjoshi: my tales would be original creations; but the tone would be the same as the one that I could perceive in these writers.

It is obvious, I suppose, that the en result, the tales in this collection, do not exactly share that "strong feminist" tone and content that characterises Carter's or Namjoshi's tales, for instance. The reason can be traced to a strange disenchantment with modern feminism that I began to experience approximately two years into the project. The many fractures and quarrels in the movement, the public excoriation of any proponent who is deemed to have said or done anything that is not 100% in-line with the doctrine. It seemed to me that little had changed since the seventies, when visionaries such as Shulamith Firestone were expelled from the groups they had created, "thrashed" out of the movement over minor disagreements¹⁹¹. And thanks to the internet the thrashings have become truly public, and reach a far wider group of people. Even if I do disagree with the people who are often being given this "thrashing", the act itself seems unnecessarily violent, and serves only to widen what could be disagreements into rifts.

This doubts, and my general misgivings about feminism, can be felt in the shift from tales I wrote early in my research, like "Salt", "Myriam's Third Eye", or "Balance the Earth and Sky"; where women's bodies are in permanent conflict with the society that surrounds them: their bodies literally behave in ways that do not conform, and thus make every interaction into a battle. In later tales, meanwhile, the relation between body and society is less

¹⁸⁹ Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables* (London: Virago, 1994)

¹⁹⁰ Margaret Atwood, "Bluebeard's Egg," *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996)

¹⁹¹ Firestone was chastised for speaking for too long, which was considered too manly a behaviour. Marilyn Webb was expelled over her desire to study a postgraduate degree, which again was deemed too male. Carol Giardina was ousted from the group she had founded by "moon goddess worshippers." From Susan Faludi, "Death of a Revolutionary," *New Yorker Magazine* (April 15, 2013)

<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary>> (accessed 15 April 2017)

confrontational: in “Fiona McCool” or “The Night I Lost my Feet but Sort of Found Them” the body is in fact a tool that my characters use for their own advantage and personal growth.

Perhaps if I had chosen to present the tales in the order in which they were written this shift would have been more noticeable. Interestingly, when I look at these tales in that order, I realise that a chronologically ordered collection would open with “Balance the Earth and Sky”, a tale about finding how to live on after losing a lover and gaining a new companion, and close with “The Night I Lost my Feet” – a tale which is also about finding how to live on after losing a lover and gaining a new companion. These tales are very different, needless to say, and yet at their core they are about women at a shifting point in their life, realising that change is necessary and enacting it in order to carry on.

In fact, I suppose this can be said of most of my tales. Different as they might be in tone to the collections and authors I mentioned above, they are about women making decisions, realising that the world around them refuses to stay immobile even as they (perhaps) wish it did; and taking the decisions they need to take in order to re-situate themselves in that changed world. In this, at least, this collection is inherently feminist.

Furthermore, I would like to quote Merja Makinen, in *Feminist Review*, on feminist writing and its reception. The article in question, “Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’ and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality”, engages with a reader who is “situated in the early 1980’s (and beyond) informed by feminism and raising questions about the cultural constructions of femininity.¹⁹²” For Makinen, Carter’s book is not feminist only because of its themes, but mostly because of the reactions and discussions it sparks in readers informed by feminism – even in those who dislike the book but nevertheless engage with it.

This is what truly convinces me that my tales and my collection are feminist, in spite of my doubts regarding the movement and the distance I have begun to feel from it. I say this with no desire to be exclusionary, of course, but I do believe that if a reader with no knowledge of or sensibility towards feminism were to find my tales, she would not be particularly moved. Under such a reader, “Myriam’s Third Eye” might be a rather simple science-fiction tale of a very stubborn teen, and “The Head and the Winds” would seem a needlessly complicated gothic tale. Though I know that the tone I had originally envisioned for this collection changed over the years, the fact remains that throughout this project, through the research and the writing, the texts I engaged with were written by women, and were

¹⁹² Merja Makinen, “Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’ and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality,” *Feminist Review*, No. 42, *Feminist Fictions* (Autumn, 1992): 6

feminist texts. They shaped this collection into what it is, and myself into a more mature writer. It is with this background, I believe, that my collection might truly come alive. I can only hope that one day my tales – perhaps this entire collection – will take part in these same discussions that forged it to begin with.

– Gabriela Silva Rivero, April 2017

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Y Octavio, que es hermano a la vez menor y mayor, lo transformé en el hermano de Myriam en su historia. Perdón/gracias. La distancia, los océanos que cuatro años nos han separado, tal vez ha tenido un efecto contrario: creo que somos ahora más cercanos. Hablamos más. Para Myriam su hermano es irreconocible, in-conocible. Creo que nosotros ya no lo somos.

Hay más.

I know for a fact I would not, could not have completed this without Matthew. He entered my life as I started the PhD, and he is staying even after I put an end to it and leave it behind. He read my stories, fawned when appropriate, and found similitudes to Cormac McCarthy. On top of that, he cooked, cleaned, and brought me ice cream when I was going mad. I love him.

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