

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Wyrđ Magic: an exploration of personal grief through narrative

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD

in the University of Hull

by

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Dedication

For Mike, and my wonderful children Chloe, Alex and Beckie.

Thank you all so much for believing in me; *Wyrđ Magic* is dedicated to you.

Acknowledgments

I should like to thank the team of supervisors that supported me in my PhD journey: Professor Martin Goodman, for the great start you helped me make; Dr Kevin Corstorphine, for your excellent input; Dr Bethan Jones, for your positive feedback and support. Above all, Dr Sarah Jane Dickenson: you were the one who gave me the hard stare and said, 'You need to find your extraordinary.' It is thanks to you that I found it, at last.

Publications and conferences

Hope and despair: an examination of the integration of the environment in recent women's writing. *Nature Writing's Future Pasts: the Land Lines Conference*. University of Leeds, February 28-March 1 2019.

Re-enchanted forest: women's nature writing, hybrid and creative potential. *National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) Conference*. York, 8 November 2019.

The postfeminist witch-voice in the gothic wild. *Gothic Nature III: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic Symposium*. 30 October 2020.

Witch voice in the gothic wild. *The Future of Gothic Conference*. University of Macau, 26 February 2021.

The Gyrl's Tale (2021). *Exclamation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 5, July.

How can the writer use creativity to deal with the pain of grief? *Fiction in the Age of Globalization Conference*. Tübingen University, 22 July 2021.

Abstract

The thesis consists of the novel *Wyrđ Magic* and an exegesis. Together, they chart my creative and critical PhD journey where I explore the form of the novel as a mode through which to articulate my understanding of grief. My intent was to develop a narrative voice sufficiently extraordinary to articulate my complex model for grief. To do so, I engaged with three areas of critical theory as platforms of analysis: postmodernism, feminist theory and the Gothic.

Postmodernism and feminist theory were platforms of analysis I re-engaged with after a gap of many years; they were stepping stones which gave impetus to my writing in terms of freedom and empowerment. The Gothic was a more significant influence which gave me the freedom to break out and find the strident, extraordinary voice I was searching for. Further, the Gothic became the vehicle through which I could take emotional risks, exposing my vulnerability within the narrative, and so reach some understanding of my own grief. The thesis explores the way my exploration of the Gothic resulted in a reconnection with the past, a re-negotiation of relationships.

Part I of the thesis is the novel, *Wyrđ Magic*.

In Part II, I focus on the development of the narrative voice. In Chapter One I re-engage with postmodernism in pursuit of creative freedom. In Chapter Two I draw on feminist theory to support empowerment in the voice. The remaining chapters chart my deeper engagement with the Gothic as a new field of research: in Chapter Three I establish a Gothic sensibility. Chapter Four charts the development of the witch-figure into a complex character. In Chapter Five I turn the focus to *Wyrđ Magic* as a novel of self-haunting.

Part III is a discussion about the writing process.

To close, in the Epilogue I reflect upon the impact of the personal journey of the PhD and the potential, going forward, for further exploration of form.

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Part I: Wyrd Magic

Note on the text:

Wyrđ Magic contains oblique references to the following:

Enid Blyton's *Five on a Treasure Island*

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*

John Masefield's *Sea Fever*

E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children*

George Orwell's *1984*

Smokey Robinson & the Miracles' *Tears of a Clown*

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Stevie Smith's *Not Waving but Drowning*

Sting's *Fields of Barley*

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Alfred Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*

Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*

Direct quotations are placed in parentheses. Elsewhere, I have placed an asterisk next to each reference where it appears in the novel.

The air is sour, rank with decay
beast wind fingers at my face—

I'm out in it, I'm wetted, I'm soaked, I'm *for* you—I'll rain, for *you* I'll rip myself in shreds across the
sky, come pelting, shrieking in the wind I'm ancient modern I'll sing the very last hymn number

111

or is it

666?

Lawks who gives a fuck. Let us *play*!

Your narrator

Prologue

Turfed path leads through weather-worn gravestones to a corner. Bench, stone wall behind. Pressed dirt under your feet, wire fence, big red sign: KEEP OUT—all the niceties of holiday-land, no expense spared. Beyond the fence: metre or two of rough grass, then cliff edge, deep sea. Sit; take in the view below: concrete causeway, twinned lighthouses that watch over the hurling sea. Pleasure boat sailing out beyond the lighthouses into choppy white-horse waves, bunting in reds and yellows but look at it flapping—crude wind out there—it's the North Sea, after all. Hats on, hoods up, all you ladies and gents on board. Yes bit up and down, out there—mind you don't puke over the side.

High, up here. Yes big red sign: KEEP OUT: DANGEROUS CLIFFS look over: you'll see sheered rock, red sandstone layers slipping, sliding over the centuries in slow free-fall all the way to those oh-so-sharp rocks below. Hidden below the sea's glassy surface: cruel reef, ship wrecker of old, like spears those rocks are—rip the hull from under the ship's wheel before you can say shiver me timbers! Like incisors, they are—Grandma in the cottage, put the basket down my dear take off that red cloak but what big teeth you have, Granny! All the better to bite you with. Yes fairy tale rocks, but how cruel fairy tales can be: catch the wolf, chop him, burn him, scald his fur, bake his bones. Keen rocks, then. Like knives. Fall on them, you're gored. Pull your child away; keep hold of a handful of his jacket at the back, just to be sure. Terrible if he were to stumble.

Chain-link fence, not that high—enough though, to make sure you don't trip over and plummet to your sure and certain death. So you can peer over without losing your legs, without your belly disappearing. Without the world tilting into vertigo. The cliff is high; the rocks are sharp. Did I mention that?

What's this? Padlocks, hanging here and there, along the chain-link fence. No keys, though; these are here for the duration. How quickly their joints rust in this salt wind. Not their messages to loved ones, scrawled in permanent ink on their metal bellies: *Adrian and Julie (heart)*. *Val and Don kiss kiss*. *Dad, forever in our hearts*. *Grandpa we'll miss you (heart heart)*. Loss and grief mixed. So many love-locks to so many loves. *Always and forever*.

Small one, here, years of wind, salt scrub: *J and H*. Aw, sweet.

It's a curious little spot: bench, and bracing sea wind. The love-locks hang like small death's heads on their hardwire gibbet. On the horizon: sea, and yet more sea. Behind, hunchback ruin of the

abbey: Nosferatu on the stairs. Below, that glassed sea, green in sun but watch the shadow slide across it, see it turn black under cloud. So high up here. And those rocks down there: so sharp.

Why am I telling you this?

Leave all that stuff; there's distance yet. I'm in land, Barbara. I've seen th'intestinal innards of these hedges, peered through dark arterial branches to pulled skinwork of stubble-stretch beyond. How the soil clags at my bones! It's in my deeps. Yes I've felt this earth heave, call clicking beetles, sliding worms to work at its designs. Years, and then more years. Time gone on long since crouched my accuser over these girlish bones, him a-knocking, tap tap tap, pinning me beneath hard-earthed irons lest I up and away—to where? Laugh me, did he b'lieve me winged spirit? Was it not enough to see my wracked shell stripped of flesh, my tears scorched to air? Yes pricked ducked burned pinned but I'll call to you from beneath these clotted twigs or fly, crazied in the haunting wind yes *now* I'll fly, to you—I'll hang on your arm, haul you hedge-backed to your tale—

I see you, Barbara. I *narrate* you. Your story begins late spring, south-coast Cornwall, high-hedged lanes, grass-green nicey-bright, primrose and gorse. Yellow, pretty hedges these but inside: hearts of granite.

How shall we start? There was once a maid with golden curls. You're at the cliff path near Rinsey cove. Warm wind scarpers off the sea, crosses carpet grass to nudge at you, and there's your hair—look how it lifts. It billows, whips. It's in your mouth. On the headland: ruined engine house, emblem of mining history, tin and copper stripped from rock. The ruin is gauzed in sun: inferior mirage, shimmered heat. Below you, waves tip against rockstacks—smell the thrown salt. Yes yes, all very romantic. You feel the urge to paint? I guess you could recall this in watercolour, but you're not an artist. Harry should be able to capture this heady scene, but no: the seas he paints are built in oils, dark, monsterish, their tentacle waves stretching. They heave, slap like wet leather. I may shriek into wind, bent-backed: don't go to him! You will; you'll bring Harry your sea greens and sand yellows, Barbara. Mix them with blacks: the colour turns only to mud.

Today: at home, your mother will be watching a Sunday film, something black and white, a tear-jerker. You know how she likes to weep. Your dad will be tinkering in the garden. Let him: he isn't used to you all grown and independent. He needs to potter in his greenhouse, see his seeds, sown in their rows of terracotta pots, poke their first leaves towards light. And you: you walked to the coast; you came here for air.

Your graduation, some three weeks ago: lawks, your dad! Strait-jacketed in cufflinks and tie not worn since his early retirement (always dress as the professional you will be, Barbara). Your

mother smiling, hanging her handbag from Dad's arm, small joke for the camera. I saw you, Barbara—you were gowned, mortarboarded, tassel to the right, or was it the left? No matter. Floral dress but with black Doc Martens, ankle socks. You tied your shoes with red ribbons and your mother tutted when she saw them. You threw your mortarboards, you and your friend Claire, even though you weren't supposed to. Claire's shaved head, elegant curve of neck where it meets fine-shaped scalp; huge earrings. If only you'd been brave enough to have your own fair waves razored! Still: red ribbons in your shoes.

Soon after graduating, Claire caught a long-haul flight to teach in Cambodia. How d'you imagine it, Barbara? Hot wind and lightning side-streaking. Geckos—small khaki shapes against plaster coving—running mad; lime-green crickets zizzing, rasping. Sweet-warm smell of coconut milk and palm sugar boiling. Claire, flying to her wide future, and you: on the train home to Cornwall.

Look at you, mist-eyed and gazing at this sea's weak, green froth. You think you know Cornwall? In November gales, this same sea will slam the clocktower at Porthleven, rush the beach at Loe Bar—play at running under the towering waves if you dare, but at Loe Bar the sea will take you. It will stick its salted fingers in your ears, your mouth, stopper your scream, drag you across shingle, mash you in its guts to smithereens.

This soft-edged coast, this murmuring sea is but a fairy tale, Barbara: drive three miles inland from this pretty moment and here's something real: greyed main road terraced houses, their eyes blind-shut, constant stagger under gusts from passing lorries, vans, motor homes, caravans, motor bikes, four-wheel drives, lorries again. D'you notice the *divide*, Barbara, between the wearied, wasting spaces of Camborne, Redruth, and the bright millionaire piles at Rock, Padstow, St. Minver? I would shake you from your sunshine dream of Rinsey, make you trudge instead through insistent rain, among racked granite boulders that scar moorland near—yes Bodmin, perhaps. Empty minestack rises in cruel irony: *Phoenix United*. Dark, fierce in the sky, brick chimney marks the industrial surge of time; remains of railways track their granites towards quarry gouged out of hill. There is the burnt smell of bracken in mizzle. Heavy metals in the soil here; it grows nothing but fern. Only sheep—and I—tread in and out of this stone-framed ruin, wet-shaped.

But you, in early sunset at Rinsey: on the beach below, small from here, a man, walking. His hair, thrown by the wind. Hands in pockets, jacket pulled by the gusts into a sail. You know him, Barbara. It's Keith. You went to school together. He's where your story starts, too. Watch his figure, smaller, until the near end of the cove when he looks up, sees you, raises a hand, turns to walk back. You wave.

But fairy tale. I might remind you, Barbara, that Cornish men—with their piskie charm, green eyes, straw-fair hair—might be conjured also from myth. Not Poseidon, no trident, but weakling, unable to swim. Flap in the shallows, instead. Much later, you'll think about how the wrong of it started here, a want in your eye, on a cliff path standing, and a Cornish man, below, on the beach, walking.

Where does June's story start? In a north coast seaside town, ice creams, amusement arcades yes but chilly, so chilly living in the shadow of a coldblack sea. Different world, Barbara. A town filled with history—stories of doings to death and hauntings, of boiling, of whaling, of smuggling and sailing, of cellars and seafarers, skeletons rattling—things have happened, will happen, here! In this town there are yards, lanes: they lead away to dark ends. Doors, jumbled brickwork, blacks laced with red. Stone windowsills. Tar-dark they are, these sills, sticky to touch, like flypaper. Don't come here: they'll pull you fast against them, wings flat and legs wriggling.

Yes June's story started here, in a town with a whalebone arch and a hilltop ruin that broods darkly, still, and a family stuck in the Dark Ages, and June was pregnant.

Poor June, you make your own bed then get the *one* person who shouldn't go anywhere near it to lie in it and there you go. Actually, June was pretty surprised not to say horrified that her body had done this to her, after all this time. Too late to stop it, now: sore breasts just PMS she had imagined and a missed bleed well these things happen always been a bit irregular. In fact, when June thinks back, as she does now, sitting in the shop on the old Chesterfield sofa, she thinks how she hauled herself into womanhood because her mother never brought her up, never told her a thing in fact when June had her first bleed, which was at lunch time on a Saturday when she was thirteen, her mother strapped June into a belt thing with a sanitary pad attached and whispered while she did it that June had better go straight up to her room now because Mother was talking with Father about *things*. Pretty soon June realised that other girls at school used tampons or at least a pad you could stick in your pants without all that belt business. Mother, though: stuck in the Dark Ages.

In fact earlier than this, when she was eleven June asked Mother if she'd tell her the facts of life and Mother said June would find out soon enough and carried on washing the dishes which she insisted on doing because Mother thought that dishwashers took up too much room and used too much water. Washed all the plates and forks and knives Mother did without another word and that left June to find out about things like periods for herself by snooping in the bathroom but the only

thing that came to light was a bag of cotton wool balls which seemed appropriately mysterious and thrilling even, until Mother used one to cream her lipstick off. Life in your teens: all about hidden *things*.

June's father: as far back as she can remember, each weekday teatime she heard the tippy-tap of her father's heels as he came striding from the office, through the yard to the tiny porch crammed with carrier bags and shoes and wellies and raincoats and Father's spare umbrella because these were the things that Mother didn't want to see in the house. Pushed open the door, its wood swollen from damp salt air, squeezed it carefully shut so as not to shake the cracked window and called out, 'Home!'

Or maybe he didn't call out—at least, not every day. Perhaps there were times—not so much tippy-tap as tiptoe. Into the hallway—briefcase on the floor, shoes unlaced and placed out in the porch. Through to the small lounge, whisky decanter on top of the sideboard—quick finger of Bell's, first gulp—but the gloom of this room, Barbara! Allow me to paint the picture: there's June's father, suit, socks (grey) on the carpet (green, patterned), he with side parting, dark waves of hair pressed into the beginnings already of a comber. He lifts the whisky tumbler once, again, to his mouth—the square gentleman's ring on his finger glints golden—a gift from his parents at twenty-one. If truth be told, his family was rather well-to-do; he married beneath himself—daughter of a factory engineer, while *his* father: gentleman's hairdresser of some standing—none of that quick number one all over but brushes and sprays and finishing oils applied with a flourish yes, even here in the north! Don't be fooled by stories of coalmines and pit ponies and grubbing around for a few nuggets in the spoil tips, Barbara. There's money, always has been.

This small room: brown, tiled fireplace with tiled hearth (two cracked tiles); green leafy whorls patterned into the carpet; armchair (dog basket by the side of); sofa—new, their one investment—a Chesterfield, olive green. Sideboard, occasional table, various shades of brown. Bay window—view of the North Sea over rooftops from the top right corner of the window if you twitched the nets, stood on a chair. Curtains, beige. All tidied—or would be, if it weren't for the pile of newspapers in the corner; the magazine rack overflowing with tattered copies of *Woman's Weekly*; knitting patterns; *Kay's* catalogue. The sewing box pushed under the sideboard; fabric scraps hang from its lid like lolling tongues. Yesterday's teacup, the day before's. On the hearth: plate with biscuit crumbs. Crumbs on the carpet. Dog hairs. Take another swig, Father, deep breath, before you head towards the kitchen to greet your wife, children, dog.

Yes June's father: years of tippy-tapping home in her memory. Shoes in porch, quick swig of Bell's—then (and June was a young woman by now) he was ill: tomatoes didn't agree with him, he said, too much acid he said, stress, he began to say, didn't want the pressure of a job in sales any more, he said later, though he coped pretty well with his secretary and Mother had a few words to say about *that*—then he threw the job in and bought the shop, right in the centre, other side of the bridge, Church Street, no less. And what did Mother think then? No more tip-tapping home in his smart brogues to kiss her on the lips smudge her lipstick make her smile.

There was June, grown woman and Father all poorly and too soon crow-stooped, stick-bound, comma curled into his armchair, reading glasses, *Mail on Sunday*, jar of peanuts on the hearth which he *insisted* on crunching down even after the oesophageal stent was fitted.

'Soft food only they said, Dad!' June said but all he could say back was don't go on and off she troddled to fix up his Weetabix mashed in cream, sogged in sugar for the few more calories. Yes there was June, young woman should have a life of her own but Mother at the hairdressers for respite and Father grolching in the upstairs bathroom bringing back Weetabix leaving brown wheaty bits round the sink for June to clean after he'd half-swilled it out. There was a younger brother too, also grown yes grown to a man should have been managing the shop but gone out, all left to his older sister to manage.

Not a great start, is it.

Today June sits in the gloom of the shop, on the sagging Chesterfield, among the hanging jackets, the shut-eyed phrenology heads, the shelves in the display cabinets with their silver and jet spiders' web brooches and the tailor's dummy still draped in *that* dress. She's remembering the last Christmas with Father—his pump for his chemicals which hung from his belt flooding his liver and the rest of him with toxins, his face yellow as the buttered turkey before it went in the oven, his trousers flapping at his thinstick ankles like flags in wind. There was Mother: do put a glass of sparkly in your father's hand, June and his paper hat is slipping that's better now we're festive! Real trooper June's mother was. Didn't mind telling June across the turkey breast and roast potatoes that she, Mother, had exchanged letters here and there with an old school friend. Perhaps the school friend could come to stay? June nearly choked on a potato: friends never came to stay. In fact June's childhood friends never even called round to play, because, as one of them, Lindsey—who wasn't much of a friend after all—eventually told June: June's family was just weird.

'Your old school friend,' said June. 'What's she called?'

'Roger,' said Mother. 'Stuffing, anyone?'

As things went, shortly after that Christmas June's father was admitted to a hospice for three days to give Mother more rest and respite. In two days Father was gone. June remembers holding his hand as the spaces between his breaths grew longer. When she was little, she had run to meet him, had pulled on his hand as he tip-tapped his way through the yard and into the porch. His hand, unchanged by the years. The tick of his watch through those last moments of his dying. His frown of pain now faded. His face still pink, still full, because if there's one thing hospitals know it's how to hydrate the dying.

'Is that it?' said Mother, and June wasn't sure at first, then knew, because there were no more breaths.

An obscenely short time afterwards, in June's view, and mine to be fair, Roger came to stay. Added his coat to the hooks in the porch, his shoes to the pile and, June is pretty sure, his member to Mother's club, you could say, if you spoke in euphemisms, the only way to describe what was certainly indescribable. On the Chesterfield in the shop, June shifts position, tucks her legs under. Her arm feels heavy, as if a head has rested there, left its impression. How perfectly another, small hand would fit itself still into the cup of her own. She examines her palm, looking for children's lines—as if this would change things. Her hand is warm—but pins and needles; she shakes her arm to shift them. That night, Mother and Roger retired early to bed. Mother's face was filled with blushes the next morning—clearly she'd been fucking with the horny git and then, would you believe, not many weeks later she went off on a cruise with him. Yes that's what *she* did, while June was left to manage the shop with her can't-be-arsed brother.

June picks at the stitching on one arm of the Chesterfield; the thread is old, and comes undone. Underneath the faded green velvet folds there are a series of tacks, hammered in hard.

Your love SCENE 1, Barbara: stage set suggestive of BEACH. Down from cliff path to wander between rocks. You dangle your sock-stuffed trainers from one hand; yellow sand is warm between your toes.

He comes, backlit by golden sunset. Something of the Poseidon about him, after all: he walks from the ocean, glittered, weed-caped, the water falling bright. Such sea-green eyes; the breeze-blown hair—fair, like yours. There's no Olympian beard, and you heard that he's gone into banking. Still. This is Keith. And he speaks!

KEITH: Alright Barbara? I heard you graduated. Congratulations!

YOU: Thank you! I don't have a job yet.

KEITH: Oh you, you'll find one—someone as talented as you.

YOU: I'm sure something will—

KEITH: It will. Or in the end.

YOU: It's the waiting.

KEITH: To be a qualified teacher. That's good. Is it good?

YOU: Yes! Except for the waiting.

KEITH: Did the graduation go well?

YOU: It was a long day.

KEITH: Did you throw your hats? Is that what they do?

YOU: Our mortarboards flew through air like gloss-winged crows! But it's nice to come home, see the beach once more. And you; it's nice to see you.

Paired, you sand-mooch to the edge of the beach. Barefoot still, you follow the path uphill to the small car park. He drives you to the pub at Praa Sands and pays for wine. You drift to the beach there, leave the families with their bawling kids, the deckchair messes while fifty yards away your opening scene plays to the quiet. You sit in the red sun, the rocks' shadowing, and soon, in his touches you feel yourself come undone. Sand gets in the damp creases behind your knees, between your breasts, your buttocks, as you roil in the grit, with Keith.

I see you, Barbara, as you walk with him across darkening yard to his home. There's wet between your legs. His father is a car mechanic, he tells you. Was a farmer, before. The farmhouse, splendid in reaching fields, but his father spends his days prostrate on the garage floor tinkering at exhausts, big ends: he has a wooden trolley that he lays on. Wheels himself under, out again, on the concrete.

You meet Keith's father, Stuart, at the door and he is a thin man. Blue overalls. Thin, and hair in thin strands.

His mother, Iris, in the kitchen. Linoleum tiles, grimed from years of garage-greased boots and the dog coming off the field—an Alsatian called Chief and he stinks, blackly. Iris is cooking. The door to the warming oven of a sooted Rayburn is ajar, and a Jack-Russell terrier is curled inside. You worry that someone will shut the door and overheat the poor thing.

Iris is round-faced, bellied. Her hair curls into rounds. You note the wave of his mother's hair in Keith. The fair must be his father. The green eyes his mother; she'll have been beautiful, once (*long time ago, Barbara*). Keith has his mother's beauty in him and oh it was more than just physical, on the beach. It must be love, because here's you, seated thigh-to-thigh with Keith at a scrub-top table, senseless to mixed stink of dog and slow-cooked lamb. The Alsatian is wedged against your leg, tongue-hanging after crumbs while Iris butters bread, cradling the loaf against her breast. On the sawn top of the loaf she slaps butter then hacks a slice and lets it drop to the plate. The Rayburn chucks out heat: the Jack-Russell's head hangs out of the oven and the butter is grease but it's all charming isn't it Barbara and the dogs are both so sweet, you say.

Conversation from Iris is mostly in commands: get away, Chief. Get that dog out of the way, Stuart. Finish up those potatoes or they'll waste.

STUART: You're going into teaching then?

YOU: I hope so. How's the garage business?

STUART: Fine, fine.

Keith's father spends the rest of the meal forking potato and meat into his mouth in silence. He has dentures; it was a straight bright white smile he gave you when you met. His mouth makes a soft chopping sound. Is the set of teeth perhaps a little loose? You reset your own mouth to a polite smile, clear your plate. You've had two glasses of warm Chardonnay, two greasy cooked-to-mush potatoes and a pile of dried up lamb but it was charming, sweet, lovely meal, you say.

A moment when the kitchen is empty. Just the Alsatian, which has lumped itself across your feet.

KEITH: I don't want—this. (*gestures to kitchen*)

YOU: What?

KEITH: Swarfega, Dad's piles from rolling around on cold concrete garage floors.

YOU: Must be painful.

KEITH: I've seen him come out of the bathroom and he can hardly walk.

YOU: Poor thing.

KEITH: (*taking your hands in his*) You understand how difficult it is for me here, at home, still.

YOU: I meant—

KEITH: I'll carve a different pathway. You'll see.

Afterwards, you hand-hold through lanes towards your village. You're sunk: between high hedges you tread slow, underwater steps. Dark tarmac streams. Light seems held at dusk. Moths, midges that itch your scalp—a maybug, heavy drone, passes.

KEITH: Where did you come from?

YOU: I just moved home from uni.

KEITH: No, I mean. You appeared on the beach—bit of magic. From nowhere.

YOU: From the clifftop! (*you dance away, whirl a bit*. It's the wine, Barbara) And you! You walked from the sea. From sanded landscapes. (*wine, still, and poetic with it*)

KEITH: Not *from* the sea. I didn't go *in* the sea.

YOU: I meant it figuratively.

Pause

KEITH: (*grabbing at your hand*) You can know someone, from a distance, for years—

YOU: Yet not know them at all. Am I 'substance or shadow'?

KEITH: Dunno.

YOU: Magic—like Jane Eyre, Mr Rochester, in the gardens at twilight.

KEITH: Jane Eyre.

YOU: You've read it?

KEITH: No.

YOU: Mad woman in the attic, flight across moors, the heroine rescued, finally—by love.

Does it bother you, Barbara, that the reference hasn't registered? I could have you explain more, but you've reached the first houses.

They burned June's father to kill the cancer. Nice little service at Woodlands Crematorium near Scarborough—watch the coffin slide, curtains close, appropriate music to accompany. Then they went home to drink sherry and Roger turned up to raise a glass, fetched his own from the sideboard, in fact. While Mother quaffed her Harvey's Bristol Cream and wept a little, and June offered the last of the fairy cakes and Roger took one and flirted with Mother in front of June and her younger

brother pissed off to walk down to the harbour, yes took his black mood off to watch the black sea rising, Father's bones were raked from oven to pan to cremulator, ground to dust. Such a system you should see, Barbara: ticketed remains, buckets filled with hip joints. Regular churn of life to death, all the bits between—here's a word of advice for when it comes to it: don't invest in a posh coffin—it'll be ash within half an hour of the service, unless there's a queue: some burns—the larger of people, shall we say—take longer. Waste of your money. Better in a cardboard case, though that won't cope with the leakage. Oh yes, there's leakage; the body *turns*, once switched off. It bloats, it sinks, things moulder, slip, merge—

but to burn! Oh Barbara, such unspeakable pain. Blood simmers to the boil, fat runs from flesh to fuel the pyre. One hand curls; fingers stretch; skin peels, flares.

Hold your fingers above a flame, if you can. Now dream of this, a million times more—then more, still and you'll come closer—and there's Cranmer, thinking to stuff his right hand into the flames before all else and die without a scream? I think not. He sobbed and squealed like all tied at the stake; believe me.

Better to bury than burn, you might say. In soil a thousand, thousand creatures to dismantle: from rats which pull at bruise-dead flesh, to woodlice working in the damp and in between, the threads of worms and legs of ants and centipedes. Until the body is but bone, laid out in awful expression of its end.

Peer below the soiled tops and here—and here—our remnant selves lie. Bones *last*, and in the end, surfaced, they tell. Look there: I see her, another. A woman in her dying, her passing long before the time of my own. There's the skull laid sideways, jaws wide in everlasting cry. How did she die? Look closer—how many centuries has she nurtured that small nest of bones within her own bone cradle? In what pain did she go to her end, babe undelivered, body stoppered with the flesh of her own infant? Yes our bones remain. We're ancients: we hold our stories close through deepest time—

watch me twist grind claw and render stones, out, I'll *out* from this keeping earth, dig out our cruel accounts, spread them through the vasts, from times of mine to yours—

my mood's turned dark, Barbara. I hide in earth, in timeless, private light; I thicken into dusk. Yes I'm dark in the darkening. I'm hedged; in quiet gloom I gaze through these branches at soaring sky.

These spaces are my own—windless lightless sightless. Cloud is a blank stretch, hand across dimmed sky. The earth cools. I sit, unmoving in leafmould, in the blacks of my canopies. Unspeakable—my dress, too soon hemmed in bright fire! The creature instinct is to flee from such crackle and blisterful heat, but there is no running in legs kept fast by chains about them. The body twists, strains, that is all. Shriek, my curse a chill to the marrow.

Last of the light, gone. Now the night comes in thick dread, cat scream, quiet, shuddered breath. Stare out the trees' black gaunts. What's left? My raw skin-sting. My stiff throat, dry. My smell of fox piss, my drysour stink. I slink to crouch then curl, wetlick my own arse.

My eyes bubble, run into this my hallowed ground. My heartbeat, stilled. But I will bleed, my skin will peel arterial throb vein network revealed: my innards out pain.

Here's you, Barbara, with Keith, halfway through a bottle of cheap Merlot one early evening at the scrub-top table, SCENE 2 in the FARMHOUSE KITCHEN. It's sallow in here, gloomy. All those Rayburned lamb, chicken dinners: grease from countless spattered pans, the smell cooked into the walls. Iris is outside feeding the dogs and as for Stuart: garage floor, under a car, lying on the little wooden trolley he uses to wheel himself under. Even with trolley, the cold concrete floor plays havoc—but he's making a living, Keith tells you. Even so: three tubes of Anusol in the bathroom cabinet. You couldn't help opening it for a peek when you went to pee. Still charmed by it all?

YOU: It's not just about physical attraction, though, is it?

KEITH: 'Course not. *(takes a slug of wine)*

YOU: A meeting of minds, hearts desires. That's what makes it love.

KEITH: I lust you.

YOU: Keith! *(you slap his thigh. His hand finds yours, holds on. That's the second time. He does like to hold hands)*

KEITH: Only joking. Right. But you can't just exist on love. You need to earn, in this world. Finance. That's where the money is.

YOU: I thought you'd be something artistic.

KEITH: Oh art, but there's not a lot of money in all that stuff. You can't live on paint.

YOU: Or bread, alone.

KEITH: Bread?

YOU: You know—the saying.

KEITH: Bread means money, in my world. *(releases your hand, drinks the last of his wine)*

YOU: It's from the Bible.

Once, probably just the once. June's mother, blushing the next morning. Double cabin on the cruise ship? June didn't like to ask. Then: if it wasn't enough having to deal with Father's last gasp, wouldn't you know it, not more than six months since his passing when Mother said to June, 'I think I've got a stomach bug.'

Poor June. All that grolching and retching from Father, then all too soon Mother's upset stomach and rush to get to the loo and not quite getting there in time. Skid marks in amongst the green leafy whorls for June to get the rubber gloves on, fetch the Dettol, scrub at because Mother was upstairs still emptying bits of herself out on the loo. Nothing quite like the stench of someone else's diarrhoea, even if that someone is your own mother, is there June?

Left to scrub shit-squits from the carpet, June was, and it's just possible that during those moments of scrubbing it crossed her mind to wonder at the way Mother had changed from the mother June remembered from her childhood with lipstick, perfume and very brown hair—June has a childhood memory of Mother in a white fur coat, back from an evening out with Father, bit tipsy and falling on the sofa—*this* sofa, in fact—with her white fur coat on and laughing, just laughing for nothing which was unusual and has probably stuck in June's mind because by this stage in their marriage Mother and Father didn't laugh much. Yes changed, from the mother of June's childhood, who'd danced around the kitchen while baking cakes, who'd allowed young June to lick cake mix from the wooden spoon, scrape the last of it from the sides of the mixing bowl, to this sudden folded fussybudget who lived in these baggy affairs that she liked to call her *leisure trousers* and who, in June's opinion (and mine, being honest), needed a nappy or Tena pads or whatever they were called to keep her insides where they belonged: *in her* and not streaked on the carpet.

There was June—her father gone on with cancer and Mother diagnosed with pancreatic cancer herself and all too soon whipped into Scarborough General. In fact, June was mightily relieved: no more spills to make her gag, bring her breakfast right up into her throat. When June went to see Mother for the last time, Mother was yellowed—again! Like Father, like Mother!—from jaundice because her liver had lately packed up. By now, Mother was fading and said odd things like, 'Aren't the nurses wonderful?' when from where June was looking it was obvious the nurses were leaving Mother to get on with her own last gasp and waiting for her to free up the bed. Still, June nodded and left grapes and a copy of *Good Housekeeping* and said she'd call the next day, only

Mother got in there first and shuffled off all of a sudden with only the wonderful nurses to hold her hand.

June, orphaned and younger brother useless on house clearance, just painting his grief into black seascapes and working in the shop and leaving June to sort through and chuck out all the things of their childhood, put the house on the market. Adulthood: still *things* to deal with. There was June though, Mother and Father's house sold (quick sale in spite of the state of the porch)—bought herself a tiny cottage tucked into one of the yards, and Little Brother in a one-bedroom first floor flat near enough so he could cycle to the shop.

Ah, puppets. D'you feel the strings, feel me pulling? Catch yourself dancing, tippy-toe here, heel-toe there? And you, Keith; yes dance, dance her into the sack if you will but when the time's right—

far from your southern lovers' shore, Barbara, in deadened air I tread these hills while I wait for your stories to catch, as a spider judders in its web. I feel the deep innards of trees gristle their warning: hold your child to you, June. The earth will turn, and turn, and eventually she will come like warm wind from the south, her own child with her, and what will Harry, with all his black-oil seas and his bitter easterly gusts make of her?

As for you, Barbara, with your maybugs and moths all flitty things in the lanes and love in the stinking kitchen. Fill your pockets with bricks. Virginia Woolf, wading; Lady of Shalott floating by in your own broad stream*. Drowning, not waving*.

It darkens; it darkens. I've walked these paths so many times; centuries long I've paced my animal spoor into chalkstone. Gorse runs these hills like picked scabs, paled grass as pus from a wound. Yes the murk grows, turns trees to twisted sticks. Their branches are snapped fingers. Soon I'll up: the moon will easyride, rump ink-dipped, two-thirds polished white, its greys pock-marked, stippled. Cloud, moon-ghosted, will seep in thin, pulled stretches. The sky will hang, black. The coming darkness will cocoon me. Next car that comes, I'll squat, bare my arse in its headlights.

I've a spiced tale to tell you, beyond my own, Barbara. Such widdershins things I have to share—not least, a family stuck in the Dark Ages.

First, then: a fairy tale.

The Tale of Husband and Wife

Once upon a time there was a wife and a husband who lived in a small harbour-guarded town on the northeast coast. Beyond the embrace of the harbour walls, high seas ran coal-black in vicious wind, but the wife and husband cared nought for the weather. They lived in a small house which was cosy enough and well tended, for although the door was swollen with salt-damp and the window cracked, the wife took care to place all such nuisances as muddied boots and rain-damped coats in the porch where they could not offend.

Husband worked in sales in an office somewhere and came tip-tapping home in his shiny shoes all the way across the yard every teatime. Each day he tippy-tapped home, his darling wife would be waiting and together they'd feast on sandwiches made with Chopped Ham and Pork, or Heinz Sandwich Spread, with fresh tomatoes which his wife sliced with loving care.

Each night—or most nights—or once each week at least—Husband and his loving bride would have an early night especially so they could—or he could—and his loving wife made no protest because she thought she loved him and that's what she was taught by *her* mother the marital bed was for, because this was a family that was caught up still in the Dark Ages.

'How was it for you, darling?' Husband asked each time.

'It was lovely darling,' said his wife, who wondered why, if the historical romances she often read suggested that true love meant a mutual orgasm, it wasn't *quite* happening for her. Several times she suggested to Husband that he rub her clitoris up and down, or even round and round, but

not side to side like that and not *quite* so hard—but she found it difficult to say such things out loud, and Husband, although he listened to his wife's hesitant attempts to talk dirty (or in fact just tell him what she would really enjoy), found it was much easier to slide his cock in and get going, and anyway she made the most encouraging noises so he knew it was all fine.

And it was! Because as a miracle, some months later, as the sun dipped towards the equinox and the leaves turned burnished gold and the first traces of autumn laced the air, the wife found that she was expecting a child.

'How lovely this child will be!' she cried. 'An angel, we will have made!'—and Husband agreed.

Months passed; trees were stripped bare by harsh seawinds; frosts turned air crystal sharp; snow fell white on a darkened world. But the young wife cared not, for all the time her belly stretched and stretched and stretched until, by the time the next summer's sweeter breezes came, she was swollen with full-formed babe and knew her time had come.

Husband knew it, too. 'Pack a bag, darling,' he said. 'It's time we took you to Scarborough General.'

The very next day, the wife gave birth to a little girl.

'How gorgeous she is!' she cried. 'What soft, dark hair! What tiny rosebud lips! What pale eyes!'

'She's everything you wanted,' agreed Husband, 'and more.'

'My mind's made up. She is a summer babe,' said his wife, 'so I will call her June.'

'June she is,' said Husband, who knew by this time in their marriage when not to argue.

'And we,' said his wife, 'shall be the happiest Mother and Father on this earth!'

But after every summer comes another winter.

Soon, being freshly aroused by the sight of her swollen breasts, her fuller figure, Father wanted to recommence his weekly delvings into his good lady. And she, happy mother of contented babe, consented. Soon, despite his being very, very careful—despite Father's efforts to withdraw before he lost himself to spilling his sperm—Mother found—Oh shock! Oh horror!—that she was with-child *again*.

'How can this be?' she cried and wept real tears into her morning coffee. 'It's too soon! I'm not ready! What will the neighbours think of us, of *me*, coming to the rut so quickly after my first born!'

'It's just nature,' said Father.

'It makes me a *harlot!*' said Mother.

'We'll be a happy family, just you see,' said Father kindly.

'It's all your fault!' shouted Mother—and dashed her coffee cup to the floor.

In the fullness of time the child was born: a boy. How different was this babe! Where baby June's hair was soft, a calm and silken sea, the new-born's curls grew harsh and wiry: rough waves tossed in a gale. Where June's eyes were pale as a spring dawn, the new child's eyes were dark: two small storms that seemed to Mother not to gaze with love as her first-born had, but to glare with anger at an unfair world coming his way.

'He's nothing like me,' wailed Mother. 'He has nothing of my looks.'

'I think his nose is a bit like mine,' said Father.

'I think there's been a mistake, said Mother. 'I think—that he was swopped. I think—this is the wrong child!'

'Don't be silly,' said Father.

But some things, which should never have been thought, remain to poison the mind, turn love's light to brooding dark.

All fairy tales should come to happy ever after, or the world's not right. Good must be sorted from evil, giant slain, wicked stepmother blown to dust. But in the world of real, it's not quite so straightforward as that.

As the years passed, and June grew from babe to child, then from child to young woman, Mother saw her firstborn as little angel, and June's not-much-younger brother as the Devil's spawn.

Mother lived out many years of her life wondering, always wondering. When her son misbehaved, he wasn't her child. Somewhere out there in the land of fairy tale, there lived, she said, a young and graceful nobleman who was *really* her own. This young misfit that had bawled in her arms—her so-called son; when he grew up to be a troubled young man, always doing battle with

the world, always caught up in a storm, a rage of his own making, she knew over and over that her true child had been lost to her, somewhere, somehow.

When, many years later—herself turned crone by now—Mother disembarked (with a true and loyal friend called Roger) from a *Hidden Baltic Treasures* cruise ship onto the docks at Hull, she took matters into her own hands and, Father departed from this world and no longer able to argue, arranged for a blood test to see if her son was truly hers—or belonged to some other mother, somewhere else.

Who knows the result?

*

Understand this, Barbara: not all was flawed. Mother raised her firstborn well because there was June, starting school for the first time and she waved goodbye happily to Mother, who dabbed at a tear in her eye as her young child—such precious angel—was handed over for formal education.

In school, June was a child who sat quietly, put her hand up to answer the teacher, played nicely in the playground swinging from the bars one leg over and if you slipped off—nice soft landings they have these days. Not like in Mother's younger days when tarmac was rock-hard underneath those bars let go with your hands if you dare. Skin your knees. Or your elbows. Land on your head.

Other sorts of accidents, though: common in the classroom, like Linda who on the very first day of school sat next to June and June saw the puddle spreading and put her hand up like the well-behaved child she was to say Miss! She's tinkling on the floor! Linda went very, very red and there were tears.

Mother's word, of course: *tinkling*. Or spending a penny. Nothing so crude as piddling, or peeing, or pissing, in Mother's world. Or shatting in your pants, which is what June did the following week and had to wear school's spare navy-blue big knickers until Mother could come and collect her. Poor Mother: a life spent surrounded by body fluids, from her little girl's poo to her younger son's sick, which had shown up all too recently when he hurled on fish pie. She would never be able to look at mashed potato and haddock in quite the same way. Then there were her own monthlies, not to mention the awful business of childbirth and leaky nipples. And talking of leaking, these days she disliked the way that Father's penis became sticky-tipped whenever he cuddled her

in bed. This was nothing: later, years later, when Father became terminally ill, the workings of his body would become only too obvious in his daily retchings and his constipation, latter of which would only be relieved by a visit from the district nurse under whose latex-gloved administrations his stone-hard stool would be manually extracted. Mother retreated to the bedroom but she cringed at his yell of pain from the bathroom even so.

June's little brother, though: quite the opposite. First half-day at school and he hung on the school railings, wailed and wouldn't let go until Mother prised his fingers from them and marched him inside for his first afternoon in the classroom because for heaven's sake, she had shopping to do and it was the first day when she could walk into town without this child hanging off her and she quite fancied treating herself to a rum baba at the Abbey Steps café. With a pot of tea so June's little brother was going into school whether he liked it or not. Yes Barbara, she prised his fingers from the grey metal railings and dragged him into the doorway and into the care of Miss Briggs. Mother approved of Miss Briggs: solid, white-haired, stern of eye.

'Come along now. Mummy will come to collect you later,' said Miss Briggs. And Mummy was off like a fucking rocket.

Let me conjure her for you, Barbara; see her as she walks. Others may wander the streets in jeans and trainers, but Mother is in floral dress, buttoned cardigan. Beneath, tights pulled up to her armpits. She carries a navy blue handbag, a telescopic umbrella to match, in case of showers. Each step she takes is placed precisely so as to avoid risking kitten heels in pavement cracks. On the swing bridge that joins the two halves of the town by crossing the River Esk, the wind comes off the sea; it messes her brown curls—maybe she should wear a headscarf, like the Queen. On the other side, there are several cobbled streets which she wishes she could avoid in her heels, though it's worth a stumble or two along Sandgate to reach the café at the foot of the steps leading to the ruined abbey, which she favours. In the Abbey Steps Café, the pinks and greens of Mother's floral dress, her knitted cardigan, blend nicely with the owner's taste for all things pink and knitted.

Today, the first day of her son's schooling, she sipped tea, and squashed her fork into her rum baba, and looked out of the window at the steps. The view from her seat was limited to the legs and shoes of those starting out to climb the one-hundred-and-ninety-nine steps to the abbey. Good luck to them; she didn't fancy such hard work and sweatiness. Such a nuisance that Doctor Lawson said the small cyst beneath her right armpit that she had removed recently might have been caused by shaving then using deodorant (Dark Ages, Barbara). He should retire, really but just as

well he was still working since he was happy to continue prescribing Valium without too much asking. Difficult to exert oneself when just a bit of house cleaning can lead to tacky armpits. Perhaps it would be best to give up shaving. And gardening—clipping all those roses back; such hard work. But to wear a sleeveless dress—or a swimsuit, come to that, with hair-fuzzed armpits—not that the swimsuit need come out till next summer. Queen Elizabeth: beautiful pink rose and lovely smell, not that many thorns but when one of them caught you—let the children's father tackle them. Perhaps there would be time to collect the prescription before fetching the children—

and here, Barbara, her thoughts turned to June (bless, those plaits look so pretty on her, wonder how her reading is coming along, maybe up to next level soon, will devote time tonight hearing her read) and her little brother (when *will* he get to grips with shoe laces). She checked her watch, drained her cup, stood and gathered her things.

Little brother progressed to full days and each school morning was the same: wailing by the time they reached the railings. Goes without saying that June, who each morning lined up like a good girl with all the other children, sometimes cried for her little brother's distress and was allowed to sit and read a book in the reading corner until she felt better. At playtime, June found Little Brother in the playground and gave him a cuddle and he held her hand and it was better, it's fair to say, for them both. Because being honest, June hadn't made that many friends at school, or any in fact because Linda, who had piddled on the floor of the classroom and who had turned so red with embarrassment, didn't speak to June and in those early days when June asked Mother if she could have a friend round to play after school, Mother said she was too busy and maybe another time. It was always another time until June didn't ask because she knew the other girls thought her home was probably a bit weird. Possible they were right. Very knowing, kids are.

There's June and her little brother, at the park, after school. It's sunny, and there are swings, a slide, a see-saw and a roundabout. Kids are queueing up the steps to the slide, girls are on the swings kicking high, leaning back, long hair flying. Mother, sitting on the wooden bench, wears sunglasses. Her legs are crossed. She's fetched the latest *Woman's Weekly* from her bag; they're allowed exactly fifteen minutes. Almost time to go home for tea.

June climbed the steps to the slide, waved from the top and saw Mother's red lipsticked lips break into a smile. June took off her blue school jumper and sat with it bundled under her bottom, hurtled down the steep metal curve and managed to come off the straight bit at the end to stand

without losing her balance. After that the roundabout was free, and her little brother was already there, one foot on the wooden step, trying to push it round with the other. It moved a few feet, slowed to a stop. June ran to her mother, left her jumper with her, back to the roundabout. Brother plonked his bottom down to sit.

'Hold on tight, I'll push you,' said June. Slowly at first, hands gripping the metal bar, one foot on the ground pushing, building speed, the other firmly on the wooden step. Round and round, easy to jump off and back on until it picked up speed—June jumped to the tarmac, running, but Little Brother was pinned, clutching the metal bar, still on the spinning roundabout. He began to wail.

Mother looked across. 'Come along, you can do it. Just a little jump for a big boy.'

The wailing increased: 'Mummy!'

'Just jump. Time to go.'

More wailing. The roundabout began to slow, Little Brother brought himself to standing, but it seemed he daren't let go of the bar. 'Mummy!'

'Jump, or you'll have to catch up.' She stood, folded her magazine. 'June, your jumper.' She took June's hand in hers.

She walked away, Barbara. Lucky it is that another mother, passing, took Little Brother's hand and helped him from the roundabout. What did June do? Did she pull away, wanting to return to rescue her brother, or did she walk obediently next to Mother, not look back? Was it blistered in Little Brother's memory, the metal bar hot under his hand, iron smell in his palms as he trailed, sniffing?

Another day: June, at home, in vest and knickers, putting on her uniform for Brownies. In the basket by the armchair where Father, years later, would spoon mushed Weetabix from a bowl: the family dog, a spaniel.

The uniform didn't go well with June's pale eyes—dogshit brown it was—and the culottes were about as stylish as a sack of potatoes. Still, she liked the badges and Mother said she would get around to sewing a couple of them on June's sash, soon. Patience, June. She'd already earned her House Orderly badge—equipped for life to use a dustpan and brush. June didn't like Brownies, to be honest, but Mother said it was good for her: learn to be a good girl, June. Do some sewing, iron a fucking handkerchief or something; start winding *chains* of servitude round your own womanhood. Years later: Father and his Weetabix. Add cream, bit of extra sugar. Spend your time cleaning the sink, wash the bits away.

June, dressing for Brownies, and the dog in its basket, smelling. Old age, dog; that's all that's in store for you. In the meantime, give out love and take what's given. And Little Brother: he'll want to snuggle into his mummy's lap at bedtime. Today they went to the park to play and he watched her walk away.

Your beginnings, Barbara—you and Keith. Write it in a diary, keep it under the bed. You'll fill pages with your neat handwriting, your own story—read it back; it won't travel anywhere much. Drinks at the local pub: lager, vodka and coke. Look at you, learning to play darts of all things! Fling them at the board, laugh when you miss. Clap when you hit a double. A club, for dancing, but Keith's sense of rhythm is poor: that smooch is more a random stagger, being honest. Lean your head on his shoulder, Barbara, slow him to the beat of the music, if you can.

Your first teaching appointment: twenty-six kiddies, start at the end of the summer, better get on and plan your first term's work: fractions, times tables, conjunctions, speech marks, important to get adding and taking away and grammar and spellings right, no other way to do it. Aw, look at all those little ones round you in the playground; you're a natural, should be mother of your own child—on the subject of which, how is sex with Keith?

You're in the farmhouse. A drab room, not much better than the kitchen. Window, brown patterned carpet, fireplace, clock over: St. Michael's Mount etched in metal. Those hessian-backed affairs were popular at one time weren't they. Keith's ma and pa out: dinner and dance.

We should have soft lighting, mood music, cherry blossom tree upstage perhaps—the petals drift like spirits across your dramatic *tableau*, rose-patterned sofa—stretch covers, how very modern. Whiffs of dog but let's bring on the troupers, the mummers, fetch the jester pay your penny for the pit as your next love SCENE 3 opens with you and Keith bundled on the sofa in the LIVING ROOM and

Keith leans forward, aims the remote control at the TV. TV comes to life

KEITH: Anything action on? My stuff, guns and that.

YOU: Have you seen *Pride and Prejudice*?

KEITH: Doof, doof-doof (*with the remote, mimes firing a pistol at the ceiling*)

YOU: We could try comedy.

KEITH: Not much on.

YOU: There's only the news.

Keith aims the remote once more: TV screen to black

KEITH: (*reaching for you*) I can think of something, something much better, something that'll keep us occupied—

Oh Barbara, you twine your legs in his. He twirls your hair in his fingers, pulls you in for a kiss, unbuttons your blouse. I see you *give*; his hand under your bra, on your breast—each stroke of his fingers across your nipple creates a small pulse of wanting, direct line to your groin—

you give a small moan

as you both subside into the rose patterns but just remember that evenings at dinner-dances can come to an end earlier than you think—

YOU: Wait, Keith. I'm not sure—

KEITH: You're not?

YOU: (*sitting up, buttoning your blouse*) What if your parents come home?

KEITH: They won't—

YOU: They might. How would this look?

KEITH: Looks great to me.

YOU: You know what I mean.

You finish tidying yourself, go to look out of the window

YOU: If I lived in this house, I'd farm the land.

KEITH: Lonely life though, Father says.

YOU: The harvest, golden cornstooks in the field.

KEITH: Cornstooks! Pulling potatoes, mostly.

YOU: Bend and pull, sweet earth and sun's warm hand.

KEITH: Machine. Works right through the night.

YOU: They used to celebrate with a harvest supper. Cider and pie.

KEITH: They used to get TB and rickets.

YOU: But all that wonderful fresh air.

KEITH: Damp makes Father's knees ache, he says.

Barking from the Alsatian; car doors slam

YOU: (*still at the window*) Your parents are early. Told you!

KEITH: Could have been embarrassing. If we had our own, you know, our own place.

YOU: I don't know.

KEITH: One day I'd like to build my own house.

YOU: What?

KEITH: Have it built. Something with style, bit of class.

You return to sit next to Keith on the sofa

YOU: Country cottage.

KEITH: Detached, four-bed, en-suite—

YOU: Can you thatch?

KEITH: No.

YOU: A parsonage.

KEITH: What's one of those?

YOU: Hollyhocks and lupins, roses round the door.

KEITH: I've been thinking. If we found somewhere, somewhere, you know, somewhere nice, somewhere bit classy, would you like—to move in together?

In answer, you rise from the sofa, pull Keith to standing. Holding hands, close, you walk off stage.

Warm pink lighting fades to black

Lights up on SCENE 4: THE NEW HOUSE. Previous owners departed, furniture removed. Stage set to suggest entrance to executive style new-build: parquet-paved driveway, shiny red front door, lead-effect portico, pillars. Beyond, more rooms to wander. Lighting is bright—typical of, say, a dentist's surgery.

You stroll onstage with Keith, the estate agent's sheet in your hand

YOU: Are those pillars for real?

KEITH: Fibre-glass, probably.

YOU: These cream walls are so pale. Like powdered skin.

KEITH: Nice room.

YOU: Just here, a comfortable sofa, lamp—needs some colour. I could get cushions—what colour would you have? Crimson, for passion!

KEITH: Quite like the cream.

YOU: The French Doors let the light in, and the sun.

KEITH: That a silver birch outside?

YOU: Its leaves are delicate: silk—or like quiet music.

KEITH: Stinks of carpet shampoo. Getting down my throat.

YOU: Citrus: the smell of sunshine, summer days—

KEITH: Juke box will look good.

YOU: You have a juke box?

KEITH: I stored it in Father's outhouse, where it waits for me to rescue it.

YOU: You have records? That play?
KEITH: Beatles, Beach Boys, all the classics.
YOU: I'd rather hear a classic like—Kate Bush. *Wuthering Heights*.
KEITH: Cat's wail.
YOU: How can you say that?
KEITH: I have the Eagles, *Hotel California*.
YOU: Do you have any Kate Bush?
KEITH: No.
YOU: A rag-rug would be nice. Bright stripes. For fun.

Rooms, houses. You remember, Barbara, your first year at uni, when you read all the Patricia Cornwell crime novels, lining them up along the wall in your squared room with its single bed, desk. The cork board was pinned with your timetable and a scattering of photos from home, Cornish seascapes, good luck card from your mum and dad. The door to your room was a fire door; it swung mercifully shut. It was only when you needed to use the loo down the corridor that you wedged it open. Those novels, with their tales of blood bright-running down walls: the crimson bloom. Spatters, patterns—you learnt that you could follow them, learn a killing story. The books scared you stupid: dark evenings, you would run the pathway through campus to the student hall's security-locked door, the lit stairwell. Until you met Claire.

When you and Claire decided to share a house in your second year you painted walls, looked up the Chakra colours of meditation: blue for intellect, you decided. Together you made bizarre-shaped lampshades from wire and tissue and tried your first hash flapjack (you planned to go clubbing but were both too stoned to handle it). You lived on toast and Marmite, Clare's lentil dahl. The lampshades hung like giant glow-lit larvae. You've written with a change of address; the last card from Claire was six months ago.

Now you have a place of your own, kitchen with no dog smells, no need for security doors, en-suite where the only pubic hairs curled in the shower tray will be yours, or more likely Keith's. Bedroom where your sex can be noisy if you want. You get a kitten, small tortoiseshell you christen Maggie. You buy a tartan fleece igloo bed so she can sleep in her corner of the bedroom. Maggie climbs up the curtains, pees in the corner into the cream carpet, makes a dive for your ankles as you cross the room. Pretty and purring in your lap, though, after school. Talking of which, your time's filled with lesson planning, parents' evenings, playtime cover, staff training days—tedious perhaps

but you're good with the children. You're Miss, and no one else will do; yes you're needed, Barbara, by those kids.

As for Keith: Friday night takeaway, bottle of cheap plonk, regular fuck. That's about it. Oh but there's his career—Christmas parties with the bank staff, annual dinner and dance, dinner parties with the branch manager. Car, second car, mortgage, holidays in Majorca, sangria by the pool. *Chains*, Barbara. *Shackles*. *The smell of sunshine*, you said. *Walls of powdered skin, leaves like quiet music*. You think in metaphor, Barbara; your world is romanced, *crimson*, look at that old chaise longue you found in a second-hand shop in Camborne: burgundy, velvet buttoned, few scratches on the woodwork, needs a couple of wood blocks under to help with the sagging but it's plush; it's got *personality*. I bet Keith's on at you to get a new one shop at DFS get it on HP foam-filled fibre-filled no need to pay for four fucking years or something by which time it'll be rag-ended pock-marked pulled knackered and good only for landfill but you! You want something different: genuine Victorian chaise longue, warts and all. With burgundy velvet cushions (to stop the wooden bits digging into your back). There's love in you, Barbara, and passion, and creativity—but here's you building a life of house, jobs, after-work drinks, weekly supermarket shop, a life that's filling with all the right ingredients for—

KEITH: Shall we get wed?

—an affair. Something; anything to break the fucking tedium. Wait, Barbara, wait. Think of deep water, Virginia Woolf's pockets—

YOU: That's sudden.

KEITH: I've been thinking about it for a while.

YOU: You have?

KEITH: Mother and Father would like it.

YOU: It's not about your mother and father though, is it? It has to be what we want.

KEITH: I'd like it.

YOU: We can't afford it—

KEITH: Doesn't have to be big.

YOU: Just a few friends.

KEITH: I like the sound of it: my wife.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking wedding, dress to buy, something to plan for, people to tell. All very lovely and I'm not trying to spoil it for you Barbara but Keith's pa and ma—let me just say. From farmhouse kitchen to speeches over champagne glasses: how does that work

for you? You cool with that? You see the false teeth managing the hors d'oeuvres? No fag ash caught in the mother-in-law's corsage? What about your mum and dad—can you see them smiling in the sunbright photos you all drowned in lace and veil looking like a fucking Miss Haversham in the making give it thirty years or so because that's how happy you'll be, Barbara. Rats running over the cake, silk all yellowed we're talking mildew and rodents and lifelong *regret*—

YOU: *(thoughtfully)* My husband.

Could be a frothy white wedding, church bells and taffeta yes romance it all up to the hilt but what does the husband-to-be do, Barbara? He books an appointment at the nearest register office. Thoroughly approve of your dress choice though: cream silk—classy. Best man, Keith's mate Gary from the bank: not so classy. Or his girlfriend, Kaytee. Still! A wedding, and a bit of a do to follow, no doubt. What's the weather like? This is Cornwall: plenty of rain to go round. Bit of sea mist. Pea-souper, more accurately, job to see your hand in front of your own face, one of those days.

Anyway. I see that Keith's in charge of the party arrangements: downstairs room in a pub. Not a bad drinking hole, The Old Monk's Arms, if you're a lover of the ale the landlord brews in those huge copper vats. Let me give you more of a sense of the place: chalkboard on the wall, *Friday Night Live*, *Coming Soon: Psycho-licious*. *This Week: BigSound: Blokes & Guitars*. Down a flight of stairs—smell of stale ale. Beer-sticky carpets. Groupies, pints held high in the squeeze, couple of smashed glasses here and there (only on Friday nights though).

Take it to the day: wedding rings freshly exchanged; confetti freshly strewn on the steps of the register office. In the pub, carpet freshly tacky under your cream stiletto heels. The landlord has made an effort: gone all countrified with straw bales and flowers down here (not sure that Blokes & Guitars would approve but it'll all be gone by the time their fans crowd into the room next week to hear a beer-bellied and bearded rendition of *Sex on Fire*).

Keith's mates from the bank, all three of them. Iris and Stuart, bottoms perched on the nearest straw bale. Sausage rolls on paper plates; your mum making small talk, licking crumbs of flaky pastry from her pinked lips. White bread, ham sandwiches, mini pasties. Boiled eggs halved, mayonnaise over and a sprinkling of paprika—difficult for the fingers. Vol-au-vents filled with beef and horseradish, too much for a single mouthful, impossible to chew through if you try it in two bites. The horseradish makes your eyes water. Keith and Gary are getting pissed on the landlord's best Monk's Honey Mild. Like the pink silk tie, Keith. Nice hair-gel, Gary. That acne's clearing up well.

I would have you happy, Barbara. It's your wedding party; doesn't matter a jot if it's a small crowd. Couple of teaching assistants from your school there, look. Give them a wave, go help yourself to a glass of dry white, let your dad give you a kiss on the cheek. He's doing well, coping with it all, even the straw bales. So proud of his daughter: teacher, married woman, setting out on her pathway through life, happy, settled, heading towards—let's not spoil the party.

Position your backside on a bale, Barbara; take a look around: there's your husband, booze-flushed face, laugh over-loud. There's Gary's girlfriend, swigging on her white wine—here she comes, here's Kaytee, tripping across the room to park herself next to you, slip her high heels off, wiggle her feet, glitter-pink toenails bunched in Nearly Nude. Just look at the way she throws that blonde hair back.

YOU: How's the wine?

KAYTEE: Bit of an ABC myself? You know: anything but Chardonnay? Prefer a Sauvignon, nice and dry?

YOU: I asked Keith to order a Pinot for the party.

KAYTEE: I suppose it's hard to keep the wine cold, bringing it all the way down here? (*throws hair back*)

Lawks, here comes Gary, all rosy pink and had sufficient number of pints to subside from man into puppy dog, nuzzling into Kaytee—look at the way she's pushing him off, she knows what's coming: it won't be long before he staggers out to find the GENTS, misses the door, finds another, finds himself outside where he'll puke half-digested mini pasty and Monk's Honey into the hedgerow at the back of the yard. I was wrong about that acne: up close you can see all the fresh heads coming to boil. Ah Barbara: in the photos, your mum and dad's smiles are *face-cracks*.

Take a sip of your wine, Barbara. Does it sit sour on your stomach? Does it taste a bit thick?

Home, later. Keith's juke-box plays. *Wurlitzer*, it says in large block capitals. *Hi-fi* and *Stereo* it proclaims from the front of its squat cabinet. It glares yellow from inside. There's a black nest of records. Mechanical wonder: each disc is methodically selected, lifted, flipped, placed to play. Squared buttons, digits to punch: A4 for *Hotel California*, many times as you like.

Keith dances you round, fast-rocking you in the grip of his bearhug—such style! The machine's sound is thin, boxy. You're tired, Barbara; your cream dress feels too tight, your feet hurt, even though you've flung your shoes to one side, taken off your tights in the loo, bare feet on cream

carpet. It's dark; you should draw the curtains closed. Out of the window, in the road: two kids gawp in at you, one spike-haired, dark, lanky, the other smaller, rounder, ginger. Keith stops his rocking, waves them away. The boys: giving the finger and laughing, pretend smooching, air-kissing with exaggerated, pulled faces. Keith leaves you, charges for the front door, yanks it open, shouts into the street. The boys run: go on give 'er one! Their voices, new-broken, through the open door. The nest of records moves: Keith has cued up another tune. He reappears, face reddened. The red, against his fair hair. Easy suddenly to picture him older, thinned hair, green eyes faded.

KEITH: Where were we? (*he makes no attempt to pull you into a dance. His hands float*)

YOU: I need a shower.

Exit you.

Months, a year, two probably, after your wedding. A Friday evening. Usual bottle of cheap red, usual candles lit, same old Annie Lennox CD. The jukebox has been unplugged many weeks ago, in all the vacuuming of these carpets. Yes somewhere behind the Victorian chaise longue, the plug has come adrift from its socket. No power, no music, nothing going round.

Yesterday you bought flowers from Tesco's on the way home from school: red dianthus. Snipped the stalks, stripped the leaves, poked the stems into a glass vase. Centred the vase on the windowsill, crimson spread, window-framed. Pull the curtain across; hide them with the night.

I see you, with Keith, sitting upright, side by side on the chaise longue (a chaise longue is meant for *one* person to recline on, Barbara). You lean into the cushions, those burgundy velvet cushions you rushed out to buy when first you lived here. Coming unstitched, they are, losing their stuffing. Feathers poke like white darts through the fabric, prick your skin. Pull a feather from the cushion, let it go, watch it float, sink, lose itself in cream polypropylene. Cast your eye over the smeared plates, last half-piece of naan bread. Breathe the still-warm stink of korma, garlic. Yes Friday nights: how *routine* you are, Barbara, though it matters not for your own story. Perhaps it's

KEITH: You look tired.

YOU: I am, a bit—but it's more than that, if I'm honest. It all seems—grey; there's little fun in life.

KEITH: Too much wine?

BARBARA: I've only had a couple of glasses. It's this—this life we're living. It isn't enough.

KEITH: Thought you were happy.

BARBARA: I am. I was. Now I want something more.

KEITH: Is it me?

BARBARA: No.

KEITH: Then what?

BARBARA: I want—something different. To travel! A future elsewhere. Somewhere hot, like—
Cambodia! I'll teach—

KEITH: Just because Claire went to Cambodia—

YOU; No!

KEITH: Just a pipe dream, Barbs.

BARBARA: It's not a pipe dream! It's fierce in me, Keith—let's leave!

KEITH: Not much call for bankers in Cambodia.

BARBARA: How do you know?

KEITH: I just know.

BARBARA: Imagine it: geckos running, searing heat—storms! Or sipping cool beer by the pool,
after work, in the shade. Or catching a tuk-tuk to town on a Saturday night—

KEITH: (*with heavy sarcasm*) Full of Eastern Promise.

BARBARA: It could be—it is!

KEITH: But that's all there bloody is: promise.

BARBARA: What do you mean?

KEITH: It's not real. This is real. Us. Here.

BARBARA: In Cornwall.

KEITH: I've been meaning to say. We could move house. If you wanted. That'd be something
new. I've talked with Father—this is something with real promise.

BARBARA: In Cornwall.

KEITH: Offered me a plot of land, he did.

BARBARA: On the farm. You want to build a house on your father's land.

KEITH: Heart's set on it.

BARBARA: Mine is not.

Pause.

Oh Barbara. Where's this heading? Don't start that second bottle; it'll lead nowhere good. Change
the CD, bit too moody. Turn the lights on. You need a clear head for this kind of talk—

KEITH: We'll have land, house—architect designed.

BARBARA: While it's being built—

KEITH: Chuck em up in weeks, they do.

BARBARA: Where would we live?

KEITH: Live?

BARBARA: Could we afford to stay here?

KEITH: Probly not.

BARBARA: Where then?

KEITH: Where would we live?

BARBARA: Yes.

KEITH: In a caravan.

BARBARA: On site?

KEITH: It's something concrete.

BARBARA: Concrete.

KEITH: Something real.

Pause

BARBARA: If you don't want to travel—if you want to do this housebuilding thing—then I want something real, too. Something real to put in it. I want a baby.

Pregnant pause

KEITH: Where did that come from?

BARBARA: Well let's at least try; it could be what we need. Every day, I look after other people's kids—

KEITH: It's your job.

BARBARA: Don't get me wrong, I love it. But those kids aren't mine.

KEITH: Little shites, most of 'em.

BARBARA: If I had a child of my own, I could teach him to read—

KEITH: We'd have no money.

BARBARA: Or her. We'd learn numbers, and paint and we'd sing—

KEITH: Sing?

BARBARA: Yes sing. All the things you can do with a child of your own.

KEITH: It's not the right time.

BARBARA: There's never a right time, or that's what my mum always says.

KEITH: I don't know.

BARBARA: A child, to bring up in the house of your dreams.

Too many Friday nights. Too much wine. Close the curtains, shut out the red of those flowers if you will but I see you Barbara, splayed on the chaise longue. Such crazy-talk! One minute searing heat and storms, the next a child. Drunken whim yes, and what comes next is sex that will be throwaround, wine-fuelled probably, orgasmic unlikely, risky yes, unprotected undoubtedly.

D'you see there, lurking behind your left ear somewhere—see that *reproductive love* right next to *love of sex* and *love of children*? Barbara, your head needs looking at. Corner of your consciousness like a little door opening and you know what's through that door? *Slippery* fucking *slope*, Barbara, heading fast downhill to all sorts of trouble and strife, trouble at mill, troubled times, double trouble, trouble with a capital T. Un-Poseidon-like Keith may be, most-stringbean-like Cornish piskie he is, but producer of seed he is also. His very many straight swimming sperm will head straight for your wandering lonely-as-a-small-bunch-of-cells ovum.

Into it, then: small child, on the way.

June's younger brother hung on the railings on his first day at school, and she cried for him. How she cried!

Here's a childhood tale. Little kids, sister and brother playing, kneeling on green-patterned carpet, cutting up the year before's Christmas cards with pinking shears and scissors to make pictures, glitter and glue on the occasional table, lovely-lovely, out in the kitchen Slade or something on the radio, *Merry Christmas Everybody*, Mother in the kitchen too, baking mince pies, all lovely. But you know how little brothers and sisters fall out.

So they fell out and there was crying mixed with Slade and Mother shoved the mince pies in the oven, crashed the oven door shut and came running and young June did a classic 'He started it!' So Little Brother got a slap on the leg (which was *fucking* unfair parenting, by the way) before Mother ran back to the kitchen. Sitting on the leafy whorls, imprint of his mother's fingers on his right thigh, Little Brother wailed and wailed while June said 'sorry' and 'sorry' again but then Mother came running once more. Which produced another story, and this time there was a slap and straight to bed in it. Very soon, the kitchen smelt bad (on the Chesterfield, June settles herself, reaches for a tissue. She was too young at the time to remember this, now). At teatime young June struggled to get the pastry of her mince pie chewed up and swallowed. The mincemeat was bitter and the pastry dry and upstairs she knew her little brother would be curled on his bed. His eyes would be closed tight. When he was older, she remembers, the drawing started.

June has never liked mince pies, although she isn't sure why.

Here's a thing about rowan berries: they're not poisonous - don't go running away with this, Barbara. But they're bitter little buggers to chew on.

There they are, June at seven, eight, nine years or so, playing in the garden, all summery, sun's out, Mother's hung the washing on the line, wooden pegs and cotton drawers and there's young June—looks like a picnic. That has to be a home-made dress by the way. Like something from *The Sound of Music*. Didn't those kids dress in curtains? So little June, in her green and white patterned was-a-curtain dress, sat cross-legged and mixed rainwater and rowan tree berries, bright orange, hard to squish juice out of (impossible, I'd say), but wooden spoon, battered saucepan

(Mother's old milk pan) round and round, red plastic cups and saucers and guess who's coming to tea?

Mother was baking again or whatever mothers used to do in the days before they grew up and realised that kitchen sinks have *chains*, Barbara, and June poured rowan berry 'tea' into two red plastic cups and Little Brother came to tea and drank it down. All fine and rainwater lovely-lovely. But not the berries. Like I said, impossible to squish.

'Eat them up' said June.

'Don't want to,' said Little Brother.

'Eat them,' said his sister.

'Don't want to.'

'Eat your tea,' said June in her mother's voice.

'Don't like it,' said Brother in his little boy *I don't want to eat my tea* whine he used with his mother. It didn't work with her and it didn't work with his sister.

'You came to tea. Eat, or you'll be straight to bed.'

'You can't send me to bed.' But the look on her face was his mother's, and Little brother ate some berries. Made him cry, of course, and in the end he retched, and his upset showed in even more tears. At which point his sister gasped and drew him to her. Did it make you feel poorly? I didn't know they'd be so nasty to eat just a bit sour we'd better not tell Mummy as she'll be cross with both of us. Poor you, let's cuddle then you'll feel better d'you want to play hospitals and you can be the patient? I could rub your tummy if it aches.

Rowanberries cook up into a good jelly, by the way. Uses a ton of sugar. Don't know how he got any down, poor kid.

All those years ago, there was June, little June, and her littler brother, side by side on the sofa which was a smart olive green Chesterfield, button-backed, with high arms for little kids to throw themselves from, land in the cushions all chucked over the carpet. In years to come, the Chesterfield would become stained from spilt milk, smudge of chocolate, biscuit crumbs worked in. Few buttons missing, threads coming loose, vicious tacks exposed, then shifted into the shop when the house was cleared.

Today, in the shop, June wipes at her eyes with the tissue; she leans against the Chesterfield's button-backed back; she remembers that night: winter, dark by teatime. Milky drinks before bedtime, reading book: gang of kids on the front cover, sailing boat, adventure story, Mother—

where was Mother? Father home from the office, footsteps heels tippy-tap through the yard, into the porch quarter-to-six on the dot tea's ready darling! But I rather think—June rather thinks she remembers—that by this time Mother and Father were upstairs in the middle of a row and things were coming to a head because June heard her father shout, 'You've brought me down, you have! Brought me down with your working class, your slovenly ways—your—your newspapers, all those bloody piles on the floor, all those shoes, all those coats left to mildew in the porch, while you—'

Incoherent blast from Mother: hen squabbling at the cockerel, puffing her feathers up for a peck.

'What *time*? You don't have *time* any more, do you? You certainly don't seem to have any time for me. If you did you'd—'

Whoa hang on, fuck. Did I suggest for one moment that this was a perfect home, Barbara? Just because Mother baked cakes and hung washing out (dolly pegs, for fuck's sake), doesn't mean she didn't leave piles of newspapers and shoes about and anyway this wasn't just about a few old copies of *The Daily Mail*, because she had started a part-time office job and suddenly she was wanting to dye her hair and she was retouching her lipstick, got her little powder compact out of her handbag, quick inspection in its small round mirror every so often and in fact far too often in Father's opinion and *now* there was trouble because wasn't Father in his mind the breadwinner? She was keeping house and now she was mentioning the name Eric a lot oh Eric this and Eric that and Eric by the filing cabinet and you know what? Gone were the home made mince pies and meat pies and lovingly served tomatoes and it was tinned soup and tinned rice pudding, tinned fruit salad in a bought sponge base with Quickjel over and Father shouting and Mother sobbing you're jealous, that's all, jealous of my little bit of freedom.

Arguing with Mother: must have been clucking hell. Kitchen sinks and chains stretched, broken, you see, Barbara.

But not without pain. All those metal pieces flying.

June and Little Brother, sharing a reading book. It was June's favourite, *Five On A Treasure Island*—yes!—and although her brother struggled with the words, June had read this one plenty of times and she liked the bit best where George shows the others Timmy the dog. June was fluent so she read to her little brother and when, upstairs, the shouting started she read louder and in the end

she covered her little brother's ears and pulled him to her. Four little bare legs stretched out on the sofa, knees bruised from falling over like kids do. On the green patterned carpet: two mugs of luke-warm milk. Upstairs, at least one set of spilt tears.

I only meant to show you the kids, for fuck's sake. They had tinned UHT cream over their fruit flan and quite liked it.

June remembers when she and her little brother went on holiday, as kids—all the way to the south coast nearly as far as Cornwall, when journeys started at four in the morning and car seats were leather still, because this was a family stuck in the Dark Ages. Father stopped for petrol while Mother sat in the passenger seat and rummaged in her bag for her powder compact, opened it, re-applied her lipstick, pressing, rolling her lips together in its little mirror and Little Brother felt queasy because of the mix of smells: petrol, leather and lipstick. Enough to churn a small boy's gut. We'll assume that Mother and Father had by this time made it up in fact a week in Exmouth was probably a good chance to get away from it all and paper over some of those cracks.

There they were, on the beach, all happy-sunny and there was June with Father with his trousers rolled up, stepping over the slimegreen rocks, rock-pooling while Little Brother was a small shape in the distance, bucket and spade and making sandcastles round the feet of Mother who was in a deckchair with book, sunglasses. Could be reading, could be asleep. She was in her swimming costume only she wasn't going into the sea or at least nothing more than a paddle as she was having her period and Mother couldn't imagine using anything other than a sanitary pad, Barbara. She packed her children into button-through vests and herself into a thing called a *girdle* (from the Dark Ages) with tights under and a petticoat in fact I don't think June actually *saw* Mother naked. You should've seen Mother's nightdress: floral fortress of brushed nylon. No wonder there were arguments. Because this wasn't really about a few piles of newspapers and shoes, it was more that Father would have liked to fuck his wife occasionally but how do you get to the real person through all those layers? His wife wasn't up for it because to be plain, her sexuality was a raw stain on her, Barbara just like she recoiled from the red mess in her sanitary pad when they got back from the beach because Father had let June and Younger Brother stay on to have a Knickerbocker Glory each in the Trusthouse Forte café on the sea front while Mother already had that icky wet feeling down there and knew she had left things a bit too long. There are more chains, Claudra, than just the kitchen sink.

Ah but it was a good old family holiday; yesterday Mother had bought calamine lotion to take the heat out of June's shoulders. Today June was in red Jelly sandals and had a new yellow bucket; she had three small crabs in there already. She stepped into the next pool. The water was sunwarmed, clouded with sand. With her foot, she stirred it into sandal-squidge. On the sea wind: other kids' shouts; squealing seagulls, high. Come down for your chips, though. Waves nudging the rocks, far out. Salt smell, sand grit in your fingers.

Later, they went back to the flat they were renting near the town centre—top floor with a window looking out over the high street—and ate fish and chips. Mother and Father watched telly while Little Brother played with his toy cars then joined the dots in his holiday drawing book and June—June's legs were bare, browned and still sand-scuffed. She straddled the arm of the easy chair that Mother was sitting in and felt the most extraordinary sensation spread through her groin that made her feel hot and bothered in a *nice* way and she squirmed until Mother asked if June needed to spend a penny and June went obediently to the toilet, even though she didn't.

Oh Barbara, young June's flower was just opening, while all the while Mother's was closing.

Back home, fresh from the sun and the south—June doesn't know about this of course—Father braved the local pharmacy to buy condoms with little rubbery studs (in bright orange) for that added bit of sensation. He placed them carefully in the drawer of the bedside cabinet on his side of the bed, in readiness.

There was Mother, working at the office, flirting with Eric which was *fucking* pointless, by the way, because the guy was gay but lived in a world where he couldn't admit it. More chains, you see. More Dark Ages. At home, Mother opened tins of this and that, made sandwiches with Homepride white bread, Chopped Ham and Pork *again*, and there was Father, tip-tapping through the yard, coming home each day to see, each time he put his cufflinks away, a set of bright orange studded condoms languishing in the bedside cabinet drawer.

There was June and Little Brother, at home in the long summer holidays, playing a special game of theirs which involved fetching the cushions that Mother had placed along the back of the Chesterfield (to support her delicate neck) down onto the green patterned carpet and chucking themselves from sofa to cushions and tumbling and romping in them. When they were out of breath, June lay in the cushions; she had found a way to produce that wonderful, extraordinary sensation by rubbing between her legs with a finger. Little Brother didn't mind cuddling; these were

nice moments for him. Look at him, sucking his thumb—at his age! Little enough love for him coming from Mother, after all.

At about the time that, June remembers as she leans into the Chesterfield, the waistband on her skirt began to feel a tad tight, the thin blue line on your pregnancy test, Barbara, has already begun a story of its own. First signs: immense tiredness. Your eyelids droop; you're small-eyed with exhaustion. Just hormonal changes, or is it wear-out from soul-searching? You're nauseous; you start to eat digestive biscuits, take to keeping the packet by the bed so you can fill your mouth as soon as you wake, work the dry wheat mess round in your mouth then swallow to keep queasiness at bay. As you slop cat food from the tin to feed Maggie your throat closes, you push the tin away, try not to retch—an early abortion, of course, will erase this madness. It was too late for June, but you, Barbara: you're young; take some time to think. There you are, husband, job, house, and the thing is there are *chains*, Barbara. Look at Keith, all husbandy and caring but this little babe you'll turn yourself inside out giving birth to—it'll be lovely and cuddly and all that but—not easy, you know Barbara. Difficult stuff, childbirth. And just another link in the chain; if you haven't quite found who you want to be, yet; if Keith hasn't it in him to let you be who you need to be. That's *his* story, you see—it's all he's got to offer you—and here's you, stuck in it.

That a small spark of defiance I see in your eyes?

You're going to keep it, then.

Seated on the Chesterfield, June thinks back to her body, when she understood that she was pregnant. To be fair, her breasts were already sizeable—a source of considerable embarrassment as a teenager in the school showers after hockey and which necessitated several letters in 'Mother's' handwriting asking for June to be excused a shower. And you, Barbara: at about the time that June's bra began to feel under strain, your small breasts begin to swell; your nipples enlarge, darken.

Wait; let a few weeks pass. Your energy will return, your cheeks fill. Your complexion will clear, you'll be rosy, peachy, all green apples—you'll probably eat quite a bit of fruit. No cravings? I think you just went through a whole bag of cherries there. There was quite a bit of chocolate going June's way, being honest. Actually a *fucking* huge bar of Cadbury's from the local Spar—but June had words with herself. She was pregnant: time to give up the fags.

You'll steady, Barbara, as June steadied; you'll stroke your hand across your belly, study your face, smile at yourself in the bathroom mirror; some sort of milestone you'll have passed.

Wait, and there'll be something, a sensation. Can you feel it? At about the time that June felt her own tickle, feather twitching across the inside of her belly, you experience a small fluttering sensation: quickening, just as *The Month-by-Month Guide to Pregnancy* says.

Let's get you to your scan. On-screen, a small, hazed image: miniature thumb in mouth. Flutter-butter heartbeat, strong. Would you like to know the sex? There, look: a weeny penis. A boy, Barbara! A son, for you. Look at you, smiling at the screen. Precious knowing, marvellous secret between baby and mother—unless you'll share with the father?

June didn't take herself anywhere for a scan, so the marvellous secret of the sex of her child must remain for the moment hidden from all—but perhaps there's something to be said for sitting back and letting nature take its course. Easier to allow for fate to play a hand—no decisions to be made other than those by the body itself, as it makes steady progress in growing a small, new being: limbs, lungs, brain. There are tests, of course, which June could have taken advantage of, had she wished to interfere in nature's progress—if nature was on the way to producing something rather less than perfect—but love, Barbara, comes in all shapes and sizes, does it not? For the moment, at about the same time that you smile, and lay your hand on your belly, and speak mind-words to this tiny boy-being that floats in amniotic sac, turns, begins to kick, June crossed her fingers, resisted the temptation to go back on the fags, and let nature take its course.

Soon, your rounding belly shows under a baggy t-shirt, loose dress. After that it balloons, until you're short of breath and you get heartburn the moment you lay flat on your back. One evening, you clamber out of your baggy leggings and t-shirt, just as one evening, June pulled herself out of her dress and stood in front of the bedroom mirror. No other word for it, ladies: your bodies, filling with child: *ripe*, like a fresh fig.

*

How many weeks now, Barbara? Adjusting to your new heavy self? Feeling big-footed, moon-faced, centrally heated by your shifting, kicking little presence? Does *The Month-by-Month Guide* mention the thick ankles, all the heaving yourself up, collapsing in your chair in your fluffy mule slippers and dressing gown? You need to prop up with pillows. That line running down your swollen stomach is the *linea nigra*, if you look it up in the book. It's getting darker I'm guessing. Your belly button's sticking out. Cup your stretched belly with your hands; cradle your babe in you.

Like you, June was pink-skinned, puffed, she was baby elephant, hippopotamus. Pretty it wasn't. Like June, you'll shed hormoneful, crocodile tears in fact you'll be *hell* to live with, fed up, can't be arsed, too much effort, indigestion, peeing every other minute, sit on a hardback chair your legs'll go numb yes all that and pretty soon you'll have to take the most enormous shit or push an orange up your nose or something like.

At about the time that you decide to plan the birth, June thought she should probably say something to somebody, so that when her time came—

Here's your birth plan, Barbara: soothing music, lights dimmed, breathe the pain away la-la. Got youth on your side.

Poor June, she was *advanced maternal age* which is a mite cruel—she wasn't *that* old.

Several episodes of Braxton-Hicks contractions to test out the system as it were, then at just about the time, give a day or two, that you feel the first real clench of pain, there was June, vast bottle, stoppered, baby hadn't turned, wrong way round, eesh. Took herself off to hospital, got the *bus* to Scarborough for fuck's sake not a word to anyone, let alone her brother and when she got there it was an enema because being honest, she'd been a bit constipated and all that stuff about the body readying itself, emptying itself nature's way is utter rubbish—like I said, she was a bottle, stoppered all over the place. Then it was dry shave of the pubic area, compression stockings oh she was getting close to a caesarean, have a go at pushing, June, for fuck's sake. Don't want to go there, stitches and all that. No good? Epidural then.

Here's your pain, Barbara: follows *The Month-by-Month's* neat paragraphs on breathing to the letter. Regular squeeze of contraction ooh aah blow the pain away fully dilated nothing to it easy-peasy push slipslop tada!—and this, your first baby!

June's pain: abstract, uncontrollable, thing of itself, monster stamping on her back when they let the epidural wear off to give her a chance to get involved and why not, it was her body after all. But the monster was chewing at her insides and here came a guy in a blue gown—massive pair of forceps he was waving and poor baby was hoiked out like a pickled gherkin from the bottom of the jar. Small wail like a cat stuck in a tree. This, June's first and last baby.

Up on bellies—at just about the same time, give a day or two. Small messy piles of baby, tiny fingers outstretched, pinked faces—actually, June's young bairn looked pretty battered, regular little boxer he was and his head a weird shape thanks to forceps and the pickle jar. But your baby, Barbara: sleeping bundle, surprising amount of hair considering the fair thins of his father—thick instead, like yours—soft swirls of it underneath that knitted bonnet. Those hands, with their perfect

miniature nails. Blue eyes, of course, but already dark: they'll turn brown, like yours again. Yes he'll have your eyes, your hair. Wonderfully, beautifully just-born—see how his eyes seem to look right at you. Small, scrunched new human, swamped in white Babygro, squirming, working up to hunger. The thin cry brings you to tears: strong red rope of love.

And June's? Dot of a child who would look just like his mother and his father. He had June's eyes. He'd have a sweet crooked little smile as he grew.

Let's see the fathers. Oh Keith, how bewildered, diminished you are, wrapped in the effeminate skirts of a blue hospital gown. Does that small cry of the new-born snag at your heart too? Look at your face! Is that expression meant to seem pleased? *Stunned*. Much better word.

KEITH: I reckon he looks a bit like me.

Really? Sorry to disappoint, but this babe looks only like his mother.

Where was the father of June's squawling infant? What was June's story going to be? That she went astray with some unknown ne'er do well who sowed his wild oats in her then fucked off to a new holiday bedsit and his old ketamine habit? Does it for me. There was her brother, of course—don't tell me he was working in the shop. Don't tell me she didn't at least give him a ring, a bell, quick buzz to say—but ding-a-ling! There was the shop bell—customer waiting, looking over the odds and sods, cash over the counter while there was June in Scarborough, groaning and heaving away at childbirth, forceps and all.

Her brother would have come, if only she'd said a word. Shut the shop, caught the bus, bought her a ticket, braved the blue gowns. But here's the thing we know already about June: she makes do, churns on, makes no fuss.

Mothers. Interesting verb, to *mother*. Front it with a single letter 's' and it's a killing, a long-held breath finally lost. Which you are now, Barbara. Which June was: totally lost in the business of motherhood. Better get used to it: here come the months when you'd like to be less round-faced, like your thighs to be less vast, like a *fucking* bit more sleep.

What about June? I reckon she was surprised at the way one small act, momentary loss of control could lead to this new world of baggy leggings, unshowering, unsleeping, insides reworked, stretch marks, loose ligaments, weak pelvic floor, baggy vag. It was important not to panic, for June; her babe—she named him Skip—would settle. Sure, he was a mite whingy at first—difficult thing, being a new mother with the father not around, and maybe a bit of gossip to whirl round those cobbled streets, lurk behind the downpipes, in the drains, hide in all the dark corners—meanwhile the small scrap fretted in the bottom drawer crib that June had created.

At least Mother was not around anymore to look down her nose, sniff a bit, leave her mouth open in a wide O of disapproval, horror, even. At least June could get on, let those hormones settle, watch *Coronation Street* or something it wasn't the end of the world the cottage looked just fine, a little world with just June and Skip in it, for a while. Smoke rising from its chimney. Little night light behind one of its windows.

June was not for doing the Earth Mother thing, but you are, Barbara—look at your babe—you've named him Daniel—snoozing in his Moses basket. Ah, mother and baby, as one. Look at this: he frets; you hold him to you; your steady heart quiets his. He niggles, works to a cry but this weebing noise is no cause for alarm. You didn't learn this, Barbara—it's a knowing you have.

What you have in common with June, Barbara, is the red rope that joins you to your babe, just as June was joined to hers. Forever and a day, he'll give out a true cry of distress and ping! you'll be instantly at your child's side, that red rope hauling you in. Elastic-bound to your infant, you are. Well June, not quite so much if the truth is known or at least not at first, but even then.

All these miles apart but here you are, there was June: mother-creatures. Like birds, hopping to grass again and again to feed your fat fledglings. Watch out though for the bigger predatory chain of existence that that you're both a part of—see the buzzard drop from sky to ground to carry the fledgling away to feed her own open-mouthed young. Or watch a fox steal a chicken from its warm nest of eggs to feed its own cubs. Here's life, and death. You think you're civilised? Nothing but a drawn veil, it is, *civilisation*—the thin skin of society that masks the animal in you. Yes underneath,

we're all creatures, small fluff of feathers dancing in the wind all that's left when the fox has been. That and the trace of blood.

Babies, though. They cry when they're hungry, wet, cold, too hot.

Tiny Daniel's crying is reasoned, logical. Easy things for you to put right, Barbara: feed, change him, adjust the blankets—sorted. When Keith comes home he can pick the baby up, baby-smile, gurgly-coo. Anyone would think you two are happy. I guess you think you are, new baby, house and all that baby equipment: highchair, travel cot, changing mat, pushchair, pram. In the bathroom, nappies, Sudocrem, Johnson's Baby Bath, baby oil, your sanitary pads. Your home, now babied-space. Cat bed moved to the utility room, nasty dirty creature. Cream carpets all baby-sicked, baby pee-sprayed. His smells, your mothering, reclining on the chaise longue, nestling in the burgundy velvet cushions, baby rooting for your nipple, strong suck, his eyes on yours, yours in his. Your milk smell, you and baby Daniel. You leak for him. It's a miracle, isn't it. From that first bunch of cells to this: new human, growing. Whether you wanted it to, or not.

There was June, coping, baby Skip snoozing in his cot. Even a new babe as small as Skip had grown too big for the bottom drawer, and being honest the health visitor had got a bit hot under the collar, came over a mite disapproving and said several very marked things about accidentally shutting drawers, pinched fingers and so on. Yes, now in a second-hand cot, nicely painted. Little Brother found it.

Kept a bit of weight on, June did but tent dresses: the way forward. Black velvet, too—brought a bit of dignity to things. Surely the black was a touch too funereal though; it was some years now since Father had croaked his last, peanut jar left half empty, Mother had waved goodbye to the excellent nurses, staggered herself off this mortal coil—surely June didn't *still* need to be in mourning.

There was June, dressing in black, spending her time not just with her new-born but with a pack of Tarot cards, practising with them, getting to know them, leaving her vibrations in the pack, lots of pencil notes on the cards in tiny writing. Yes there was June, laying out her first spread of cards while Skip took his afternoon nap—I prophesy a new business in the making. Now the black velvet makes sense.

For sure, it was never going to work out with both June and her little brother working in the shop: it might sell all sorts; it might be crammed with exotic this, Victorian that; it might be an

absolute Ali Baba Aladdin's cave of bric-a-brac but who was going to buy, seriously? It couldn't make a living for two—it certainly didn't for Mother and Father towards the end but by then I reckon Mother realised Father was on the way out and just hung on a bit. Started writing the odd letter to old friends, leafing through the odd cruise brochure.

Stuffed with *stuff* the shop was: rubbish, mostly—house clearance—but the odd antique here and there worth something, few pieces of silver and jet, couple of phrenology heads—one of them would find its way into the cabin that June would soon arrange to rent for her Tarot business, down by the harbourside. Being honest, I can't quite see what it was about the shop that had excited June's father, all those years ago. June's younger brother didn't show much enthusiasm; he just disappeared into the room at the back to start another painting of the sea, sod the customers. No doubt Father had thought it would be a relief from the pressures of sales and the office—quite a contrast after all the years of tip-tapping across the yard, into the porch, home to try and digest Mother's tomato salad when really his hiatus hernia was giving him the jip. Anyone would think she did it on purpose. Feeling a bit stressed, bit *acidic*, darling? Here, have a tomato or two. That'll sort you.

Stocked to the proverbial gunwales and beyond, it was, that shop—jackets, lampshades, jaded teddies—somewhere to hang that dress, as well, get it out of June's sight. You never know, it might sell. She couldn't squeeze in it now, if she wanted to and green was never her colour but anyway that was then and now Skip was here and he wasn't a bad little sprite. Cheeky smile he was working on as he grew, shame one of his eyes wasn't quite—and he was small, wasn't he? Bit undersized. Ah but a lot of love to give out. Though he'd have to take what was given.

Daniel, growing. Small hands learning to reach, hold. Rolling, sitting up, propped between cushions, bright-eyed with wanting to know. First sounds: babble, then sort-of words: Dada, Mum-mum. All that fair hair, dimples to break your heart, Barbara; he's a chubby want-to-squeeze cherub. He's learnt to sit straight, doesn't need the cushions anymore. Inflatable plastic books for bath-time, thick cardboard books he can mouth on. I knew you'd be into books. He's a bit dribbly—maybe his first tooth is coming? He takes the bottle but anyway, solid food is well on the way.

Skip, growing. He rolled, he sat up, he reached, bright-eyed. He made no sound. No sound at all. Well—crying, of course, but no word-babble. In fact he was a dab hand at a nice lengthy wail from his cot upstairs if his afternoon nap was a bit long which June learnt to ignore just every now and

then, especially if she was practising with the cards (or making herself a coffee) or in the middle of a Tarot reading which she did, every now and then, at home. Getting her hand in.

'Is that your child crying?' asked the client, looking uncomfortable, losing track of which goddess was advising about what.

'Next door,' said June without so much as a wrong turn of a card. 'I've complained a couple of times. Had social services round.'

'How awful! How could they leave a child to cry like that?'

'Ah, but the cards are showing the loving, caring side of you. Look at that,' June said, turning a card. 'King of Cups. You're compassionate, wise. Or. There's someone in your life cares for you.'

'I can't think—'

'An older man. Light-haired,' said Juno, doing a quick check of her client's blond curls. 'Or— not actually quite so light,' she said, catching sight of darker roots. 'More brown: a father figure.'

'Oh yes, that would be Dad. Still trying to look after me when really I should be looking after him.'

Upstairs, Skip played with the rabbit dangling over the side of the cot. Watched sunlight and shadows round the room. Quietened. This was a child who was learning to wait.

Daniel: more growing. Slapping his palms on the plastic tablecloth of his highchair—loving the way you clap with him Barbara. Making music! Daniel tries with his plastic spoon—doesn't squeeze his mashed potato and baked beans in his fist—in fact he doesn't seem to like messy play at all, does he? Look at that face he's pulling. What *is* that mess in his Peter Rabbit bowl, anyway! Custard with no sugar? That explains it. You've been reading those magazines again: Baby doesn't have a sweet tooth unless Mum gives him one. In *theory*.

Skip, growing a bit more. He squeezed mashed potato in his small fist, pulped baked beans and spread them over his chin. I guess a few got in his mouth, somewhere; he loved messy play. He loved anything sweet (his mummy did have a *bit* of a thing about chocolate when she was pregnant), especially the doughnut that June whizzed in the blender (after gobbling down a couple herself. Watch out for the jam, there. Dribble all down your chin if you're not careful. Make you look greedy). There was June, small tobacco tin in the pocket of her black velvet tent dress. Seems like she was on the roll-ups again. For fuck's sake blow smoke the other way, not in your young son's face.

You and your books, Barbara! I see you're in the traditional phase: all Brothers Grimm and fee fi fo fum the giant's coming to tickle your tum!

To be fair, June did her bit too, Incy Wincy Spider climbing up the spout—it's not like she was a *bad* mother but think about the role model for mothering June had.

Story: the stuff of life, isn't it? *Once upon a time* and here we go, something much more interesting than the real world which is just how Mother had felt when she read her latest *Angélique* romance, all Versailles and Poitou and bodice ripped away by the evil Duke to expose Angélique's fair skin, plump breasts yes much more interesting than opening the next tin of Chopped Ham and Pork, twisting the lid off the next jar of Heinz Sandwich Spread, to feed two young kiddies. Little fizz in Mother's groin as she pictured all that bodice-ripping, more fizz than the thought of lifting her nightie to allow Father and his sticky willy and his studded orange condom access could conjure. But that was of course much later because there had to be something at first, didn't there?

Two mothers, with their young charges. Here's you, Barbara-mother: lost all your weight, stretch marks fading to silver already. Not back at work—seems you'd rather take your young son swimming, float with him in the shallow end of the pool, serene-sail home, chlorine waft, wild hair.

Here's your weekday routine: Keith up, coffee and toast, out to the bank. What will you do today, Barbara? Take Daniel to feed the ducks, pram-walk to the park, his afternoon nap. Squished food. Coffee mornings with other mothers but not often; there's only Daniel, if you're honest. Light of your life. Little angel.

Your weekends: see your mum lift Daniel from you, give him a squeeze and cuddle of her own: 'How's my little grandson today then? Beautiful boy!' All smiles, coo-coo, he pats her cheek, grabs her pearl necklace, her hair. She laughs, kisses his small sticky palm. But at the farmhouse, with Stuart and Iris—watch that Daniel doesn't crawl on the kitchen floor, down with the garage grease. Careful he doesn't come too close to the dog and its stink.

And Keith? Trugging on, Barbara, trugging on. He'd like to tell you about bankified things: his increased lending discretion, the new assistant manager who started today, up-and-coming lady called Serena—but look! Daniel has another tooth coming!

As for project new-build on his father's land: let's just say that things are *on hold*.

There was June-mother. Black velvet dress, all mysterious, yes skirts swirling in the wind, working up a bit of a mist—just the odd wisp, occasional tendril—as she pushed the stroller down to the harbourside, her small waif hatless against that wind coming straight off the sea. No wonder he wailed. Little Brother had indeed found her a cabin to rent for her Tarot business. Summer season, maybe longer depending on trade and in the winter she could do a few readings at home, help out at the shop, park the stroller in the back room, leave young Skip strapped in with the door to the toilet to look at for an hour or two. Younger Brother gave him a vintage model car to hold: London taxi cab, brmm-brmm noises from June's brother but not Skip; this young scrap still didn't say a word, though June didn't think it was a problem and didn't worry herself with having any more contact with health visitors or anything like that, managed to be out if they came calling, poking their noses in. Skip held the taxi cab, mouthed it. Turned it in his hands, found the little front doors that open, little steering wheel inside. He studied the world in detail. Saw more than he ought perhaps, through those odd eyes.

And I. I see you, Barbara, in all your mothering. I've watched June, the sudden turn in her life. Yes even now I watch over you both, you and your young, as I grey-glide like the haunting owl, switchback like a hare in and out of twisted hawthorn ancients, gaunt ash stalks, forest where conifers drip in dimmed corners. The smell is wetbark pine, alive; Treebeard rootstrides across mossed undergrowth. My dog-spirit smokes over field—I'm wind-soaked, easy running like deer.

A tree, split-crashed, trunk splintered into yawning bawling jaw. But the halftree lives, still. I haunch my rump against its windshield bark, stare up into vast criss-cross darks. There's been rain. The air slops, squeezes between hanging daubs of trees—stench from these overblown wets. Oh it's turning, it's rancid, it's rank and in the spiny brambles I squat. I hide in shadowleaves, or wander, your secret keeper. Into the darks I cry, lone fool in the woods.

Look here: bird corpse. Worms work at the scene; their black-ridged mass heaves. Lift a wing, feel it come away with ease, see how the pulling brings the worms to hectic squirm. What's this? Claw in blood-bubbled stain. The blood is long dried in these flat-blobbed remainings.

Such things there are, Barbara. They line my paths, crawl from leafmould mass, scale my flesh, burrow to my bones to grip my innards with pincer, claw and hook and all the while I show them my screaming yaw.

Where do our souls go when we leave this world? Do they fly, dark flutter into air's nothing? Or are they caught hedge-bound, impaled, stretched, wracked for barbed eternity? Or bog-buried,

to come choking, snuffling up from peated earth to growl and slink in ditches? Or dig with clawed fingers into flesh, pull at sinew, muscle, burst blood from thick-branched veins in unkempt anger—

where is my soul? It has not flown.

It slinks, and festers centuries long in *rage*.

The rain stops, and stops. I walk. Cracks, as if to split th'earth with their very name. How soon they appear; how quickly growth shrivels when soil that would be fertile dries flint-hard.

Here's Daniel, each milestone reached, passed, easily. Early, even! He crawls, then pulls himself up on the chaise longue, first steps, arms wide, towards the new rug I see you've added. Cross-legged in scarlet shagpile—such passion in that red!—you catch him in your arms; he pulls himself up, launches again. You clap your hands, laugh. Again!

It's a nice SCENE 5. I won't spoil it.

Keith, home from work. Your KITCHEN: white cupboards, table, couple of chairs. Highchair. Oven, fridge, white. Fridge magnets: the alphabet in primary colours. Kiddie drawings on the door: wax crayon swirls, red, blue, green.

Keith's late, missed the fish fingers you cooked up for your son's tea. He pokes his head around the door and Daniel totters to cling, hug his daddy's leg. You haul yourself to fetch Keith a plate from the oven. Seeing as he's the one earning a crust. Seeing as you somehow haven't gone back to work. Seeing as you're busy winding fish-fingers-in-the-kitchen-stay-in-the-domestic-space chains. Let's not labour the point.

Yes eat in the kitchen, Keith. This is what daddyhood reduces you to: kitchen, and fish fingers for tea. Daniel in his highchair with a biscuit, warm milk in his blue plastic sippy-cup.

A word of warning, Barbara. If you're planning on staying with this relationship, don't do the 'you're late' thing. Never a good start.

YOU: You're late tonight.

KEITH: I gave Serena a lift home. Car wouldn't start.

YOU: You had a good day? Before the problem car.

KEITH: So-so.

YOU: Lots of lending, customers to see?

KEITH: Serena saw more than me.

YOU: She helps you quite a lot. I suppose she lends—

KEITH: It's not her job—

YOU: Assistant manager, not her job to lend?

KEITH: Unless it's big money. Big stuff.

You lift Daniel from his highchair into your arms, carry him from the room. Keith eats. You return without Daniel. Sit, Barbara. More to come.

YOU: We went to the Soft Play Centre today. Lots of socialising for Daniel.

KEITH: Right.

YOU: He was nice and tired afterwards—had a good nap, then we did some drawing.

KEITH: Right.

YOU: Great artwork! All these pictures, in one day. (*you indicate the fridge door, with its crayon-swirled pieces of paper*)

KEITH: What's it meant to be? (*clears plate, puts knife and fork down*)

YOU: Meant to be?

KEITH: It's just—scribble.

YOU: It's artistic expression, Keith, not that you'd know.

KEITH: I'd like to know.

YOU: You usually say something facetious.

KEITH: Can't win.

YOU: No, you can't. You're never interested in your son. I try and tell you all the things we've done, and in return you're more concerned with Serena Big Stuff and her bloody car.

KEITH: At least she talks about something other than kiddie stuff.

YOU: At least one of us is bothered about our son's development.

KEITH: Look. I've had a hard day—

YOU: I've had a hard day too.

KEITH: With soft play and scribbling.

YOU: D'you think I don't miss teaching? D'you think I like messing about with crayons at home all afternoon?

KEITH: Go back to work then.

YOU: Who would look after Daniel?

KEITH: He could go to a nursery.

YOU: There's no way I'm handing my child over to a nursery.

KEITH: Is there any pudding?

YOU: There's ice cream in the freezer. You can get it yourself.

You stand, start to clear the tea things from the table. Banging, clatter of plates. Exit Keith.

I probably did spoil it, just a touch. But Barbara here's you, immersed in child's world, crayons, fish fingers, baggy leggings *still*, and there's Keith, all Serena the new assistant manager—oh how wonderfully, how greatly she lends!—giving her lifts home for fuck's sake, all lipsticked she is and corporate heels and pencil skirt—

in the meantime. Later. Another time. One of those moments when you take a moment to check: there's your son, sleeping, on his back, nappy and vest, arms thrown wide. Evening birdsong and the room, silver birch leafshadow lazing, still warm from the day's sun. Daniel, pink-cheeked in beautiful slumber. He'll have fallen asleep sucking his thumb; if you watch, you'll see his mouth still moving, just a suggestion.

You know every crease of his small body, the way his plump fists curl, catching late sunbeams. Those long lashes, the fair curls—turning darker now—labyrinth rounds of his ears. His clear, unfrowning forehead, still-small dome of his head.

Your son, forever heartfolded.

Childcare for little Skip: regularly bundled off to the shop and into the care of June's brother. In the room at the back of the shop he claimed as his studio, her brother painted: vast, dark seas. The oil thickened, stippled on the canvas, lurched in intimidating waves. He cursed when the bell rang for a customer, or when Skip grew fractious. Handed him a paint brush to mouth, whisper the bristles soft across his cheek, wave around, young artist in the making.

Brother painted, yes—but there were other times. One thing he did have a stock of in that shop of his was books. Old ones, to be fair, but the written word fades not with time. Gets a bit dated, perhaps, pages a bit yellowed, one or two missing, few scribbles here and there but a story will speak, still.

June's little brother fetched a faded copy of *Five On A Treasure Island* from the bookshelf in the shop, settled on the stool behind the counter with Skip on his knee, and started to weave a world of Uncle Quentin who looked rather fierce and George who scowled and glared and kids who declared, 'I say!' and 'Rather!' and a dog that bounded madly.*

As time went on, Little Skip began to point at words like 'ginger-pop' and look up expectantly at the chin of June's younger brother, who said, 'Bit like cola'. Next time he rode his bike to the local Spar he fetched a can, just for Skip. Shared his chips with him, too.

Come to think of it, there was a little something these two had in common. June's younger brother: grown to be a man of few words.

Meantime, June could get on with doing her Tarot readings in her small cabin on the harbourside. Out in the beyond: greycold stream of sea. But behind the protection of the harbour walls, a cluster of stalls that went some way to looking a bit friendly, a tad welcoming: Wall's ice cream kiosk, Union Jack flying. Next door there was fudge and doughnuts, then shrimps and chips. Fried fat seafood, sniff 'n' snack. *Starry skies and stormy seas*, said the mural painted on the brick wall of the nearby fish market. Artwork to match—starry sky, stormy sea—in bright blue, with white bits: stars, or wave tops, depended on your interpretation. We're not talking high art here, seaside holiday end of town. But if you were to lean over, look down to where the harbour's stonewall defences met the water. Below the tideline, a different story. Stones washed black, pocked and worn from years of wind-driven sea-swell that spilt scumfroth over all the bladderwrack. Twice daily or thereabouts, the north coast tide would lift those fronds, caress those swollen pods, then piss off and leave them stranded, gasping. Regular prick-tease. Or twat-tease. Depends on your interpretation.

So there she was, little cabin right between ice cream and doughnuts, and June had been doing a bit of marketing. Take a look at that sign on her cabin:

CLAIRVOYANT
SPIRITUALIST
TAROT READINGS

Clairvoyant! Spiritualist! Since when? Oh, here was a lady knew how to sell herself. A poem on the door, too:

Get to Know your Future.

Come my Way.

See for Yourself what I Have to Say.

The cards hold the Future; don't Doubt or Despair.

Now is the time to take One Big Step Forward.

What rhythm! Such a way with words! I was hoping for a rhyme with that last line but still. This is the stuff of invention, and nothing is more invented than that name above the sign:

JUNO

Juno the Clairvoyant! June was settling in to playing the part, too—get a load of that black cloak. Haul in the customers—or should I say *clients*, June—or should I say *Juno*. Give them your best shot at reading the cards, trace the lines on their greasy palms, and while you're about it cross your own palm with plenty of silver.

Leave the North Coast for a moment; let's go south, to your SCENE 6, Barbara: CLIFF PATH, near Rinsey. Get over your paranoia over a few specks of dirt, leave Iris to look after young Daniel. Take a walk with Keith. Sea rush, salt taste. Below, grey slick of water smudged into sky. Gull scream. Onshore breeze, cool.

I see you, Barbara: the way your shoulders slump; the weight that you carry. Breathe in the space, clean spreading air. Beside you, Keith, hands in pockets, wind lifting his hairs—thinning a bit, if truth be told. So soon. How green his eyes look against this backdrop. There was a time you thought of him as from the sea, as if he walked from the waves. Or pictured him with ruffled shirt, tousled hair, proper Mr Darcy striding out.

YOU: Are you happy? (*addressing the horizon*)

KEITH: How could I not be, with a son.

YOU: I meant, with us.

KEITH: Are you?

YOU: Perhaps we should talk—

KEITH: Aren't we talking now?

You wander the path. Ahead, the minestack rises; the chimney pokes the sky. Keith follows. The path opens out: gritted stone beneath your shoes. You reach the ruin, lean against the stonework. Out at sea: a ship, grey shape on misted water

KEITH: About the new-build.

YOU: What about it?

KEITH: It could be a new start.

YOU: Really.

KEITH: Yes.

YOU: It wouldn't feel like anything had changed.

KEITH: You want change, then.

YOU: You see that ship out there? We can't see it but the engines are chugging on. The waves will bring the wash to shore, in time.

KEITH: I don't get it.

YOU: It's a metaphor.

KEITH: The ship?

YOU: Yes.

Pause, while you watch the ship, suspended in sea-sky line. Royal Navy, perhaps. A shift, not visible with the eye. The vessel has been moving, even while you thought it caught as in a picture

YOU:

Oh Barbara. I'd like to give you the final line to move this scene on, but I'm struggling to find one. Why are we talking all grey ships and mist? About to go string myself up, slit my own wrist, sit in a bath and watch the water run red, cut my own *throat*. Cracks, Barbara; they'll widen, we're talking crevasse, we're talking chasm, probably avalanche coming sure there's a rumble somewhere we're looking into the fucking *abyss*— look: this is going nowhere. Leave Rinsey. Go home, the pair of you. Collect your youngster from Iris and her dirty kitchen and go and do a bit more living, a bit more not getting on amongst your cream carpets and your shagpile rug and your unplugged juke box and see where that gets you.

Get yourself back into the bank, Keith, do a bit more low-level lending, live some more among the dusty ledgers to be sure you can spend a couple of years at least before technology comes your way, writing all the securities stuff in there charged this, uncharged that, make sure you underline in red the proper way, stocks and shares, dividends, get those certificates into the strong room properly alphabetised naturally. Banking: it's all so *sorted*, so *proper*, isn't it? Loads of filing cabinets involved, hanging files, all locked all checked, cash-up, check the tills, balance the books, double-check yes all proper. While those thoughts a-swirling in your head are so *improper*, Keith. Seen much of Serena lately? Is she on keys duty with you? D'you need to lock the strong room at the same time, the pair of you? Last to leave, by any chance?

Invest, Barbara, in your child's early years; it's where your heart is. Here's Daniel at four, his hair now messed in silk fair-to-brown curls. He chatters away; he writes his first letters, Annie Apple

Clever Cat all very good you have it sorted once a teacher always a teacher. While you're at it cover those cream carpets with toys: let's have a farm, lots of little green plastic fences and trees, milkmaid carrying buckets, plastic cows, sheep, pigs, ducks, two hens twice the size of the pigs—your son risks growing up mightily afraid of hens if you're not careful—wooden train set, model cars, red London bus, vintage black cab—more than one child in this story will have a black cab to play with, open the little doors, find the little steering wheel.

Buy a play mat with *Fun and Colourful Roads*, Barbara, then you can spend a wet afternoon daubing doors and windows onto cardboard boxes, this one's a house, that's the post office with the red door, let's drive along this road to the garage. Yes paint away until your floor is covered with a paint-blocked cardboard town, red paint on the cream carpet move the rug a bit to cover it. Then books: bedtime reading, *Each Peach Pear Plum*, *The Gruffalo*, (watch for the) *Jolly Postman*, *Peepo!* Baking: fairy cakes, flour snow-sprinkled into the bowl with sugar, weigh the fat, crack the eggs, white paper bun cases into the tin, butter icing, glacé cherries on top tra-la, scrape the bowl out with a spoon like June did—though you won't know this of course—when she was a little girl, once or twice when Mother was in a good mood, when Mother danced around the kitchen, when she was still brown-haired.

What comes next? School! Come on Daniel, wet morning, into the car join the mums' school run, Daniel in buttoned-up coat like Paddington Bear, wellies for the rain run across the playground jump splash! Three-thirty in the afternoon: car mayhem at the school gates again, then home, coat off, mug of warm milk, two biscuits on a plate, read the story book that comes home in Daniel's book bag, make notes in his reading diary for teacher in your best handwriting Barbara, help him learn to spell: boy, but, did, dig, got (though you've already taught him these).

While your son is at school, Barbara, what do you do? How still the air is in your cream-carpeted house, when Daniel isn't here. Have a morning coffee. Have another. Tidy round a bit. It's just a day at school. The first of so many, when you have time on your hands to think, and think again: when you're not busy being a mother—what's left?

June, with four-year-old Skip. Regular thing: into the shop, morning Little Brother and can you look after this young ragamuffin share your chips with him at lunchtime he can watch the train go round, play with the faded teddies don't let him near anything breakable though especially not that Tiffany lamp and maybe a scrap of paper and a pencil, couple of crayons he can kneel on the floor and do

drawing and don't expect him to say anything, by the way. Not big on words. Meantime, I'm off to do a few readings, bit of fortune telling. Tara!

Tin out, smoke a quick roll-up on the way down to the harbour, then June was in her shack, now *Juno* in her black velvet get-up, working on the gypsy look good and proper with a bit of gold bling and a veil, no less, to add that bit of mystery to the proceedings. Something to cover that long nose with.

Nice bit of lace frill, more gypsy, over the doorway—step foot over that threshold and you'd be taking a step into place of psychic aura, the veil between the worlds of the dead and living but a thin curtain. Oh she was mystical she was magic, the pack of Tarot cards was in regular use, many more tiny pencilled notes added to aid that uncanny knack she had of striking a chord with her client now you *are* cared for, he *does* want to protect you, but you in turn have to play to your own strengths—things will improve, you *will* find a way through this oh I'm sensing distress in you, yes, but you have strength, you have inner force, there's an aura about you, no wonder you chose to wear a pink scarf today—that's your compassion, your loving side coming out in you. You just grabbed it from the wardrobe as you left? You may say that, but in reality your inner psyche, your other-world heightened sense was working from you, *charging* you, making you ready to take on the world—

and now, in turn, fair do, I'm charging you: thirty quid please—blessed be.

What came next? School for Skip? Not quite. Not at all, actually. Ah, health visitors. Busy people, they are. Call round, want to check on your young scrap's development but when you're never in, never about, never a knock answered, even the best of them may give up and concentrate on those who really need help, appreciate their call, put the kettle on, make them a cup of tea.

Systems; all systems have their small gaps for a small child to slip into, slip away, tucked under the radar. Little Skip was all right, perfectly healthy, didn't need any of those vaccinations for this and that, fair enough his eyes weren't quite right but let's not involve the health care system, they'd only want to do something, drag him in for tests, drag his busy mother away from her mystic mornings in the shack. They would make him wear glasses and by the way, they'd say, why isn't he talking should be a right chatterbox at his age let's to the speech therapist, then, let's single him out as different, loner, far too small for his age, special needs, learning difficulties—*disabilities*, weirdo, known for in-breeding round here, it is - these small northern seaside communities tiny gene pool

that'll explain it. Did you know you gave birth to a mutant, miss—madam? Misfit, monster, right little wall-eyed Frankenstein ain't he?

Leave him be! Yes leave him be. Small foundling that he was, he could draw his pictures while he knelt on the floor. The shop was full of bits and pieces, gewgaws and gimcracks, odds and ends and if this child was a little singular, he'd fit in fine, merge into the background with all the china dolls and threadbare teds. He wandered among the vintage jackets and dresses that crowded and jostled on their racks and no one noticed that from among the folds and silken falls of mothballed fabrics, a small boy peeped.

Another summer. Your SCENE 7, Barbara, on THE BEACH: Rinsey cove, backdropped by cliffs, the ruined mine overlooking. Flat sea that wanders in and out of rock pools with its tide. Salt wind and a seagull lifts, calling. Silvered sand and sun, the kind that warms your bones. That you wish you can take home in your heart. Your bruising heart.

You've bought coloured sunblock sticks for Daniel and painted streaks across his cheeks. Now he skips, small beach-warrior, striped pink and green. Shock of sand-stiffened fair-to-brown hair. Grit in the sandwiches, splashing in the shallows, squealing at the cold shock of seawater on his tummy. He runs with the waves, incoming. Keith dozes behind his sunglasses, flat out on his towel.

From your own towel, you watch Daniel at play. You remember when, as a child, like Daniel you were splashing in the sea when suddenly you were overtaken, pulled underwater by a rogue wave, rasped over sea-scoured shingle then dumped with the next wave up on wet sand. Cornish tides can be treacherous. I see your mind now pelt through dreadful possibilities of tidal pull, waves—you're feared for your son lest he's spirited away by beach bogeyman, or great white shark. Or a tsunami, when crabs scuttle in warning, don't they Barbara, away from sea-froth, as if they feel the ocean convulse in its depths, miles away. Tremor in their brittle frames. Roofs of their small sea-houses shake before the coming storm.

But sun, and sandcastles, and you've brought with you a yellow plastic castle-shaped bucket, spade to match and a packet of paper flags to decorate. Daniel builds a perfect sandcastle; you helped him tip it out.

DANIEL: This one's for Daddy. *(pokes the stick of a small Union Jack into the top of the sandcastle . It flutters on its thin wooden stake)*

Pause while Daniel digs.

DANIEL: *(still digging with his spade into the sand)* This next one's for you Mummy.

Keith wakes, stretches. Catches the finished sandcastle with his foot and it topples. The flag slips.

DANIEL: Daddy-er! You spoilt my sandcastle.

YOU: Keith!

KEITH: *(sitting up)* What did I do?

YOU: He built a perfect castle.

KEITH: Did he?

DANIEL: You pushed it and now it's ruined!

KEITH: You can make another.

Daniel throws himself down, flinging legs, rolling, scraping with hands, until the castle is razed, scuffed sand. He sits in the sand, wailing tears

KEITH: That's enough.

Daniel sits, curled away, thumping sand with small, tight fists

YOU: Daniel, let's walk back up the path, find the ice cream van.

Daniel nods, gets up

KEITH: I don't think this is the right way to handle tantrums.

YOU: If you have a better plan, let me know. I'm just happy we're no longer the beach entertainment.

Pause

YOU: I take it you don't want a lolly. (*You rise, shove your feet into flipflops, search in your bag for your purse*)

KEITH: It'll melt.

BARBARA: Yes it bloody will.

Look back, Barbara, as you climb from sand to rock path, your son with his small hand in yours: Keith, sitting as stone. His face is towards the sea. He turns his head: sunglasses like black beetle eyes.

Later: warm wind, lazy sunset to come, shift of water, looping and relooping over sea-smoothed sand. The Earth, breathing. The dropping sun a golden penny. Sea and air, mixed. Small shape of your son, water's edge, wrapped in big sky.

It darkens; it darkens.

Take it to autumn, to wind races across the night, rooftiles lift—you're woken by their rattling. You rise, pad along the landing to check on Daniel. In his room, the window is a pale square. Through the curtains, silhouetted silver birch bends, dances. What d'you hear beyond the wind's call—an owl? Cat's wail? Or my own keening through the trees. D'you see me, Barbara, noiseless, shadow-shaped?

I know you see only your son, one small hand thrown out, pyjama-sleeved space rockets. Outline of head on pillow—night turns the curl of his hair to ink-spill on white paper. Close-up:

spangle of lashes on cheek, his dreaming sigh. Tuck in his hand, Barbara, kiss his warm forehead. Feel the life in him.

I wait, as autumn becomes winter. Trees, stripped. Dark, darker and the chill drips to frozen, like candle wax that runs to solid. Fog, or a sudden star-spotted night sky. In the morning, spiders' webs beaded white with frost, low-hanging in bushes. I wait, until—

here's you, Barbara, early November. SCENE 8—but leave Keith standing in the wings, let him watch, wordless.

One such sharp Sunday morning. I see you, mug of coffee in hand as you watch through the kitchen window. Keith is helping your son make a guy, straw-stuffed, pillowslip head, Keith's-old-shirt torso, old-jeans legs. Sure, you can find a scarf somewhere for the neck, donate a couple of unused whiteboard markers for Daniel to create the face: thick black eyebrows, owl eyes, leery smile. Draw on a beard, Daniel. Make it wiry, scratchful, a beard fitting for a guy splendid enough to burn.

Tickets to Bonfire Night celebrations: in the field some fifteen minutes' drive from home they've stacked the pyre, yes built the bonfire, loaded the faggots, plenty on it, next door neighbour's old sofa, couple of bed frames, lawks! mattress too though the springs will stay hot unburnts in their coiled sharps. Next Friday: hot dogs and soup, Best Guy Fawkes competition at 6.30pm. Prop your guy up on the back doorstep, Daniel. He can rest, huge, arm-flopped, drunk in a doorway until Friday comes and your mum takes you, after school. Will your dad be coming? He should be, he *would* be, but—

Keith is on keys duty. With a second key-holder he must wait until all the tills are balanced, cash trolley-wheeled into the strong room, then lock the walk-in safe, set the alarm (banks: all very proper). It'll make him a little late from work. No problem Barbara, you can wait for him to come home, then together you can take Daniel to see the firework display. No problem at all. Who is the second key-holder? The corporate, fragrant, lipsticked Serena.

Wait, Keith, wordless in the wings, while I rise from my windsticked hedge to darken these skies the more, have it mild-fogged, gloom-laden, darker still—see how my clouds thicken to black and you can only watch, Keith!—while I twist and weave, unfold—

get your hat on Barbara, button your coat Daniel, wellyboots at the ready—remember your torch—dark has come early. Keith home yet? Late again? Oh you can phone, you can check his extension number, dial as many times as you like, leave a message, there'll be no answer because right now Keith has other, more clandestine matters in mind involving a certain assistant manager who, frankly, is punching below her weight and he is most decidedly punching above his but it seems there's a certain attraction in opposites or why would you be here yourself?

Drag the stuffed guy out of his doorway down the parquet driveway and wrestle him into the rear seat of your car. How patient he is, your guy! Look at him, slumped against the car window, streetlit. How his eyes start from their white bloated face, as if to think on his own coming burning!

You can take Daniel to the fireworks, Barbara, by yourself; you can drive with the owl-eyed guy behind, mute-glaring. Now you're seat-belted, purse in glovebox, torch, gloves on passenger seat, keys in ignition but *wait* Barbara, *wait*. Get out of the car. Take a moment. *Think*.

Watch, Keith!

Barbara, you know it, in your heart of hearts. You've known it since he first talked of her. Hear me, in the sudden breeze that ruffles as you stand by the car, on your parquet driveway, watching for some kind of inspiration from the banished moon, the black-hid stars. *Hear me!* as I send my whisper, my care-filled sigh to you on this fidget-wind. Listen: the world is not perfect, and none more so than men who do such wrongs in what they name as right. Believe me, this I know. Go to find him, Barbara. If he's beyond reproach, he'll be there for you, only. If, however, you should find—

back into your car, turn the keys, heater up, fan on, wait for the screen to de-mist as the engine ticks but oh, you can't wait! You grab a glove from the seat beside you, swipe across the screen, slice of vision drawn across the obscured outside. Lean forward—peer, Barbara, through the small smudge of clarity you've made. Slowly, slowly it will expand until you can sit back, all-seeing. Drive now, slow still through the streets of your estate—see that high star-fall of a rocket up in the black, Daniel! A right turn now will take you to the firework display. To turn left, however, is to take a road towards fireworks of quite another kind—

while you wait under the screw, Keith, jaw-hooked—which way will she turn? Your tongue is struck clear from your mouth. Take a *left* turn, Barbara, to his degeneracy made plain.

'Why are we going this way Mummy?' says Daniel.

'I know, I know,' you say, 'we should go the other way. But—I just need—to check something.'

'What do you need to check?'

'A little—something.'

So: out from the estate towards town centre, past the flower shop, dim-lit window-square, flowerless, closed. Turn again, Barbara—Post office—turn yet again, green glare of traffic lights, main streets, this one, further down on the left, the great doors to the bank. Closed, of course. Drive past!

'Mummy!'

'I'm concentrating on my driving, Daniel. And it's just—I'm not sure if Daddy will have got my message. About the fireworks.'

Past the bank, traffic lights green, turn left, side street, lorry parked: high, white sides. Small carpark in this street, behind the bank—you can turn the car in there, drive back through town, out to the firework display. Possibly bit late for the guy competition but you can still see this pillow-headed fellow burn bright. How well he'll burn.

On the left: see the entrance to the car park, Barbara. Slow the car, nudge it in, nice and slow, few vehicles remaining, enough room to crawl your car round—no harm done. You've checked: the small something was nothing. Unless—

there, in the corner: Keith's car.

Yes crawl the car round, Barbara. Sweep of your headlights—quick—quick!—then away to leave them in darkness, safe, they believe, in their dark act. Shown in the moment of light: two figures inside, combined. This, in one sweep of the headlights. At the carpark exit, you stop the car, turn off the engine, grab the torch, get out—but a streetlight, in the end, is enough. As you approach his car: misted, but combined, clearly, yes entwined in gorgeous sweat. Her skin-sheen; fair curve of breast. His kiss, hard in such love-making. This, through a car window on a November night!

Do you smash your torch on the windscreen, bring them panting and shamed apart, like mating dogs caught in a sudden jet of water? Or kick the door, yank it open—but look across to your car. There is the guy, big-headed in the back. And there is Daniel, after all, his small face staring.

How would it be for him to see them tumble out, *flagrante delicto* tipped onto the tarmac in the car park?

No. No. Back to the car, start the engine, allow it to rest in neutral while the pieces fall into place. All those late nights. All the Serena this and Serena that. Her and her big lending and her slim skirts and has there been just a suggestion of an unfamiliar perfume about your husband's shirts lately? Spring to his step as he's leaving home? Paying a bit more attention to his morning shave, pulling his belly in, cleaning out the belly-button fluff more often. Choosing his shirt carefully, colour of his tie, shoes polished, packets of Polos appearing in his pockets, odd stick of spearmint chewing gum. Yes Keith spruced up and pulled in and all fresh-breath and after-shaved: all the little pieces. Glass shards they are, Barbara. They'll make you bleed.

Ram the car into first, rev it, stutter it forward, out, out Barbara and back on the road. In the seat behind you the guy nods like crazy. Glass shards, falling.

Hear the squeal of rocket somewhere overhead: gunpowdered sparkleshow, soaring, splitting, spilling. It will come down to earth, dead. What will you do?

You drive to the firework display, of course. See how shard-pierced you are! There'll be time enough for you to gather your thoughts, for tonight there's a guy to drag out of the car, hand into the care of his burners. And a small boy all excited: hot dog, tomato sauce scribbled over, strands of boiled onions he finger-feeds into his mouth like warm, hanging worms. Spicy vegetable soup-warmed hands, runny nose. Damp dark, feet cold in wellies—listen to those fireworks scream! Watch them pitch the night into high blaze. There's your guy, look, now hauled onto the burning pile—let's spice it up a little, give him a name. What would you choose: Keith? Such cruel justice in burning—the father, in front of the boy! Not appropriate for your time, perhaps? Appropriate enough for *mine*.

Outline of chair, bedframed in flame. Owl-eyed, the straw torso slack on its firebed burns. The bearded pillow-face stares from the smoke; his eyes are cast to heaven but there's no heaven for him, only his hellish end in scorched and twisting, peeling flesh oh tickle his chin and laugh, I'm happy when that beard is chewed from his face by the hellhound flames; I'm content when his limbs are split from his torso, his innards rent, fire-savaged, ripped, dribbling his own fat to fuel his pyre—watch me whip up such a storm, such a wind as none other to fan those flames and render render—

finish your soup, Barbara. Ditch the polystyrene cup in the nearest bin. People's faces are lit by the scene. Like devils they laugh in the red, whoop at the sparks, the crackling.

Curtain fall, Keith. Quite a performance, while your tongue was nailed to the table.

The cracks widen, 'till we see the darks' flare within—yet you hold your knowing close and *do nothing!* How do you manage it, Barbara? Me, I'm all Medusa, killing stare. Black-snaked hissing, I'll strike, and strike—

but we've got all this way into a story and we haven't had a Christmas! Let's have fireside, holly and mistletoe, twinkly lights on the tree, TV holiday ads, carols on the radio Deck the Halls fa-la-la, Advocaat and maraschino cherries suddenly in the drinks cupboard. Well in June's house, anyway, because this was a family with roots firmly in the Dark Ages. Couple of small bottles of Babycham for June and her young brother if they behaved themselves and even a small glass of apricot brandy when the family played cards, Kings and Lucky Sevens because this was Christmas, after all and Mother knew how to push the boat out and loved a Snowball here and there with even a slug of vodka in it because somehow, these days, a drink or two made the world more tolerable.

What's a Christmas for kids without sweets! Selection boxes which Santa brought each year, After Eight Mints, orange and lemon slices which Father liked but Mother couldn't bear. Mother liked Petits Fours which looked like small fruit pieces but which were only marzipan dressed up and cost a bomb—or so Father said and it was amazing how such a small thing over a box of sweets could lead to a row, but that's alcohol for you, and long Christmas holidays when June and her brother were bored and the parents were having to work so hard at seeming to be getting on. Pull your cracker, bicker over the plastic curling fish and the little red spinning top, June, Little Brother! Paper hats on, everybody!

Tradition: so important for a happy family. The Christmas tree always stood in the bay window and Mother put the fairy on top because June couldn't reach yet and Father always carved at the table. There was June, not believing in Santa Claus these days but treading carefully: Little Brother was still comfortably unaware of myth, while June, who was awake late enough at night to hear more often than not the insults and accusations chucked about the room her parents slept in, was more uncomfortably aware of reality.

In your house, Barbara: little boy still believing. Decorations up, turkey on order, ready-stuffed—but something is about to *spill*.

Christmas shopping in Falmouth. Slade and Wizard always, Christmas musak in Boots where I saw you buying Calpol, Barbara—Daniel with a cold? Poor lamb, look at him hanging on your hand, nose snotted green for you to wipe. Outside, it'll be dark soon. Push-pull of people on narrow pavement, stepping out into road. Cars edge past. Grey street-smack under your shoes. Hot dog stall on a corner, raw wind bringing stink of boiled onions. Carol singers runny-nosed from cold, tin-shaking for Marie Curie. What larks, Pip.*

There's Keith, wanting to get something for Iris. Traipse into your SCENE 9: INTERIOR OF JEWELLER'S SHOP. *Outside: street scene. A toy shop window: bright, lots of movement, toy Santa waving and so on*

KEITH: What about a brooch? *(an assistant fetches a tray)*

YOU: I don't know. Something with a bit of shine. God, anything.

KEITH: These look expensive.

YOU: That silver one, with sapphires, shaped like a bow.

KEITH: Bit over the top.

YOU: Or diamonds, get her diamonds. Go to town.

KEITH: Would she wear it?

YOU: Who cares? Oh drown her in fine filigree, platinum—

KEITH: You ok?

YOU: I'm melting, leaking, running in the dark—

KEITH: You look a bit—mad.

YOU: Do I?

KEITH: I'll take that one. *(pointing)*

YOU: Parting, spilling, bursting at the seams— *(the assistant boxes a brooch, gift-wraps it)*

DANIEL: Have you caught my cold, Mummy? Your eyes are leaking. You've got a sniff.

KEITH: Is this about us?

YOU: Probably.

DANIEL: Sorry.

YOU: Oh Sweetie, none of this is your fault. Let's wait outside.

In the street: shop windows are yellow rectangles in gloom. You poke your face towards the toy shop display: train trundling round and round while to one side, the toy Santa waves. Daniel sets his runny nose to the window, fogs the window with breath. You watch the train, round and round, wipe Daniel's nose, then your own. Keith joins you, gift wrapped parcel in hand.

YOU: We can't go on.

KEITH: This isn't the right place.

YOU: Then where is the right place, Keith? When's the right time? How would you have me do this? Do you have it in you to recognise an end to something when you stare it in the face? Because I do, Keith. Finally, I do.

You feel blotched, Barbara. Your insides drag. Town centre not the place for this. Probably time to head home; think of Daniel and his snotty nose. Yes go home, make some ham sandwiches, few mince pies on a plate, boil the kettle for tea—amazing how you can do ordinary things in the moment when you're about to tip your own world upside down. Turn on the telly, watch the newscaster's mouth shape words you don't hear. The forecast is for snow. How festive, how jolly! Wouldn't be Christmas without it. Through the window: few flakes already in the dark. They wander, melancholy.

Send Daniel to his room, Barbara. He can watch the snow from there. Get a spoonful of that Calpol down him, make it two; he'll sleep better for it.

Sit you both on the chaise longue in the LOUNGE. Cup of tea, cold. Leftovers taken to the kitchen. This, Barbara, Keith, is your FINAL SCENE. Medusa moment. Your forks quiver, the heads weave. *Keith turns the TV off*

YOU: I know, Keith. Have done, for a while at least.

KEITH: Know what?

YOU: About your sordid little affair with Serena.

KEITH: Oh, God. *(puts head in hands)* Look: it was—

YOU: What was it? A laugh? With the other half of life, your child, your wife, safe at home unknowing? While you—sweating and groaning with the sexed-up siren Serena!

KEITH: *(looks up, gestures to the room)* It was—a silly fling.

YOU: It's more than that, much more.

KEITH: I didn't—

YOU: I saw, Keith, oh I saw, alright.

KEITH: Saw what?

YOU: I saw you! I drove to the carpark at the bank. Fucking in your fucking car. Like animals, rutting in your stinking lair.

Pause

KEITH: What can I say?

YOU: There's nothing.

KEITH: Must be something.

BARBARA: Like what?

KEITH: I—don't know.

Pause

KEITH: Look. It's done with. I won't see her again.

YOU: It's too late.

KEITH: No, no, we can—

YOU: I can't carry on.

KEITH: I'll fix things; we'll move away or something.

YOU: There's no point.

KEITH: No point?

BARBARA: Not for me.

KEITH: We could try again.

BARBARA: No.

Curdled, like milk gone bad. Yes the stink of it: curdled milk, the way it separates. Sick, in the yellow swimming mass. I see you, Barbara, see it *in* you: the drag of your insides, but turning solid.

YOU: How shall we manage this?

KEITH: Manage what?

YOU: I know it's dark, the weather's bad. But you should go.

KEITH: Go?

YOU: Go home, Keith. Go to the farmhouse; give me some space.

KEITH: But—come on Barbara—can't we sort this?

YOU: What's left to sort?

KEITH: Well—Daniel.

YOU: Don't wake him! Don't you dare! You need to leave.

KEITH: He's my son.

YOU: You should have thought of that; it'll break his world.

KEITH: It has to be this way?

YOU: Yes.

Long, long pause

KEITH: My car's in for a service.

YOU: I'll take you—drop you off.

Pause

KEITH: Just for a couple of days—to give you some space, like you say.

YOU: You'll need a bag.

KEITH: You shouldn't leave him on his own.

YOU: He's sleeping. I won't be long.

KEITH: The roads will be bad.

YOU: Black. But I'll cope.

KEITH: It's what you want.

YOU: I'm desperate iron behind these wretched tears. There's nothing more to say. I'll start the car.

Drive careful, Barbara. Snow coming down, tyre tracks in whited lane.

This wind is ice—see it flick at Keith as he heads across the yard to his parents' house. You turn the car. In the rear-view mirror: the dark mass of your husband. Alone in blank white, he lifts a hand. Don't look. Just drive away.

The snow is deepening—hear it, feel it scrape underneath the car to bring you heart-lurch. Flakes, crazy at the windscreen; wipers do nothing. You're mazzled by snow; slow the car, ten miles per hour, second gear.

Keith in the yard, left behind, in the snow, alone, as you pulled away. Don't dwell on it; your tears will blind. Snow scrapes under again, blots out road, verge, swing out into the middle of nothing, get it back.

There's Daniel, alone, snowbound at home. Cry his name out loud, Barbara, his warmth: deep-sleeping child, rise and fall in steady breath, small heartbeat, strong. I watch over him; he's safe, Barbara. But you: fresh tears when you see the driveway, house: you've made it home to your son.

Keith will be fine, Barbara; you'll see. He'll stay home, take the land from his pa, build his house, find a new wife, stay faithful, have a couple more kids. Tea in the kitchen, Alsatian across his feet, the Rayburn warms. He'll be fine.

At home, you lie in the vast bed. Yet rise, Barbara, lift the window; feel me, in the drift of flakes, ice-melt on your skin. Outside: deadening press on branch, tree—how the world quietens,

stills, under snow! Through our lattices, we see the first star poke from a mourning sky. Look down; catch the wink of my knowing eye in the dark spread of deadleaf under white—come daybreak, the world will be filled with fierce light of itself, new-made.

I wrote you out, Keith. Stand there if you will; let snowflakes settle about your shoulders as you swap your little case from hand to hand and wave into the dark. The car is long gone. All that remains is my wide smile, Cheshire Cat in the black.

Time; how it passes. And here's you on the way to a new home, Barbara! Yes here's you and Daniel, on the road north. Fair enough, it took until the end of the next summer to come to this point: the executive-style, cream-carpeted square *box* that you hammered yourself into for all that time—stage and scenery for all that *Keith and Barbara* play-acting, has been sold. Might as well have been your coffin, had you stayed. Can I say that now you're driving away?

Your half of the sale proceeds has bought you a small place of your own—these things, handled from a distance and in a bit of a hurry, are never straightforward of course—but here you are finally, heading on up the M1, M18, M62—such road signs, such place names! *Sheffield. Doncaster.* Do they make your insides flip? Such *northeness* in them.

How d'you see the north, Barbara? Does it come to you redbrick-built, with satanic mills—vast edifices belching, roaring under hellish red-smoked skies? Regular churn and clatter of weaving looms: Spinning Jenny, Arkwright's Water Frame—*Arkwright!* There's a name! Where there's mook there's brass none of that southern *braaarrss* shit but *brass*, in yer face with a *fucking* short letter 'a'. Never mind what all these machines actually did they probably clattered like I said no doubt there was weaving, pumping, dawn to dusk and far beyond. Small urchins scrabble beneath the hot bellies of Behemoth looms—waifs, wasted, pot-tummied from malnutrition, wracked with rickets, no sunshine, no oranges, nothin' but a pot of thin gruel before dawn then it's get yerself t'floor, littl'un, yes scrabble about sweeping up fluff or vast numbers of poisoned rat corpses or fingers lost in the weaving, while the shiny boots of the fat boss stride by, the whip descends, lash for a boy here, a girl there. This what it's like for you?

The houses: what will they be like, do you think? Terraces that snake for eternity in grey-slatted rows; outside toilets: shit-houses for the poor, ooop north. Tin bath for you to dip Daniel in each Sunday then use the same murked soap—scummed water for your own quick wash-over before you read scriptures and pray a lot. At one time some of the three-storey cottages in this town held at least five souls on each floor, probably more. That's what you call a houseful. Outside privy and coalhole to dig your hand in, bring out a couple of nuggets for the range, wipe yourself a bit on your apron, never mind the blacked fingers. Match everyone else's in the yard.

Yes coal; there'll be nothing but coal. Stevenson's Rocket chugs the line, more belching, hot ash and devilish black smoke; heavy-bellied barges, probably belching dark clouds, poisonous fumes on the Manchester Ship Canal—great hippos groaning, fucking *wallowing* they are as they bear vast

loads of coke towards the greedy goblin mills. All very black and smoky, it is. Lots more belching, positively *satanic* like I said.

Leave those soft southern shores of Cornwall behind, Barbara—let them fade, as a sunset bleeds to grey dusk. Forget primroses, coconut whiff of gorse blooming yellow in the mild embrace of an early spring breeze; forget the tide's hush of pebbles in its wandering salt wash. You're heading to the hardspun, grating, spit-in-yer-hand, gob-in-my-eye, shake-on-it and stap-me-vitals-while-tha's-at-it—

NORTH.

Time, Barbara. It passes; all moves on. D'you feel it? It's in the turn of a leaf from green, its fragile edges spotted, fringed in brown as it faces its own dry death. It's true: I spatter in raindrops, iced, sharp. I wait, too in the low setting sun that shifts under the horizon, lengthens the shadows, darkens berries in their hanging. I lie cocooned in the day's fade into shadow, call the hush of birds, the slow settle of breezes into still night. I creep in frost across grass, bead the webs, make dance from the branches more leaves, and more. I'm in the silvering of a dawn that signs a new start—did you feel the wind change, get behind you as you packed the red shagpile rug in the boot, couple of velvet cushions, all those miles away in the south, in Cornwall? Time passes, till I'm done with waiting and call you.

Hear my whisper, Barbara, as I beckon, tender in the pulling to bring you closer. Feel my hand on your arm, my dry kiss on your head—

grey wind blowing through small, northern market town: post office, library, small primary school, secondary on the outskirts somewhere. Market each Tuesday in the square. Off the square: Coopland's Bakers, Boots Pharmacy, Co-op. Newsagent. You've arrived.

Streets, running towards, from, the town centre. A neat row of terraced houses topped by chimneys. Space to park roadside as you pull up, handbrake on. On the pavement, passers-by shift their shopping bags from one hand to the other. An elderly man, raincoat, shoulders rounded, slow trudge.

Your new house has a streetside, one-metre wide area with railings and a concrete step up from gravel to the black-painted door, which has two panels, a knocker and a letterbox. It's a shiny door. In the centre of the gravel is a single terracotta plant pot. Brown dried leaves trail. The gravel

is clear, apart from a Cadbury's wrapper, incongruous purple in the grey stones—better get out of the car, pick it up, pocket it. Next door there are two crushed lager cans on uncut grass.

Let your son out onto the pavement where he totters, travel-legs still with him, clutches at your hand, twines his fingers in yours. 'I need the toilet, Mummy,' he says.

So you find the keys to the house from your bag. 'Here we

Wait, wait.

I can't do this. What kind of a break for freedom is this? From one set of bland walls to another? *This* is breaking away, Barbara, after all that hurt and heartache? Where's your story going, after all that digging you out of the south? Oh I can see you, Daniel starting school soon, into the local primary with him, you'll probably get a job in the same school, teach five days a week then swimming lessons for Daniel on a Saturday morning at the local leisure centre while you drink shit coffee from the machine in the reception and jab your head towards the glass window to see your son splash about attempting something resembling the crawl and all the other kids squealing around him then the instructor blows the whistle and you troop round to the changing rooms to help your son towel off and dress then afterwards you call in at the library spend an hour in the children's section and after that ah sheesh fuck this sentence is going nowhere it's too long it's a life sentence because you head this way, you're about to settle on fucking *retirement*.

I'll send you back, send you packing down south in tears and the word *sorry* on your tongue for Keith and his farmyard ma and pa and his wankery banking if you don't take this somewhere else.

Fuck no. I'm the narrator in your story, Barbara; I'm coming for you. I'm your thief in the night, I'm knee up, in at your window, see my smoking footprint on the windowsill oh I'm climbed in, shake you till your teeth rattle and your bones break if you don't stay on the road. You didn't buy a house; this journey is a *whim*. You just *drove*—out of Cornwall and into a new future. So chuck those house keys and, by the way, your northern stereotypes down the nearest drain. Coal and shithouses for fuck's sake. Which century are we in here? Daniel can wait to pee; he's a big boy now. Or let him out to soak his toes at the roadside. He'll cope.

Get that car further north on the A1, Barbara, then onto the A64; it rushes you over Yorkshire Dale, sweeps you across moorland then downward scream of road to make your brakes smoke and—just like that!—into a small seaside town, harbour walls bashed by a coldhard sea. Get a load

of that gothic ruin, perched on the headland. The streets of this town are narrow cobbled labyrinth; they'll swallow you, spit you out tada! It's where Juno waits. And Harry! *Now* you've arrived.

Bring it a bit closer: carpark—park the car. Oh you're tentative: look at you nudging in and out. Just shove the car in, handbrake on, engine off, do a bit of stretching then get yourself and Daniel out and ah, end of season: the wind has a bite. Well it is the north. That great grey expanse you'll meet if you head left and into the town is the *North Sea*. What did you expect—tropical waft? None of your Cornish Riviera up here.

There's a supermarket—Co-op—and a railway station. Yes yes, it's a start. In fact it's where the steam train comes in from Pickering; see it slow, puffing, smuts, squeal of brakes, doors open, mind the gap ladies and gentlemen, children—who's this, ghost in the steam? Oh! my Daddy, my Daddy! Maybe not. In fact no. Let's leave him firmly in the south.

Anyhow. Come on! Explore! Shove your hood up, Daniel, against the wind. Town centre is *that* way—through the alleyway, into the streets we go. Down towards the harbour—*Dracula Experience!* All very paranormal in there, very spine-chilling, very eerie, very gripping, life size model of Count Drac himself beckons you in but I think that tug on your hand is little-boy-speak for *I'm hungry*. And you are too, Barbara. Go on, give in and further along you'll find fish and chips, wooden forks but fingers are better, knees together on a wooden bench, grey line of sea out beyond the harbour walls but here, dogs and legs and shoes and hats and stale-whiffing jackets of the elderly wandering. Wipe your greased mouth on a tissue, all that batter. Toilet stop in the nearest café we'll have a cup of tea afterwards but actually straight out again onto the street. What now?

Wipe your fingers on an antiseptic wipe, Barbara. There: all clean, all wholesome again. You don't know what to do next, do you? You feeling a tad irresponsible, bringing your young son to this place on a whim? More than a tad, much, much more. I guess it suddenly feels—a bit surreal. Like out of a story?

I know you'll feel like a stranger in these streets: that accent is so *abrupt*, isn't it, after the southern burring and curling of tongues you're used to, even use yourself, here and there. Or did. Will you let it fade now that you're no longer in country-cottage Cornwall but have landed at the slate-sharp wind-whipped North Yorkshire coast? You feel stupid for not arranging anywhere to stay. You feel worried as the light begins to fade and here you are, in the north. Oh, you feel mad; you've taken leave of your senses!

Stay with it, Barbara; stay with it. You've only just arrived. Sure, you'll feel a bit strange, bit odd, bit out of place, bit *alone* but cross the swing bridge, head uphill towards the old town here's

a sign, look: *Grape Lane*, only the letter 'G' has been scribbled out so it says *rape Lane*. Oh Barbara! Will there be gangs of snatchers out on the cobbles after dark, in the lamplight, their swine-faces leering at you? It used to be *Grope lane*, after all—what fumbblings and fingerings have gone on in its murky past! Will dark figures beckon from dark corners, curling a finger to entice you in, pull your child from you, disappear him into the dark?

Lawks, watch me dance in these cacophony streets with me flat cap on! Such *life* here; it makes me want to *cavort* oh I'm jiggling, I'm prancing—another sign here, look: *Viponds Lane*. So many lanes—such a maze of streets, it is. Look, look here!—at this corner stands a big-bellied man, jolly statue, his laughing might turn his gut to jelly look at that wide grin beneath his twirled moustache. Hands on hips, black hat, his black apron swings solid. CRAB BAIT £1 a pot, writ large across his great fat belly. You'll learn, later; Harry will tell you: the guy who owns the fish shop calls the statue Frank the Wank. He *does*!

I know these streets: watch me flit and tumble; I'm skipping in and out of their corners, their stones, their pasts—what stories this place can tell, of dark deeds and darker hearts! There's history in this town, of spearing whales—great timber ships, there were, once—I *saw* them, Claudra, sailing out centuries past, heading north in vast, iced seas to spear the lumbering beast yes spear it chase it down to death then bring back the spoils, turn it to glue, and oil, and soap, and paint, with all the parts, the innards used—such labour, such *industrious* work but the smell, Barbara! The oil stench that filled these streets yes boiler houses, boiling oil in this small harbour, stench to dribble your mouth, clag your throat—wouldn't think it in all this quaintness, would you? Oh there were riches, despite the smell—from sea-hunting but darker deeds on ice-bound ships like the cabin boy, dear child frozed to death in rigging, or worse—caught with the crew, Arctic ice-trapped, whole ship, whole crew yes caught and starving nothing but the ship's dogs to take the edge off the roaring hunger, then the ship's rats, then the ship's *cabin boy*—no wonder he haunts and cries 'neath the whalebone arch. Take care if you see him; reach for him if you will, but he'll slip from you, cry wailing to the sea, mist before your eyes, gone.

Back to the cobbled streets: we're in sweet shoppes, warm sugar smell, jars filled with aniseed balls, catherine wheels, liquorice wands, *Dracula fangs*! There's fish—window dressed with shark's jawbone, wide grinning. There's bag shops, clothes shops—bow ties, shirts and suits, fishnet stockings dressing up legs that pose under silk and lace dresses. Shops selling Steampunk goggles and feathered hats. Shops selling trumpets, shops selling drums. Church Street now and there's shops selling Whitby jet—jewelry for the bosom of a Victorian queen in mourning. The prince is

dead: swaddle your child in his nightgown; stay there till the coming of the first black dawn yes black, black forever; your tears will glint in coal-black jet, your bustle and bodice sink under the weight of it—how the black eyes gleam in their silver spiders' webs! Never seen shops like these before, have you Barbara? Grip hold of Daniel's hand, though he's pulling away from you towards another bright shop window, something straight out of Dickens this one, all those small panes of bottle-end glass.

'Look, Mummy!' He points to a red-mouthed crocodile, near life-size, which snarls; get those teeth. The eyes shine. How lustrous this window display is! Plush ruby button-backed velvet behind, and in front a cramming of more fabulous things: a red-dressed, black-faced doll; a galleon with crooked masts; shrill brass candle holders; distressed teddy bears; antlers. More animal figures: cats, dogs, cockatiel, stag! Statue of a woman, robes flowing, bare silver breasts; a silver necklace draped across black velvet bust. It's gorgeous. It's sumptuous. It's so *agitating!* It's a tit-jiggling, cuntish, brothel's doorway of a shop. These, by the way, are my words, not yours, Barbara. I see you can only stand and gape, wordless.

'Can we go in?' says Daniel. But to step inside, into the midst of those plush things in there—

'Let's find a café for that cup of tea,' you say. Scurry away from that thrilling window, Barbara; pull Daniel to you—but is that something different in your step I see? A slight lift, as if a wisp of heady incense has wandered from the shop, wound itself into your hair, caught in your fingers, slipped under your toes, made them want to dance a little?

Lift your eyes from this scandalous shop; hobble across cobbles: glimpse of dark heaving sea through more narrow alleyways squeezed between buildings. To the corner, where street becomes lane and where, side by side, cobbled road and shallow stone steps lead away from the town, up, up. Steep hill, and out on the headland, if you could but see: hilltop abbey rises gaunt, church and graveyard crouches. Ah, Dracula! Sailed into this very harbour, did he not? The black dog runs to shore; Lucy sleepwalks to first bloodkiss.* Such lust, in this small northern town! Does it send a delighted shiver, Barbara? Are you frit for fear this place will *awaken* something within you? Let something loose? Your own black dog running? We'll see; we'll see.

But tea. Here, at the very start of that steep cobbled roadway, the stone steps which will lead up, up again, towards that gorgeous, silhouetted abbey—those benches you can see further up are not benches at all, by the way, but rests for *coffins*. We're steeped in death. Come rainfall, come landslip, there's caskets poke from the hill, bonefingers point from them, restless sockets blink at the sudden light.

Anyway! Here, still at the cobbled bottom, where steps and roadway start and Church Street becomes Church Lane: a small tea-shoppe where the cakes in the lit window are *knitted*, for fuck's sake.

'Can I have a cake? A real one? Please!' says Daniel.

Don't tell me that after all the sumptuous stuff I've shown you, you're going to head on into a tea-shoppe with crocheted cookies on offer.

'I can't say I've ever seen a knitted éclair before,' says you and maybe you're having a little moment there, picturing yourself telling your mum about this? This account for the smile on your face? After all those exotic shops—I guess you'd like to send a picture home. Bit of comfort, after all these miles, in all this strangeness: something knitted. Something pink. Go on then: step inside.

Actually, lots very pink. The doorbell jingles. We're in a total cosy pink everywhere tea-shoppe—feel yourself smiling into it, Barbara? No other customers—this is a *sign*: not popular. Yes utterly pink: so many pink things: pink tablecloths, pink flowery cushions tied with pink bows to wooden chairs, pink-iced buns. The knitted cakes in the window are a touch faded, being honest, a little sun-bleached, after many, many months in the window. Dropped stitch or two. Come to think of it the real ones on the counter look a tad hard round the edges, bit dry. Still: your choice.

A hairy dog, terrier of some sort—not pink—snuffles round your ankles and Daniel bends to stroke its wire-haired back. It pants, pink-tongued after all. Bit overweight. Lot overweight.

Behind the counter, a lady waits. This is Marge, Barbara. Small, glasses, grey bobbed hair. She indicates the round table in the window—sit. Marge, by the way, will be someone useful to know.

'Come and see what you'd like, Daniel,' you say, reaching for the menu. Yes leave the scruff-dog, Daniel, let it waddle off towards the back of the tea-shoppe and disappear somewhere—it's a bit smelly to have round all those cakes. Fresh cream and damp dog: not a good mix, not a food hygiene award winner. But coats off, legs under the table, examine the plastic-coated menu Daniel though you know already you're going to choose a strawberry milkshake and I bet you're convinced you'll manage a chocolate éclair as well.

'Are you sure you'll have room after chips?' I hear your mum say and she's right—you're being a bit piggy there—but look out: the grey bob is approaching.

'Now then,' Marge says. 'What can I get you?'

Ah, Barbara. I expect you'd like to say, *my life reassembled*. Never mind; take tea instead, indulge your son with both milkshake and éclair, why not after all, so far from home. He must be

tired after the journey. Yet I see your son's face is, like most things in here, pinkly cherubic and here comes the dog again look at it fat thing wobbling across the floor but see that big split smile on your son's face: 'Hello again, Doggie!' That's nice. That's happy.

'He's called Wilbur,' says Marge, 'aren't you boy.' Wilbur sits his fat backside on Daniel's feet. 'Ah look, you've made a friend.'

'Hello Wilbur,' says Daniel, fussing the dog's coat.

The milkshake, when it arrives, is pink, naturally. Daniel scoffs the chocolate éclair and drains the glass, sucking, scooting the straw across the bottom. His mouth is chocolate-ringed.

'I don't know where you put it,' you say.

Sip your tea, Barbara, and worry not. Must be the sea breeze, whetting his appetite. There's a salt smell to it, this northern air: rich, briny—did you notice as you wandered the streets? Seaweed on sandflats.

The sea is different here. At home—how long will you call it that? A little way away now—in fact approximately *four hundred miles* away—Cornish sea: green, froth-up-the-rocks, warm rockpool. Soft-edged, silver-sunset romance. This is, we both know, crap: in a southwesterly gale the wind whips those froth-edged waves into vast, white hammers of water to pound at the rocks. Monster sea, troll sea, it gobbles sand then spits it out over the coast roads, coughs up bashed starfish, their arms, or rays, as Daniel once read out to you from his *At the Seaside* book, split from their torso and spun out on the open tide. But on a late spring evening: sea stars in the green swell of water; sky stars in deep velvet arc.

Here, the sea—or what you've glimpsed of it from the small passages that run between the buildings towards the harbour's edge—is dark; turned black from cold, it skids to shore. This sea is deep, so deep: in those depths: barnacled wrecks; strange life forms: bug-eyed fish snuffle the seabed with bulging lips; tentacled squid crawl in water. This sea is swollen with mystery. Enigmatic sea, in the north.

Drain your tea; evening's coming on. Outside, the roadway rises. The gradient is so steep and you're so low here, at your pink table, that the window shows pairs of legs passing, mooching up, or tipping downhill. Children's legs, running. Old legs—take it steady. Jeans, a skirt. Trainers. Walking boots. All—unlike you, Barbara—with somewhere to go. Like the running tide, the realisation of what you've done sweeps over you. Alone with a young child, in a place where you know no one. Suitcases in a car.

Come *on*, Barbara. No tears, for here you are. You've arrived! You just need to nudge it forward, piece by small piece. Not all those legs are walking with purpose. Is that how it looks? You'd be surprised just how many there are in life, wandering untethered. Like Harry. Now he has a wandering heart; needs someone to help him settle it. But sitting here amongst the pinks and knitteds, pining? It won't help, won't get you somewhere to stay. Look: you've come a long way; you're tired. The night's soon here in its deep blacks. The splendid ruin on the hillside will be lit. The streets of Whitby will come at you in their gaudy reds when you step outside.

You're in a *seaside town*, at the end of the season. Do I need to spell it out? Find a bed and breakfast for tonight; there'll be loads to choose from. Try asking Marge; she's friendly enough. Told you she'll be useful. You'll see; just *ask*.

You've spent the night in a bed and breakfast over a café in the old town, dug into the hillside at the back of Planters Yard. Look at that climbing rose that overhangs the yard wall. It's sweet; it's twee; it's *fucking* convenient and to be fair, I couldn't have made this part easier for you, Barbara. At least you were brave enough to enquire at the tea-shoppe. No doubt Marge directed you to Planters Yard and actually, this part of your story is a touch tedious, if I'm honest. Trying not to yawn. Did I tell you I've been walking again? Go on, get down to the café; it's where they serve your breakfast. Finish up your sausage and egg, pay the balance or whatever, ask if there's a cottage available for a longer let. You'll find out from the guy behind the counter frying up bacon that in fact his mate owns a cottage back across the bridge which is empty and available for a long let. So convenient! Quick phone call between Guy Behind the Counter and his mate, and you agree that you'll pay a deposit and rent the cottage for six months over winter—which gives you a grippy-inside feeling that you can't quite identify.

I was walking in the dark. There had been rain. How the world turns strange under night skies, Barbara! I walked, and broad-leafed plants were slimed skin, squat toads. Hedges were bare bones, torchlit ribs. That grippy-inside feeling is *excitement*, by the way.

I looked up: perfect star-plough. I searched for the moon but its pale round was hiding. We don't own this world, darkened, Barbara; it's for night creatures—owl cry, then again, over field towards graveyard. It was answered; there were two, in secret flying.

Night shrank to light-pool. I turned, turned again, peered into dense black. Imagine: the tree becomes a man. He steps out inhuman: stretched skin, guttural cry. Closes in. The black lane; the road sign was a figure shocked into light by my torch—Give Way 50 yds. Such stories, in the dark!—did I say you arrived at the end of summer? Your story will work so much better in a world turned strange, Barbara.

I think—it should be late October. Put the clocks back, bring on the afternoon dark. You packed your winter coat, didn't you? Get it on then. You might want to add a pair of mittens to your shopping list: the temperature has dropped. There's a chill air—at least one jumper colder than the south, up here.

Lord be praised, Guy Behind the Counter even has a spare key for his mate's cottage! Don't expect climbing roses in every corner of the town though, Barbara. Some places are—shall we say—a little more reminiscent of the past than others. Still: you trundle your little pull-along case back over the bridge, Daniel trailing, into the street that leads past the bakers and the shoe shop and here, on the right, is a wrought-iron gated passage. Daniel pulls the gate open and in you go, up steps and more steps then flagstones as the yard narrows. Right at the back, beyond much of the light because most of it is blocked by what looks to you like the back of a massive brick-built chapel yes at the very end of all things, where the passage is one person wide and comes to a halt at stone wall, a small green door to the right proclaims itself as Teacup Cottage. There's a small tree in a wooden planter to one side of the door; a pair of glass fishing buoys hanging in netting from a hook; a Green Man knocker.

Ah, home. The green door opens to a room: square, high window at the back. Cheap beige carpet, fireplace, wood burning stove on flagstone hearth. Small clay pot, or urn in one corner of the hearth. Along one wall: cooker, couple of cupboards. Table with plastic spotty cloth, chairs. Small sofa. On a shelf: red plastic flowers in a metal jug; wooden seagull on one leg. You look for the door to the other rooms—actually there aren't any, not on this floor. You think this is small? This, Barbara, is a classic yard cottage. Would have been about twenty fisherfolk living here, once upon a time. The only way is up! So: narrow stairs to bedroom, bathroom. Stairs again to twin beds—the one nearest the window for Daniel, you instantly decide. Toilet. Just be thankful the days of the tin bath outside, tip your bathwater down the open drain, are long gone.

Unpack, Barbara, then to the tea-shoppe for coffee; you can ask Marge if she wouldn't mind keeping one eye on Daniel who'd like another pinky-pink milkshake please while you take a walk down to the harbour, do some thinking.

Back across the bridge to the harbourside area. Into the full bluster of wind coming straight off that grey sea it'll take your hair off, blow your head sideways, but hunkered down behind the harbour walls: stalls—buckets and spades here, flip-flops and crab lines or at least in summer when there's a touch of blue sky and sunshine to take the edge off things but now: sea black and rising. That wind will chill you raw. Anyone wandering on that harbourside will find the snot whipped from their nose before they can wipe at it, like the seagulls which pinch your chips before you can get them near your mouth. Land on heads, dig beaks into ice creams, seagulls do. Greedy vicious things. Or canny.

Chilly, then. Few foodie stalls open, fat smells and frying, chips mostly. Amusement arcade further down the promenade but here, brick walls painted with sea and starfish to make it look like Holiday Land. Enjoy the walk, Barbara, even with this wind. Don't concern yourself about Daniel: he's fine, he's safe at the tea-shoppe on t'other side of the bridge, sucking the froth off his milkshake with his straw, stroking the dog. He's got two bars of the electric heater near enough to heat at least one leg and he doesn't mind the cheese-feet stink of Wilbur, who's cooking his fur close-up. Marge will look after them both. People have hearts, here. Or some do.

Here's a stall should interest you—right between ice cream and doughnuts:

CLAIRVOYANT

SPIRITUALIST

TAROT READINGS

JUNO

Ah, Juno! She's useful, Barbara. She'll be able to tell you about the shop her brother owns and wouldn't you know it? There's a part-time job vacancy. Did I mention which shop? Let Juno tell you; her amazing powers of foresight should make it easy. She'll want to do a reading for you first, though. D'you think she saw you coming?

A small sign:

OPEN

How lucky. Normally this late in the season she'll have shut up shop, taken herself home out of the wind but this weekend there's a smattering of holidaymakers wandering the harbour, cone of chips here, bag of fudge there, wind knocking the sides of their faces off, earache later but late season holidays: such a bargain.

Juno's open for business, Barbara. Give it a try, do. Don't be shy—in you go.

Lace frill over the doorway, very tasteful. Feel it brush your head as you peep in. Inside, such ambience! Dim light, tealight flame all a-quiver, incense enough to choke on if you breathe too hard—best keep it shallow. Posters on the wall: *Gypsy Advisor*. *Genuine Romany*. Small window, blocked with curtain—more lace.

On a shelf, crystal ball in a plastic bowl; small cloth dolly wearing a brown cotton dress; a pale bright phrenology head. The head looks, luminous in the gloom. You've seen one of these before. Where was it? Maybe you peeked into a shop, past all the things in the window, to see one of these staring at you shut-eyed. You can't recall? It'll come back to you.

In the corner a woman sits in an armchair, doing a pretty good job of looking gypsy-like. She has long, dark hair under a lace veil. Around her neck, an assortment of gold necklaces jangle against her cleavage as she rises to indicate the other chair, which you need to perch yourself on. You face each other across a small round table draped in black velvet.

Juno lifts her veil. Ah, Juno! Even in this dim light you can see this lady isn't quite as young as first, veiled impressions might have you believe. Juno has unusually pale blue eyes, a long nose. But she's smiling a welcome. Who's going to speak first? Since you're already wondering why on earth you're doing this, and whether you should get up and leave, and if after one night in a bed and breakfast you can legitimately claim to have journeyed to a new life in the north (which you can't) when, later tomorrow, you bring the car to a halt outside your parents' house, firmly in the south once more, it must be Juno. What will she say? Will she begin with 'Welcome,' in a low voice filled with mysticism? Will she already have a prophesy to make, brought on by the aura of light that surrounds your head? Are there already angels present?

Actually there are a couple of housekeeping points to get over, before the fortune-telling can commence. 'It's thirty quid,' says Juno. 'Can you shut the door?'

'Yes of course,' you say, and get up to push the door closed, in so doing barring your own escape. You sit once more, but before you can delve into your bag for your wallet, Juno reaches across the table and takes both your hands in hers. How awkward. You've only just met. But Juno's hands are warm; the pale blue eyes staring into yours are friendly. 'Now,' says Juno. 'Tell me your name.'

Oh! I see you hesitate. During the walk from the tea-shoppe across the bridge to the harbourside shacks, you gave this some thought and fair enough, you're not keen to let everybody know exactly who you are. An instinctive desire, perhaps, to remain anonymous in this new, unfamiliar setting. No problem. But more than this, as you walked, you experienced—it was at about the point where you looked up to see the grey line of sea, then behind you at the gaunt outline of the ruined abbey on the headland—an inner convulsion, or rebellion, even, against the old you. Only natural: this is, after all, your new start. And tempted as you were just a moment ago to walk out of

this booth, even as thoughts of returning to Cornwall filled your head, you closed the door and returned to Juno's table.

You should be proud, Barbara. Because the journey, the conversation in the tea-shoppe, the Tarot reading that Juno is about to start—these things aren't just happening to you. You think you're passive? Wrong. You're *making* this story; you don't really need Juno to tell your fortune. But the door's shut, there's thirty quid promised, and you need to know where to find that job. Let's get to that reading, because Juno has let go of your hands and is offering you a pack of large, tattered Tarot cards and telling you to shuffle them, leave your energy in them, even as she asks you your name and you say, 'Claudra. It's Claudra.'

What the fuck?

Where did this come from? *Claudra!* Are you telling me, *Barbara*, that you saw that cheesy *Dracula Experience* place by the harbour and you—you sat in the tea-shoppe and doodled on a receipt and—you did some crazy *anagram* with the old cunt's name? You really did this? It sounds like—it's just—

That's so—

it's actually rather good. *Claudra*. A touch of the dramatic.

Completely un-Barbara.

I like it!

June: such a childhood she had, because her family was stuck in the Dark Ages so there was Mother scanning the pages of her *Kay's* catalogue in the hunt for a new dress or something—anything to turn Father's head when it wasn't really the dress it was the armour beneath it all girdles and press studs tights and poppers she was under there and really wasn't it Eric's head she was trying to turn? Such struggles going on in the adults in June's young life, when there was Father coming home to a house full of piles of newspapers, shoes everywhere, nothing dusted, nothing cleaned, plates everywhere with crumbs scattered, cups with the tidemark of last week's Tetley's dried brown around their insides and if you want your shirts washing shove a bit of Daz in with 'em yourself and what was a man to do?

As for dinner, tea—gone were the days of steak and kidney casserole with home-made dumplings, jam roly-poly with custard yes gone, just a luncheon meat fritter here and there and Lyon's jam tarts and Arctic Roll and a Wall's Viennetta on a Sunday if he was lucky and beyond him, it was, to see Mother's own struggle with her kitchen sink chains and her apron strings—such threads, such bindings there were, such messes such *tanglings*: there she was with two children one angel one monster—though which was which?—and freedom of sorts in a part-time office job but Eric these days ran from the photocopier at the sight of her and Father seemed a bit more involved with his own office work than he possibly should be and not one, not a single fucking orgasm in the last however-many years unless you counted the times when, in the bath, bit of her own spit and polish, polish, polish no not ever, not with Father. Only with Angelique and her ripped bodice.

Yes gone were the days when Father and Mother rode out on pushbikes together and Father did a bit of fondling over the picnic things till they were both a little damp, then rode back, both of them, cheeks flushed from all that fresh air.

Or went to the pictures and sat in the back row and kissed.

Or walked the beach together, hand in hand.

Or stood under the whalebone arch for a photograph, handed the camera to a passing stranger.

All that tip-tapping across the yard, smart shoes and riding high coming home to his new bride and in time, soon-to-be-mother. All her lipstick and welcome home darling and what can I do for you. Gone, fine castle in the air reduced to rubble heap of pursed lips and sideways looks, loaded statements, sleeping back to back on far bed-edges. How both began to grow into their faces,

Claudra. The lines worked their way into Mother's skin, till the mirror showed her nothing but lip wrinkles and undyed greys. Father's forehead creased itself into a frown; gravity pulled at the edges of his mouth. Yes fine castle subsiding, brick here, lump of plaster there, years spent crumbling until finally settling—probably with a sigh—into dust, or ashes.

In amongst the debris, two children trying to grow up. Years of Mother brushing June's hair, plaiting it, using ribbons, while her little brother's hair grew into a mess of tangled briars. Years of Mother stitching a was-a-curtain dress for June to wear, keeping those fingers busy-busy so her brain didn't have too much time to *think*, Claudra, while June's little brother hung around in any old shorts and t-shirt, scuffed sandals. Yes years of Mother saying how well June had got on in school, while her little brother was told he should try to be more like his older sister: better behaved, more likeable, nicer child all round. Different child altogether, possibly.

You'd expect him to be jealous, wouldn't you? Put frogs in his sister's bed; mix worms in her spaghetti hoops. You'd expect him to pull June's plaits, steal her ribbons, scribble over her best handwriting. Especially after the rowan berries, when he was but an itty-bitty boy.

There was the time when the ice cream van came tinkly-tune diddle-di-dee round the corner and Mother, who was in the front garden weeding amongst the roses said yes and he and his sister dashed up to join the queue of kids (who weren't friends and never came to play because by now it was common knowledge that June and her little brother lived in a house that was weird) and exchanged the last of their pocket money for a cider lolly for June, lemon for Little Brother.

Back in the garden, while Mother went inside to wash, she said, her hands, boil the kettle to make a cup of tea, June pulled the wrapper from her lolly and sucked at the ice and, as her little brother unwrapped his, she dared him to piddle over it and still eat it and you know what? He did. Right there and then. So Little Brother won the dare but who got to eat a lolly with widdle still dripping from it?

Whatever did the other children think? Those rose bushes were quite a size. Bit of privet too—enough to hide a couple of kids being silly. Or weird.

Yes you'd expect jealousy, after being tricked into licking a lolly laced with wee, and *especially* after retching on rowan berries and *especially* after all the games of doctors and nurses where he was the patient and never allowed to be the doctor, where he'd have to put up with having his tummy rubbed, and tickled a bit, and bits and pieces of him bandaged and sometimes Germolene applied from an almost empty tin that June had pilfered from the bathroom cabinet.

Come to think of it, why didn't June grow up to be a surgeon, or a doctor, or at least a nurse? What was with all the Tarot cards and gypsy stuff when she could have—ah, but there was the small problem of Father pegging out so soon, then Mother popping her clogs early, then the family house to sell and the shop to manage, then—*total* accident but child on the way, all of which, as the years have rolled, have rather tipped her train off the tracks, you might say.

You could say that Little Brother's childhood was a tad one-sided; that things weren't always fair. But here's the thing: in all the mess of trying to live in a family that was entrenched in the Dark Ages, there was one person who June protected from (Mother's) harm where she could, and who June loved above all else, and that was her little brother. And in all the mess of *that* family, and in spite of his obsessive drawing and poetry and later, painting, as they both grew a bit and their stars were rising just as Mother's and Father's were in freefall, there was one person who Little Brother loved most, and that was his older sister, June.

Juno lays several cards face up on the black velvet. 'I see you've had some difficulty,' she says. 'Look here: *The Moon*. The path ahead may be unclear. And the two swords on this one, look—conflict. A sticking point. You need to move on.'

The pictures on the faces of the cards are bright: on *The Moon*, two dogs howl madness at a vivid blue sky. Each card is scribbled on round the edges: notes for Juno, in tiny pencil lettering.

She divides the rest of the pack into three piles. 'Please choose one. Shuffle.'

Pick one up, Claudra; mix up the cards—we're getting into this already. Careful you don't drop any onto the black velvet. Large, aren't they? Too big for your hands but just the right size for Juno who has quite thick fingers. If you look closely, do a bit of fortune telling yourself, you'll see a lifetime of hard work in those hands of hers, already. These are hands that have cleaned up, over the years.

Careful you don't drop your luck, as your dad once said when you dropped a card as you shuffled the pack to play. Memories! Playing whist as a four with your parents, Keith as your partner. I think you lost, the pair of you. I seem to recall your irritation with him at the time. Partners in cards: small failure. But let's not think of Keith just now; he's four hundred or so miles away, and Juno is laying more cards out. You need to pay attention.

'Ah,' says Juno. 'Things will improve for you. You'll find your way out of this. The sun—there, you see? Yes, things will get better. The *Death* card—don't be alarmed, though it points to a personal

loss. But the sun keeps appearing—look at it coming up there. That's a good sign. You're in transition.'

On the card that Juno points to, death rides a stallion. On the ground, a crown toppled—such drama in the cards! But behind green hills a bright sun rises, and you, Claudra, in spite of the cheap lace at the doorway, the incense which makes your throat catch, see hope. I know it.

Another card: *The Emperor*. 'There's a man,' says Juno, leaning over the cards. 'He'd like to take care of you. Does this resonate?'

'A bit,' you say, and I notice you don't elaborate. I totally understand.

Juno's fingers work between the cards, lifting one, moving it, fingering another. Those hands again: the nails are short and clean. There are no rings on Juno's fingers, which is a surprise for you, I see. You were expecting them to be laden with gold, in a gypsy kind of way? Let me whisper in your ear, Claudra: I don't think the gypsy thing is actually *real*. Bit of an act. Like yourself, if we're honest here. Look at you both, faking it!

'*The Hermit*. Take care not to be too much alone. You deserve to be with others. And *The Tower*. Change, freedom. There's a lot that's positive.'

Three more times Juno gathers the cards, splits the pack, asks you to choose. 'The sun—keeps appearing. I see a journey, also, and water. This man. He's interested in you. He'd like to take you to where there's water.'

You're thinking Cornwall, and Keith. Oh Claudra, the past cannot escape the cards—or something like, if we want to continue with this *sham*. Ah, but such fun! A laugh! A hoot! A gas! Although to be fair, June's quite good at this cards lark. Done a bit of practising. In fact I'd say she's a natural.

'The angels can advise,' says Juno, reaching for a second pack of cards. The first, when she turns the card up, is *Jeremiel*. 'Jeremiel says, it's time. Time to move on. A change for the better. And Gabriel says, have patience. You can resolve this. Nurture your child, and in doing so, you will nurture yourself.' Oh *now* you're surprised; you haven't mentioned your young son to her.

Juno turns the last card: 'And the angel Haniel. Things will happen. Don't let your fears hold you back. Are there any questions you'd like to ask?'

'I can't think—'

'You will find your way,' says Juno. A small timer pings, somewhere. She gathers the cards. Okay session over. You still need to pay, Claudra—used notes on the black velvet cloth of the table please—but isn't there something else, something you need to ask? I'm getting serious now.

Claudra, don't you dare get up from that chair and leave without asking about the job. Marge, remember? The tea-shoppe? All that incense clouded your mind? What did you come here for, anyway? To dwell on all that's history? It's a story already told. This is about your *future*. It's simple. Just start with, 'Marge at the tea shoppe said there was a job.' And, by the way, I need to have a word with you about Juno.

But for fuck's sake. *The past cannot escape the cards. Sees hope.* Claudra, Claudra. You're being pulled into this, despite all the fakery. It's jiggery-pokery claptrap *rubbish!* Probably.

'I just wondered,' you begin.

'Yes?' Juno is patting herself, searching for something. She brings out a small tin, opens the lid. Inside are three neatly rolled cigarettes. 'Just need a quick smoke before the next one,' she says, as you look. 'Anything I can help with? You've used your time, really.'

'Yes of course. It's just that the lady at the tea-shoppe—Marge—said you might know of a job.'

'Oh right. I'll come out with you,' says Juno, tearing off her veil.

Outside, there's a brisk wind. You stand by the harbour wall, the pair of you, arms folded. Juno lights up behind a cupped hand, takes a drag. 'I make five last the day,' she says, blowing out into whipped air. The wind slaps her black velvet dress against the back of her legs. She has large calf muscles; her feet look big. You try not to shiver. Beyond the harbour, the line of sea is darker, the colour of lead. There's a mist coming down.

'It's only part-time,' says Juno. 'Shop assistant.'

'Sounds just right.' You smile, try to make eye contact, but Juno stares out to sea with a face like granite.

'Probably not what you're looking for.'

'I'd be interested, I really would.'

'Won't pay much.'

'It would be a start. As I'm new to the area.'

'You planning on staying then.'

'For a while.'

'You'll make friends.'

'I hope so.'

'You're feeling a bit alone just now.'

'Yes!'

It's as if Juno has read you, in the cards. Yes Juno's better at this than you—or I—perhaps thought.

At last she looks at you, and in those pale eyes it's as if something has given: a drop in tension, like a rope hanging slack. There's something like a smile. She pats your arm. 'Now, no tears. He was never worth it. You're welcome to go on over and call in at the shop. Harry'll be there tomorrow. It's called *Art Mayhem*. Just up by Planters Yard, in the old town. Look for the red windows. I'll send him a message, let him you're coming in first thing shall I?'

'You can—you have a way—?'

Juno smiles properly now, flips her fag-end over the wall into the sea. 'I'll give him a call,' she says, reaching in her pocket and bringing out a mobile phone.

Now about Juno. You think she's nice. And she *is*, Claudra, she has a heart well-meaning. You're vulnerable right now. And fuck me, so naïve. You think she 'saw' your son in the cards? Don't be fooled. Marge told her of course! You did some chatting in that tea-shoppe, didn't you? Marge gabbled the rest straight to the clairvoyant outside her shack while Juno pulled on the first fag of the day. She knows you're a one-nighter at the B and B. You think she used her mindpowers to see Keith, all that way in the south? What about the *indentation* on your finger, where your wedding ring used to sit? She can read the signs, Claudra, but they're not in the cards: you carry them with you. She can see your loss in your eyes, read your need in the way your fingers clutch.

Juno will help you. It does her splendidly well to hold out the hand of friendship—all well and good. She needs to be needed. Gets off on it, wonderful warm feeling. And it is, it is. You know what it's like: buy the *Big Issue*, swap your coins for that nice helpy feeling. You've never bought it? Not when the guy stands freezing his bollocks off on the street corner? You think he spends his takings on drugs? That's so cynical. The guy's trying to set his life right. Look at that bloke sitting greyly in the shop doorway all the while as you collect your son from the tea-shoppe, thank Marge for her help, pay for the milkshake then tootle past on your way to a safe (probably) little part-time job at Harry's arty red shop. Pull Daniel close to your side, Claudra; there are down-and-outs in this small town. Plenty here who kip under miserable cardboard, miserable crack-house two miserable streets behind the happy-seaside holiday lets.

But Juno. Helpy warm feeling, stick with you while you're down and out.

June, Juno. It's all in the name. Juno the mystic, the clairvoyant. See her at the sea's edge, her eye on the sludged waters. Will she raise her arms, spread those thick fingers, summon spirits

to turn dreams wicked, do dread business in the night? Or will she reach for the next fag in the tin? Watch her blacks flap in the dropping fog! World turned strange, Claudra. It'll be a good story. Just—be careful.

It's been a long day. Is Daniel ready for sleep? I'd pack him off to bed. Up the stairs then, settle your son to sleep. You can take yourself off down to the one square room, get yourself a glass of wine, plump the cushions, shove a log in the stove. Leave the bedtime story to me; I'll stay with your son, whisper tales into his dreams where he'll see Hansel and Gretel, follow the bread crumbs if you can but the birds will peck them away till you're lost in the forest yes the dark, dark forest where the trees have eyes and roots that creep and twine about your ankle, pull you in, stop fast your mouth with twigs, and leaves, and crawling things till you choke and in your throat, black wriggling things of the earth—too much already? Only teasing.

You can trust me, Claudra. Seriously! Look at him, dear lad: away with the fairies already much, much nicer spirits than the hedgewitch self that haunts my tales. Oh, if 'twere the case that I had birthed my own child! Mayhap he would've had fair curls, like your sweet child. Rosebud lips, fair cherub cheeks—

sleep, young Daniel; feel my hand, warm on your brow. Wander in stardust dreams, little one. I'll hurt you not but only whisper my ghost-self in shadow.

Don't they *change*, though, kids, as they grow? Talk different, dress different—all those hormones. There was June, look, sitting on her bed, leaning into her pillows, knees drawn up. Fresh out of the bath, she was, t-shirt and teen-bra, knickers and socks. Homework to finish probably now she was in secondary school and there was her little brother come to keep her company or pester just as she wanted to write in her diary, which was totally private but she wouldn't put it past her little brother to peep. Once, she had written *don't be so bloody nosy* at the top of one of the pages, just in case. She was pretty sure he took things, if he got the chance. She had a silver locket which she had been keeping in a small cardboard case inside her jewellery box and she couldn't find it wherever she looked. The jewellery case had a small ballet dancer which, when she opened the lid, popped up to pirouette to tinny-tiny music something from *Swan Lake* or *Nutcracker* and her brother liked to make the ballerina dance. It's a funny thing, but June can't remember what happened to the jewellery box with its small pirouetting lady. She shifts herself round on the Chesterfield, glances over her shoulder as if she might see it amongst the piled frilleries in the shop.

'Pack it in,' June had said, when her brother lifted the lid, all those years ago. 'You'll break it.'

She was into fantasy by then and it was all Alan Garner and John Gordon, amulets to find, dark forces to battle but still Radio 1 and *Top of the Pops* each week on the telly. She was drawn to wearing black and there was a bit of eye liner involved which Mother tolerated but Father—actually Father usually stayed late at the office these days, which gave Mother the chance to dye her hair a nice chestnut brown to hide those greys, which were coming fast. He wouldn't notice though as these days he was *far* more involved with his work and in fact more interested in quickfucking his secretary over the office desk, blind down. Naturally, June has remained unaware.

So on this day Mother was in plastic gloves with little plastic bottles of this and that, ammonia stink at the kitchen sink after the kids had got to grips with her version of salad for tea which today was tomato, lettuce, boiled egg and Heinz Salad Cream. Little Brother liked to stuff his tomato with chopped up egg and salad cream then go for it in a single mouthful, which made tomato pips and salad creamy bits spurt down his chin and Mother was cross with him for his bad table manners. Mother was cross quite a bit these days. Perhaps Eric had stopped hiding behind the filing cabinets and plucked up the courage to come clean about the gay thing. She wouldn't tell on him; she was too embarrassed about coming on to a guy who to be honest, probably couldn't get a hard on for her if she offered to pay him in blow-jobs.

Little Brother's reading had come on, too, in spite of the fact that he still hated school, and he was following in June's footsteps with the fantasy thing. He was a poetry writer with a love of sea poems that he kept a close secret from the couple of kids he knew vaguely at school. In fact he knew all the words to John Masefield's *Sea Fever* off by heart, though that was a thing his teachers would never hear about and Little Brother would go on one day to get a paltry grade in his English exam but by then he wouldn't care because for him it was all about drawing. The sketch pad he had on his knees as he sat on his sister's bed, leaning back against her legs, was filled with pencil efforts to capture the rush of waves towards a land somewhere in his imagination—although he found the curl of the wave just before it breaks on the shore hard to get right. He worked the pencil harder and harder into the page. If you were to turn that page, Claudra, you'd see his latest effort scored into the paper until it almost tore.

'How's it going, little bruvver?' said June, shoving *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* to one side and leaning forward to see over his shoulder. 'Nice one.' She put her arms round her brother, pulling him into a bear hug, then shifted her legs suddenly, so that he was pitched to one side.

'Don't!' He pushed himself back upright, leaned in again. June took a strand of his hair – how their hair had grown! There was June's, all long, dark, and her brother: briar patch, wild thatch. June took a strand of her brother's hair and wound it round and round the fingers of one hand, pulled gently.

'I'm drawing,' he said, pulling his head away, but she had his hair fast in her hand. 'Ouch!'

'It's good,' said June.

'It's shite,' said her brother, frowning over his sketch pad.

'Mother says you shouldn't swear like that.'

'Mother's not in here.' He worked at a patch of sea: dark, darker—it would soon be black, if he didn't let up with the pencil.

'Anyway it isn't *shite*. I like your drawings.' She let go of his hair, placed a small kiss behind his ear. 'Do one of me?'

'I want to finish this.'

'You'll be *ages*. Go on. I'll sit still I promise.'

Her brother sighed; she wouldn't let up until he gave in. He turned a page in his book then shuffled himself round on the bed until he was facing her. 'Don't move then.'

'I won't move a muscle. I'll read if you like. Then I won't fidget for ages.'

'Alright.'

He started work on a quick sketch of his sister. The pencil moved fast across the page. The long hair—the way it fell across one shoulder, the dark of it just like Mother's used to be. The pale eyes, the long nose just like Father's. T-shirt off one bony shoulder, lift of a small breast under the cotton.

'God!' June said, when he finally tore a page from the sketch book and handed her the result. 'Are my lips really that big? You drew my tits in, you rude boy!'

She tipped him off the bed; he landed with a thump on the bedroom floor.

'Will you two quieten down!' shouted Mother up the stairs. She had just rinsed off the chestnut brown and it was going to be way too dark. Her skin was different, these days—paler. Her eyebrows needed pencilling in just to remind her she still had any. She'd look like mutton dressed as lamb. Too late now, Mother: that stuff is permanent.

On the bedroom floor, June straddled her brother. She was still bigger than he was; he hadn't started his growth spurt yet.

'Submit!' she said, smiling (June has never forgotten this. She still has the drawing, folded in a diary).

Ah but Claudra this morning I see you've found the shop: all those little windows, their red-painted frames. A bell rings somewhere as Daniel charges straight in, drawn to the bits and pieces for sale. I see you hesitate at the door—step inside; it won't bite. Such things there are, to fascinate: in the Tiffany lamplit gloom a small red engine chugs on a track, through a tunnel, past miniature trees, round again. At the rear of the shop, a wooden counter, no one behind it. There's a carousel; its horses slow-gallop, round and round. Shelves filled with wooden automata: turn the small handle to the side and the waves toss, the ship pitches. Or this one: two birds dip their beaks to peck. Here, a pair of hands clap. Crazy clown, wearing a top hat, pedals on a unicycle. Around his neck, a marching bass drum hangs from red ribbon. Turn the handle: the drumsticks in his wooden hands would hammer at the sides of the drum, if they could reach. They beat only at air; the drum is mute.

'Look at these, Daniel,' you say, but he's disappeared into the crazy mess of teddy bears and toys, so for something to do—presumably the bell will fetch someone eventually—you pick through a box of dust-covered kitchen allsorts: egg cups, plates, one of those bird-with-an-open-beak pie funnels for placing under the pastry lid. Bit deeper and you come upon a couple of battered metal tablespoons, a scratched oblong enamel dish—white with dark blue rim—perhaps the very dish the beaked bird was baked in. But leave these kitchen bits and take a look here: life-size figures: milling

crowd of tailors' dummies. Their torsos are fabric, or wooden, antique. Some wear jackets. This one is dressed in a long, dark green medieval gown. Feel the velvet in your fingers: gorgeous, only one small stain, dried out years ago. This is a vintage piece, can't expect it to be perfect. These dummies though: they're headless, armless— or mostly: several have wooden, articulated arms. The arms swing, loose. The fists are curled. So many figures lurk here—their shadows, from the corner of your eye, make you catch your breath.

On a battered dark wood sideboard: a selection of hands display rings or bracelets. Vintage, probably porcelain, some black, some white; they sprout from the dark wood like monochrome toadstools. The hands are open; they reach. Their outstretched delicacy reminds you somehow of protest, or Suffragettes, though you can't identify why. This one, elegant fingers with several rings adorning, is perched not on wrist but on black arm; it stops at the elbow. The fingers look as if they should hold a cigarette. But *this* one, in a small glass cabinet: the skin on those fingers looks a little bit dried, little bit lifelike—this, Claudia, is a *Hand of Glory*. Probably hacked from a hanged villain for its extra magic. See the candle poking through its fingers? Fashioned from *fat* from the corpse, it is. Don't light it—it'll turn you statue, hold you fast in unnatural sleep till fell deeds are done. There's something curiously leather-like about the hand as if, in its mummification, it has become glove, though several phalanges are visible through the fabric of pickled skin. The ends of the fingers where the nails should be—were, once—are nobbled, warped, as if the candle that burnt on this Hand of Glory was not fuelled by wax, but fat from the *fingers* themselves.

A touch of the occult; shudder if you will and move on—there's more to see, much more. Here, a bust—phrenology head. Was it only yesterday when Daniel stood, mesmerised by the fabulous things in the window display? Not an unpleasant face, though those shut eyes: such blanks—as if turned statue. Withered to stone under Medusan gaze. *Moral & Religious Sentiments*, you read on the grey-glazed head. *Intuitive Reasoning; Reflective Faculties. Domestic Propensities* are situated above the right ear. What happens if you press there? You suddenly feel like doing the ironing? Just behind the left ear: *Destructiveness*. At the back, just above the nape of the neck, small, like a secret kiss: *Love of Sex*. Beneath the glaze, the scalp is finely crazed. To touch the head feels—impertinent. Yet you do, and it's dead-cold.

Another tailor's dummy, in black iron. You can see its hollow guts inside curls of metal, in at the waist, out at the bust. Its feminine, curved, metallic swirls of sensual delight. Draped around the shoulders is a gorgeous feathered affair: a capelet of cream and gold feathers. You've never seen one of those before. The feathers are held by gold-beaded trim, gold clasp. You can't help running

your fingers through those feathers, their mellow shades, their silks. Such seductive, sultry, *carnal* feathers!—but who's this crept up behind you, in the lamplit gloom, in amongst the mobbing dummies and craze-faced dolls and the unlit Hand of Glory? Someone you should meet. Allow me to introduce you:

'Nice, isn't it?' a soft voice says, and it's Harry for you Claudra, at last.

'Like to try it?' His smile shows crooked teeth. He's thin, bearded, dark, wild-haired; he wears a shirt, white gone grey, tucked into threadbare denim jeans smeared in blacks, browns.

'Oh, I couldn't afford it,' you say. 'Besides, I wouldn't have anywhere to wear something as lovely as that. The feathers are so beautiful. What are they?'

'Rooster, goose, some ostrich—the small flitty ones.' He twirls the feathers in his fingers; they fly like hairs. 'Wear it in your own back yard then.'

'I haven't got one of those, right now.' Whoops your face has fallen. Don't think about all that 'what am I doing here' stuff—bit more positive. Say something else, something nicer.

'People should be able to wear what they want, wherever they are.' You smile back. Better Claudra, better.

'Proper free, like.'

'Yes.'

'Here look.' Before you can refuse or move away, he's unclipped the capelet from the dummy and swirled it round your shoulders. He fastens the clip just below your throat, where your heartbeat throbs. There's black under his nails; his hands smell of something. Oil. It's linseed oil.

'Wait a sec.' He disrobes a nearby dummy with a flourish and drapes a black dinner jacket round his own shoulders. 'See. We're reinvented. Who are we now?'

He turns you and his hands on your arms are an imposition—or so you may say. Coupled, you face a leaning mirror, full-length, ornate dark wood framed, vintage.

What do you see through its glassy black spots, Claudra? See how your fair hair seems to glow against the fluff of feathers; you're suddenly *sumptuous* (from the chest up). Try not to look at those tired jeans, below. And he, in the mirror with you. This man, in jacket. It hangs from him: he's too lank, too thin. The black fabric accentuates his paleness. He smiles his crooked smile into the mirror. His eyes are dark, too much knowing in them. They look at you, you at him. But the capelet's hot around your neck. The feathers stick to you; you'll stifle in them. You, Claudra, have gone red.

'I need to find—my son is here, somewhere,' you say, pulling at the clasp, which remains closed.

'Wait and let me.' Hands on you *again* and he turns you and his fingers fiddle at the clasp. At last it opens and the capelet falls from you; Harry's hands catch it: 'Whoops me lovely.' He re-fastens the capelet round the shoulders of the black metal dummy, pulls himself out of the dinner jacket.

'There I was, to my mind. Gatsby,' he says, re-hanging the jacket on a dummy. 'And you, a Daisy. Now where's that lad of yours?' I see the literary reference surprises you; he *can read*, you know.

'Daniel?' you call, and your son appears, wearing a pirate hat with large green feather. 'Mummy, Mum!' he calls. He romps through the shop. 'There's a big box and it's just full of all these amazing things to dress up in!'

'Daniel those things will be for sale. Please put that hat back and apologise to the gentleman.'

'Name's Harry,' the man says. 'And it doesn't matter. Only playing, weren't we.'

He smiles at you, and you remember —at last! Thought you'd never get round to it—you meant to ask for work here. You think that now it's too late? That the mirror and the feather capelet have turned things different, made it—you feel unsettled, on thin ice; something cracks; you're ragged. Your neck, de-feathered, hot, exposed. You can't ask.

Let Harry save the moment: 'There's a job if you want,' he says, hands in pockets. 'June said you were looking. Guessed you were here for it.'

'I am,' you say. 'If you think—I would fit in.'

The crooked smile, again. 'Nine while four, three days a week. Maybe more, if you're up for it. Just serving, looking after the stock. Give me a chance to get on. You can bring the lad.'

'Well—thank you.'

'See you tomorrow.' He saunters through to the back and is gone.

'Tomorrow,' you say, to your face in the mirror.

Which is still a bit flushed, if you want me to be honest.

Here's a thing: between your first visit to the shop and the next, there's a conversation between you and your son, Claudra. Let's put you back in the cottage, by the small wood-burning stove, which you've lit, cosy again for tonight.

The décor in Teacup Cottage is—shall we say—seaside cheap. But in this small room with its window looking out onto the narrow yard, brick-back of chapel, you've stuffed the spotty plastic tablecloth into the cupboard and already worked in some colour. You've unrolled the red shagpile rug which you squeezed into the car on top of the suitcases, brought cushions in—the very same cushions, by the way, which once carried the imprint of your arse from the night Keith humped you on the chaise longue, until you plumped them, next morning. The night your son was conceived. Those cushions have soul, history. You've thrown a coloured scarf over a lamp which lit the room in too-startled white and hey presto! Bohemian! The woodstove chucks out heat; there's a merry glow.

It's late in the day, close to Daniel's bedtime. He's in his space rocket pyjamas and you sit on the rug by the stove for a chapter of something, bit of Roald Dahl, nice and primary school.

Tomorrow you'll go to the shop, to work. Yes indeed! But for now, merry fire, bohemian glow of scarfed lamp. Small sofa, small boy, with you, reading.

You finish the chapter. Daniel leans against you, then asks, 'Mummy, will I go to school here?'

Will you send him, Claudra? Autumn is shaking and spilling leaves, has squeezed the sun out of the sky, chilled your sweet bones. Holidays over, term has started—some weeks ago, actually. Didn't you notice? Will you place your son in the hands of the state education system, here in the north? Feel them closing in, Claudra: *The Authorities*. Your new name, new start will be checked, stamped, authorised—or more likely squashed, stamped on, stifled even before you can begin to breathe. Will you register your new name and address with the bank, library, solicitor? Not to mention your driving licence—and the Inland Revenue, dental practice, doctors' surgery—

will you give up your new home address? Give out your name? Claudra, you'll say. *But your bank card has Mrs B here, not Ms C. Could you please explain?*

They'll crawl all over you, Claudra. Is your son well fed? Kept clean? Properly educated? Developmental milestones met? Is he socialised? Balanced? Normal? And you: are your bills paid? Your car taxed, insured? Your electricity paid for, your income taxed? National Insurance—you're nearly thirty, Claudra—have you started saving for your old age yet? You *haven't*? How remarkable. How remiss. How fucking *renegade*. Would it easier to not quite show yourself? Stay a little under the radar, just for a short while, create a space for you to *be*?

Fuck. Know what I'd do? I'd forget all that *official* crap. Take your son to the shop, Claudra, he'll learn such stuff there. Might not be what *The Authorities* recommend but—look: just tuck the

cash that Harry gives you in your bag. Each day at a time, no hurry. You can teach your son; you can teach him what you like. It's what June's done with young Skip, after all. Utterly under the radar.

'Am I going to school, Mummy?' asks little Daniel, leaning in.

'There's no hurry,' you say. 'There are lots of new things to get used to before we need to think of school. I thought you might like to come with Mummy to the shop tomorrow, play with some of the things—the ones Harry lets you play with, of course.'

'Can I?'

'You can! And I'm not working every day, Daniel. I'll have time to teach you as well. We could buy some books to help. How does that sound?'

It sounds just *fine*.

Did I tell you I walked to the woods in fog, Claudra? The hill folded me in; I was lost in blurred landscape, muffled. Headlights were an eerie glow that lit up the space, burnt the trees to stark black stripes. Then the car passed; I was disappeared once more in wood smell, smoke air.

Alone in weighted silence I could creep; I could lurk. Cloaked by fog, I could do, and do, and do.* On the path, I saw a dog—or was it a wolf? Black fur, tongue out, chasing. I ran like a rat scattin! Backed my rump into the hedgerow like a bird holed up, squatted to leak my piss into leafmulch. And all the while the fog felt at my face, my cheeks, my chin. Its cold breath mixed with mine. I gasped in fog, Claudra, felt it finger my own sweet cunt! Oh Claudra, I was clotted and crawling, my wet leaves spread, my treebark dark and streaming. I slid edgeless into thick air. I was anywhere; I was of the fog.

Afterwards, as I felt my way downhill, I heard the wolf's howl, saw three deer cross the path. Their breath was mist. The air cleared; the sun broke its passion redly on the hill and I thought—I thought of you.

But you got yourself a job! You should be at Harry's shop—what have you been doing? Let's get you there quick-quick, skinny morning-moon still visible, sunshine yes yes, chilly air but quick hurry yourself across the cobbles, pull Daniel with you; you're worried no doubt that Harry will notice you're a little late on this, your first morning.

The door to the shop is unlocked; as you step inside you hear the bell, but no one comes. A half-glazed door looks as if it leads to a back room, but beyond the glass there's only dark. Perhaps he's gone out for something. Breakfast, probably. Perhaps, because he's expecting you to mind the shop, he won't come at all.

To be honest, in this morning light the shop isn't *quite* so fabulous as yesterday. Early sun's doing its best but it can't help but pick out dust on the tailor's dummies, fingerprints on the mirror, tired faces on all those teddy bears. Yes shows everything up, the morning sun, doesn't it—June should know. The gorgeous feathered cape is still there, draped voluptuous around the metal hourglass frame. Yesterday so bright, so marvellous!—today a tad wilted. A grandfather clock—you didn't notice it yesterday—has a slow tick, pendulum swing. The shop smells of damp.

Put your bag behind the wooden counter, Claudra. You'll have been expecting to struggle with an electronic till, card payments perhaps. In here you'll find only an antique cash register—

unlocked, small float of notes and coins in the drawers—and a calculator on the surface by it. You're shocked at how antiquated it all is; the banknotes all look fingered, dirtied, smudged with black. There's a pen and small lined pad: *Art Mayhem (Antiques & Art) Appreciates Your Custom*. Receipts are handwritten, then. A small sign on the wall behind the counter: Cash Payments only, Cheques by Arrangement. NO cards.

Settle in, Claudra, Harry won't be here for ages yet; he's collecting a little something. Switch a few things on; you'll find the shop comes to life. See that plug, underneath the counter? It's the power supply for the trainset. Here we go, let's play! Whoo-whoop chugga-chugga up the hill, plastic trees, engine through the tunnel, past the papier-maché figures in the station, waving. Those cows are *way* out of scale by the way. Here it comes again: hill, trees, tunnel, people, monster Friesians. Twenty times round and you'll be bored chugless.

Second plug: power for the roundabout, dingly-dangly music as the horses ride, up and down Mary Poppins clap-hands lovely! There are lights, if you find the switches over there by the half-glazed door. Search with your fingers for the clitoral brown Bakelite buttons. It's old, the wiring in this place, not been looked at for years. Still, it all works. Lamps; we need lamps, Claudra—get them on. Is that a Tiffany? Oh, now we're exotic, we're fabulous, we're cheek to cheek in crimson, amber, secrets tittering in corners, old Chesterfield sofa over there and on a side table—is that a *tape recorder*? Press *play* it *is!* and we're putting on the Ritz how glam how gorgeous how many customers have there been so far today? None. Ah well.

Where's Daniel? He's found, by the looks of it, a box full of vintage cars. London black cab, red double-decker bus; they're cast iron, heavy in the hand, Matchbox classics—there's money here and there, in this shop. Better tell him to be careful; these are antiques. He'll line the cars up or something—hours of fun. Get yourself a coffee, Claudra. The kettle's behind the half-glazed door. Care to go through?

We're out the back: more Bakelite wall switches—one that brings a hanging bulb to light slowly, yellowly, as if reluctant to reveal this windowless, brown-walled, brown linoleum-floored—this is a *hole* of a room, Claudra. Seriously. In the shop: exotic! Fabulous! Out here? *Eesh. Dungeon*. And it's *well* cold—heating for the shop only, then. Two doors to somewhere else—hidden passageways, secret stairwells? Such mysteries, behind closed doors!

In here: sink, small fridge, cupboard, surface with kettle, couple of mugs, damp whiff again, stronger. Mugs, insides brown-stained; pile of dried out squished teabags by the sink. Fancy a coffee? In the cupboard, you find a jar of brick-solid instant, which you stab at with the only

teaspoon. You scrape with the spoon until some of the coffee granules break away. Inside the fridge: carton with about an inch of UHT milk, semi-solid when you give it a shake. Black coffee, then. You run the tap, scrub at one of the mugs with an ancient scouring pad. The water's cold and there's no washing up liquid that you can find. Kettle, on a stand. The handle is blackened with smudged fingerprints. You change your mind about coffee, leave the mug to drain.

You need to pee—perhaps one of these doors leads to a toilet? You try the first door and tada: small room with toilet, sink, all mod cons. There's a pull-switch, the bottom six inches or so blackened. Reach above the black, pull the cord and hey presto! The small room's lit by its single bulb. Wait: peep into the shop around the half-glazed door : you'll see Daniel, still involved with toy cars. Don't worry; you'll hear the bell—wherever it rings—if a customer comes. Go ahead, Claudra, take your time, take a pee in peace.

Did I say all mod cons? I meant rusted, crusted waterworks: this toilet is ancient, the pan browned. A handle hangs from a chain attached to metal arm which protrudes from a large cistern high on the wall. See the word *Shanks* up there? Quality, that is—or was, once upon a time. There's no seat, no toilet paper that you can see. No lock on the door. Fish a tissue out of your pocket, shove your jeans down and perch on cold porcelain. It's ages before you can let go and piddle, but at last you dribble wee into the pan, wipe at yourself and stand, pulling your jeans up—*seriously* cold out here. Arctic wastes. Enough to goose-pimple your thighs, turn your extremities a touch blue.

You pull the handle and with a loud clunk the mechanism that flushes this leviathan into action is set in motion. The flush goes on and on—you wrench at the handle, panicking about water welling up over the bowl and flooding the floor—but the thing gives a final gurgle and the water level in the pan settles.

On the sink between the taps is a dry lump of soap, cracked, black-seamed. You run the tap, working the soap between your fingers in cold water until enough of the stuff comes off to give your hands something like a wash. A striped roller towel hangs, greyed and stiff. You wipe your fingers on your jeans, get the door open, pull the cord to turn the light off. Shake your still-damp hands; your fingers are blue from cold, or perhaps stained from the black that smears everything.

You're about to return to the shop, when you notice the second door. Feeling a bit like Goldilocks, you push the door open.

A secret revealed: so much light, after the dim grim arseholes of back room and loo. A large window looks out onto a yard—bins, brick walls, pushbike leaning. In here: white walls, ceiling. It's a studio, Claudra, and if you take a look, you'll see that everywhere—and I do mean *everywhere*—

there are paintings. What d'you make of that? Take a minute, let it sink in. They're of the sea, every single one of them. You, Claudra, are in the presence—or nearly, because he's on his way, I promise you—of an *artist*.

So many paintings—one small one, at the back of the room, turned to the wall. Paintings of seas, but not just any seas. These are northern seas, in all their dark mystery, their proud and mighty pulling. The way he paints: some of these are stormy, others morose. They're deeps, wave-swells, *vast* seas rising. See the cold in them, their raw thrash. It's all here, in the way he layers the oils in blacks, greens, the way he swipes, slashes, *loads* the canvas with palette knife—no brush here, unless—the wave, its topmost urge of white before the fling—but mostly, palette knife thick, thick until the waves stand up off the canvas—look!—currents, riptides—*feel* the movement. If you could see Harry at work; if you could catch him at his struggle! *Fuck*, how he fights with these seascapes! He wrestles with them until the paint works its way into his fingers, his hair—look at the way he runs his hands through his hair, Claudra! The black of these waters is in his skin, his breath. If you could see him now, standing harbourside, calling the sea into his bones. Cold rakes his skin; salt threads his hair, sea-light gilds his scales, turns him merman. He'll smell of the sea, taste of it, you'll writhe under his salt tongue—but didn't I tell you there was a bike in the rear yard? It's Harry's and it means he's no longer sea-gazing. I did say he's on his way. In fact he's here, Claudra, even as you bolt from the studio, through the back room and into the shop and there goes the bell ding-a-ling yes Harry's here! Who's this he's brought with him? A little something he collected from Juno. Let me introduce you to Skip.

'Ah,' says Harry. Yes he's in through the front door ding-a-ling! His shirt is untucked, sleeves rolled up, hair wild and busy. There's colour in his face. And yours, Claudra? A hint of pink again in your own cheeks. There you are, all perched and proper on the stool behind the counter.

'Good morning,' you say, and smile a shop assistant smile. *Good morning*, for fuck's sake. Nought out of ten for originality. *Look* at him, Claudra: he's brought the sun in; see how it dances the dust—the air is disturbed to say the least. And all you can say is 'good morning'. Let me take a moment to slap my own forehead, bang my own head against the nearest brick wall.

'Found all you need, then. Got things going.' Harry smiles his crooked smile, advancing between the dressed dummies, the teddy bears.

'Yes, all fine. I hope you don't mind—' You indicate Daniel, who's kneeling on the floor driving his cars into a carpark he's designed, between two lamps and a hat stand.

'No, no problem,' says Harry. 'Matter o' fact, I brought someone to play. Skip, come say hello.'

There's movement behind Harry's left leg, and a small face peeps round.

The young boy, about the same age as Daniel, though much smaller, thinner, wears a jumper, baggy trousers. The jumper falls from his small bony shoulders like the jacket on Harry, yesterday. He has dark hair on end but matted into fuzz at the back where he's slept on it. Bit of a bird's nest on his bonce. Dark eyes, sharp little nose. Dangling from one hand: a small brown one-eyed teddy. Something about this child—lost waif—tugs on your heart string.

'I'm looking after him for June.'

'This is Juno – June's - son?' You look at Harry, who nods. 'Skip.'

'Hello, Skip,' you say.

'Hullo,' he whispers, and his face disappears behind Harry's leg once more.

'Bit shy,' says Harry. 'C'mon boy.' You see, behind the protection of Harry's leg, the small head shake.

'Don't worry Skip,' you say, 'Daniel is shy too, sometimes.'

Daniel, with manners that make your heart ping with pride, looks up and says, 'Hello Skip, would you like to play with the cars I found?'

The small boy nods, unwinds himself from Harry's leg and goes to kneel near Daniel. Daniel offers him a car. 'I'm just parking them in the carpark. It's filling up fast.'

Skip takes the car, pushes it a few inches across the carpet with his fingers, then stops and looks up at Harry. Harry nods. 'Ok boy?'

There's something about the child's eyes—you can't quite put your finger on it—a shadow, somewhere. This small bundle of bones and sticky-up hair.

On the carpet, the boy nods and pushes the car some more.

Time passes, during which the two boys move the cars about on the carpet. Daniel's creating a whole town down there and you hear his running commentary: this one's the bank. Here's the post office. There's two hours free parking in that street. Skip is silent.

Harry has disappeared into the back of the shop. You'd be bored, if it wasn't for that small something in the air now that he's here. A tingle, something catching at your skin, making the small hairs on your arms rise, your heart beat just a tad faster, if you were to check.

Watch the grandfather clock tick-tock does it make you dream, Claudra? Feel your eyes close. The shut air in here feels heavy, scented—we could use the word *claying*. It's overlaid with

something hypnotic, something seductive, like the thick pollen-stench of oil-seed rape on a May morning, sun-weighted, bee-drowsing. The sort of May-morning warmth that makes you want to lie down among the stems, watch the yellow petals shift above, earth against your back, his wild, black curls, his mouth—shall we use the word *moist*? Shall we use the word *tongue*? His hand—the taped music has stopped. The train passes into the tunnel, chug-a-chug.

The bell rings and a man steps into the shop. Great heavens above, a customer! He's ruddy-faced, whiskered, padded jacket over blue checked shirt, cloth cap. This, Claudra, is a northern Yorkshire farmer. He'll probably start with 'Now then.' It's how people say hello up here.

'Good morning. I have been thinking for some time of buying a necklace for my partner,' he says. 'Those are Whitby jet, are they not?'

While you reset yourself at the Received Pronunciation—never, Claudra, judge a book by its cover—he points to a glass cabinet near the window, with several necklaces, bracelets, earrings on display. You better shake yourself, dust yourself down, abandon any 'Now thens' and 'appens and back-endish and other weird northern-foreignnesses and get off that stool to investigate.

The gemstones in the pieces twinkle their blacks. 'I think they may be Jet,' you say, peering in.

'I rather like that one,' says the man, pointing to a chain with a silver pendant shaped as a spider's web, set with a single dark stone. Inside the cabinet, the chain is draped over a black porcelain hand. 'How much is Harry asking?'

The cabinet isn't locked; you open the glass door and reach in to turn the small price tag over. 'It says eighty pounds.'

'Sixty,' says the man, smiling.

'Um—I'm not sure there's any discount.'

'Perhaps you could check with Harry? He'll be in the studio, painting. He usually is. Do go and see what he says. I promise not to walk out with the stock—Harry will certainly come looking for me. Or worse, June will be on my doorstep! Tell him that James is asking.'

'Yes of course—I'll check,' you say, fingers crossed your first customer isn't going to empty the cabinet and fly as soon as you step into the back.

The small back kitchen is empty. Either Harry has gone out, or he's in the studio, painting as James suggested. If it's the latter, you're about to interrupt an artist at work. Is this wise? Well knock anyway on the studio door, open it—but be prepared.

Inside, you see Harry standing before one of his seascapes, palette in one hand, palette knife in the other. He turns from the canvas and you see the look in his eyes—how the fierce sky falls! How these waves churn! You're in howling storm wind; your words lost in salt spray, you'll flood, flounder in these deep blacks. He reaches for you and your hands catch as you stagger against the force of the next wave and the deck slides he's shouting hear him above the scream of the storm as it spills into his eyes, his heart I can't, I can't—hold on! Yes you're hauled into the storms that rage in his eyes; he pulls you under, but salt-kisses will only drown—

his eyes, filled with anguish. The paint's blasted on thick. All these years he's tried, Claudra, from the pencil sketches of his childhood to these heavy-pasted affairs—but no matter how many times he paints, he can never quite see it finished. Never say 'it's done', put down his brush, his palette knife, take a step back, fold his arms, nod. Never ever.

But you! Didn't I tell you? You're creative. You're passionate. You like velvet cushions and bohemian lamplight, for fuck's sake. You study that northern impossibly thick-painted sea, the roiling oils; you respond. No wonder he throws his palette knife down and clutches at your hand. It's you; you're his proof, evidence that it works, at some level; it has *movement*. You ever seen June/Juno look at one of his paintings? See the blank in her eyes? She doesn't get it like you do. All those years between them, June and Harry, but she still can't access his art, doesn't know beauty, can't get her tongue round aesthetics.

But you. Never mind that he hasn't cleaned his teeth this morning. That his beard is untidy, his smile crooked, his smell sweated, his hair greased. He catches at your hand and tada! You look at his work and you're there, underwater, drowning oh yes you'll drown, you'll drift, thrown by the sea. Your hair will spread like seaweed in the green. Your skin will be alabaster, opal. The porcelain lady floats.

We forgot the guy in the shop! Has he legged it with the contents of Harry's jewellery cabinet? Or is he browsing amongst the frippery, while you two cavort amongst the oils, making eye contact, grabbing at each other's hands for art's sake? Relax; this is James, whiskered and from Whitby and in his checked shirt and cloth cap silver spoon shoved in his gob and Harry pulls himself together and says, 'Tell him it's seventy, only 'cos I know him and he's a thieving wanker,' which you relay to James as, 'Harry tells me there's room for a little discount—the price can be reduced to seventy pounds?' and James accepts and you say, 'you think your partner will like it?' and James claps his hands and says, 'My dear, Marcus will just adore it,' (never judge a book, Claudra) and you

make a pretty good show of wrapping your first piece, writing out the receipt and sending James happy on his way while the touch of Harry's hand stays in your gut, winds into your pelvis, makes Cornwall move just a *little* further than its four-hundred or whatever miles away. Leaving your heart, you see, Claudra. Or your heart leaving it.

The boys, still playing. Added a carpark and a police station. Little smear of paint there, on your wrist, by the way.

Later, later. Sunset over the ruined abbey. Here you are, back in your at-the-end-of-all-things cottage, first day in the shop done, young son to make tea for, no time to think about that moment over the oil paints, Claudra, and how it left you reeling, how you came ding-a-ling! out of the shop sudden urge in you to gaze some more at those North Sea waves as they spill over the rocks, the bladderwrack, slosh up against the harbour wall.

No time to think now, because there's tea to cook for Daniel but who's this coming up the yard, knocking on the door of Teacup Cottage? It's Juno! What's that she's carrying? Looks like a pie. Nice timing, because there's not much in those kitchen cupboards, we could hardly call you *settled in* when the most you'd manage tonight is beans and grated cheese on toast if it wasn't for the Spar shop. But here's homemade meat pie in Juno's large, capable hands—wait, did you buy wine? You did? Jolly good timing your first visitor thumping the door knocker. Look at you all flustered—she's nice but there's something about her—go on admit it. Admit, Claudra, that there's something about Juno that makes you feel—on edge. Looked over. *Examined*.

Maybe she knew about the wine in your wire basket and cooked a pie specially to go with it! Quick work though—how did she know? Did she hold quivering hands over her crystal ball, gaze into the smoky depths until it showed you in the Spar shop, by the French red, pushing a fair strand of hair behind one ear as you weighed up the price between a Merlot and a Shiraz? Or did she lurk round the next aisle as you dithered then recklessly put a bottle of each in your basket? Which do you think? When did she bake the pie? Who knows? Who *cares*, get that wine open and for fuck's sake answer the door; your tea is on the other side of it.

The pie smells lovely. You're thinking she spat in it? Laced it with rowan berries for bitterness? Poisoned it? Why would she do any of these things, Claudra? These thoughts are irrational, unwarranted, based on your narrow stereotypical viewpoint, I might add. Guy wearing a check shirt—doesn't make him a farmer, or for that matter, illiterate, local yokel. A woman who wears black velvet—doesn't make her a sorceress. *And*, Claudra, just because a woman is a

sorceress, it doesn't mean she's wicked, even if she does cover her head in lace and waft patchouli. Even if wispy black misty bits *do* follow her trail, every now and then. Listen: your son is hungry; it's a nice pie; Juno can be a nice lady. She read your upset as well as your cards. Let her come in and be neighbourly to you; don't be so fucking suspicious. Go on: let her in, give her wine, have a glass yourself. I need to take a walk; sky's leaning on me just now.

Dark oils on canvas, wine with pie—who gives a fuck. The sky presses grey; I'll buckle under its iron weight—how heavy it is, how hostile this landscape. I feel its sudden malice in the wind that slices me, cuts through the gritted, bared hawthorns with their dark crawling branches, their bitter, shrivelled berries like so many pursed lips, their cruel spikes. Last summer's grasses fly banshee shreds from these sharps. Soil here is peat-black, plough-turned to reveal dark heart.

So many buried under this earth, Claudra. Pull back the centuries: clatter of blade against bone reveals woman—ducked, pricked, pinned by irons, instinct, intuition, wisdoms sent screaming to the wind. Back, further still: deep history in earth's folds—woman, curled, foetal.

Let the years take their time; *drive*, incessant rains! *Scour*, heartless winds; soon enough these ghosts will push their tatters through the churned mud. Stories like yours and mine, Claudra—perhaps a century or more hence, we'll poke our flensed fingers, you and I, from slab and tomb, crack our grave-seized joints, moan in mist, scare the kids—talking of which, must show you Juno's house, by the way.

But first, tell me about Juno. Does she have a glass of wine—or two? Does she eat pie, or does she say, 'Oh no, no, I made it for you and your little boy. But yes, I'll share a glass of wine with you. Mind if I smoke?' I know you, Claudra. You do mind; you resent her intrusion in the small new world you're attempting to build, but you don't say so; you're too polite. Juno plonks her backside down at the no-longer-spotty-plastic-covered table, fishes out her little tin.

'Let me get you an ashtray,' you say.

You fetch a saucer from the cupboard, place it on the table in front of Juno. Perch on a chair, while she takes out a roll-up.

'Last one,' she sighs. 'How'd it go in the shop?'

'Fine,' you say.

Fine. Is that it? A touch impolite—you tongue-tied? Wine not loosening. But wait. I'm thinking you could be right about staying tight-lipped. Make small talk, Claudra. Chat about stuff in the shop, customers, the weather—anything but Harry, the touch of his hand, your moment by the

painted seascapes. No, keep that to yourself. Some things—are best not shared. Surely she asks you how you're settling in though, doesn't she?

She does! She says, 'How you settling in though? This place alright? Bit small, but then there's only the two of you, I spouse.'

'Oh, it's fine, for the moment,' you say.

'And your little boy? Daniel, isn't it.'

'Yes. He's fine.'

'You come from far, then?'

'From the south. Cornwall.'

Juno laughs. 'Wind sent you scuttling, all the way up here. Poor girl, you seem so lost to me.'

'I suppose I am, a bit.'

'New start, then.'

'Yes.'

Hold it for a minute. Firstly, that laugh is not *entirely* kind, Claudra. Neither, by the way, is that word *scuttling*. Oh she's all poor girl poor you and full of sympathy, but (and she doesn't realise this) she *likes* you being on your own. You're *in need*. Juno, however, is *needy*. She needs someone to be wandering, lost. Gives her a chance to take you under her wing, play the good Samaritan. And she's fishing for information: she's checking out whether that hunch of hers over your upset, your being alone here, is right. Listen: take your time. Take a sip of wine, in fact. You've a new name, new home. You don't need to go blurting out stuff bla bla bla about Keith and Cornwall.

You know what I'd do? I'd stop her nosy questions right there with one of your own. Don't you want to know about Skip, for instance? You got to admit, he's an interesting child. Ask her, Claudra. Ask her about Skip.

'Skip seems a nice little boy,' you say. You take a sip of wine. Good girl.

'Ah, Skip.' Juno takes a glug from her own glass.

'They played very well together in the shop, the boys.'

'Ah, yes.'

'Skip's very quiet.'

'He has his ways. You'll be doing three days a week at first, in the shop then.'

'Yes.'

'Harry taking care of you?'

'He's made me very welcome.'

It's probably time Juno left, Claudra. Sup up and tell her it's time for Daniel's tea, then bed. Thank her for the pie, but get her to the door. Juno would be interested to know you're getting friendly with Harry. Anyway, it was the painting, nothing more. You lost yourself in art appreciation for a moment there, the pair of you, that's all.

Poor June, poor Little Brother. Such teenage angst amongst the Lyon's jam tarts and Heinz Sandwich Spread. There was June trying to exist instead on Ryvita with cheddar cheese and Branston Pickle, chewing on a soggy mess (somebody should have told her: Branston *soaks in*). There was Harry—Lord knows what he ate. Chips from the local, probably.

Thin things, June and her brother were, as they grew up. Little Brother grew so fast he didn't know where his arms ended. All knuckles and elbows, he was, bluntness and bristles and still that crooked smile to melt his sister's heart, make her donate her pocket money for another bag of chips (with scraps).

Out of school, into the jobs market—they should have headed into bright futures, these two. They might have done but for Father, stressing himself out over a nine-to-five office job, fucking himself raw on a secretary called Madeline who moved on to trifle with co-worker Nigel, then thumbed her nose at him (at the bottom of the stairs leading to the LADIES, Nigel had grasped Madeline's breast, whereupon she had slapped him round the face, hard, and he wore the pink imprint of the fingers of her right hand back to the sales office). She rejected Father's efforts to repent in the little cubby by the tea urn, dropped the words *sexual harassment* into the conversation (which acted on Father like a hot iron on the back of the hand) before she buggered off to take a degree in Business Studies, yes start her own marketing business called *Mango!* where she could prove herself successful and give ageing misogynists like Nigel and Father the finger. Father's smart shoes no longer tip-tapped but his worn brogues plodded across the yard each day like he was towing a two-tonne barge behind him.

Bright futures, June and her brother might have had but for Father, rejected in the cubby next to the tea urn—*threatened*, he was, no less by that bloody little minx Maddy then belly full of acid eating away at his own insides, chucking back Milk of Magnesia, chucking the job, ploughing what little money he had behind him into a bloody *shop* of all things—at least, this was what Mother said, which was interesting since where class was concerned, it was not Mother's but Father's view, aired in many an after-dark argument, that his wife's slovenly ways had brought him down. Yes had lowered him from the verdant growth, if you'll forgive the cliché Claudia, of his middle class (hairdressing finishing oil suburban did you know we used to have a maid) upbringing to working class (tomato sauce on the table shoes in the porch crumbs on plates kids yelling in the garden)

clichéd cultural desert. A shop, which he filled largely with crap from dead people's houses, customers a rare sight in amongst the bric-a-brac.

They should have had wide horizons, June and her brother but for Mother, dyeing this and that, pencilling her own eyebrows in, keeping up the lipstick until Eric finally braved it and came out and wore a floral shirt and a bit of his own lipstick (and minced a bit, quite deliberately) so she finally got the message and stuck to her filing until a bit of restructuring went on in management and she was given her cards.

So it was the shop—from salesman to shopkeeper, Father!—and lawks, how Father and Mother managed to bicker behind the counter so anyone braving the teddies and trainset and house clearance chaff would come up fast against a fucking solid cloud, like lead it was, hanging over the pair of them.

June and her brother: the world should have been their oyster, as they say, but for Father with his gut ache and trouble getting anything down till a visit to outpatients put him on fast-track to a dose of chemo then quick fix of a stent—which didn't fix a thing—then coughing up peanuts and bowels crammed solid then needing a stick to get around then finally one day here the next—poof—gone. Cloud of smoke.

Bright young sparks, they should have been, but for Mother with her handbag which she clipped closed with a brass-effect clasp and her powder compact which she snapped shut and her lipstick which she pressed her lips together very tightly to spread evenly. Mother, permitting or even encouraging the occasional poke from Roger and then on a cruise with him and later her own 'funny feeling' tugging in the base of her belly—astonished to see her own skids on the carpet—mortified by it, the way her own body betrayed her *again* as it had done for years by laying bare for all to see her inner workings, her own fluids leached from inside to out for maximum embarrassment. Fabulous service, though, in the NHS: stick you in a room turn on the telly on the wall while you turn yellow yellower very yellow turn up the morphine hold your hand watch your breathing slow until—poof—gone.

Just June, and her little brother.

Let's take it forward, have some weeks' worth of three days in the shop for you, two days home—tutoring Daniel, weekends free to wander the town, the harbour. Let's have several weeks of two young boys playing amongst the curiosities—lot of whispering going on there, seems Skip's not quite so silent as we thought; more days of ding-a-ling! at the shop door until you're used to finding the

Bakelite switches first thing; getting the trainset and the roundabout up and running, Tiffany lamp lit, ambience set, electric wall heater on (top five inches near the ceiling: warm. Round your feet: like ice), calling 'Morning!' through to Harry (checking your hair in the leaning mirror).

In the back room, you make yourself mint tea in your own mug with a bag from the small box of Twining's teabags you keep in the cupboard; take a mug of black coffee through to Harry in the studio—he's painting; he grunts. You sit on the pedestal loo, pee then wipe yourself with the Andrex toilet tissue you placed in there. Later you'll head back to Teacup Cottage in the dark—the nights are drawing in and the temperature's dropped like a *stone*. It's cold.

Fucking cold, in fact. Short days, long dark nights, the barometer drops and what's it like now, in the north, Claudra? How far you've come, how different these iron seas are from the soft summer wash of the southwest, as you recall it, that day when you stood on the Cornish cliffs, gull scream in clean spreading air. Up here, you've seen the water *rake* into harbour, black-filled, deep, deeper. In these fathoms—who knows? Serpents, sea dragons, slime and scale, look how the kraken rises! Its tentacles whip, wind fast about the ship, take it down. As for Harry—there's trouble in those seas he paints; you've seen it in his eyes.

In fact you'd better batten down the hatches, lash yourself to the wheel, stick fast to your stool behind the counter because today, here comes Harry here's the man, come all of a sudden through from the back room to the shop. He looks in the sort of mood to slash at the canvas with a carving knife, gouge deep gashes. He leans on the countertop, spreads his paint-stained fingers. Black smudge in his beard. He works a hand through his hair—that wild hair, like he's scarfed all the paint in the world through it.

'How's it going?' you ask, though from the look in those eyes you fear the answer, fear for yourself too somewhere, though that thought is a complicated one. Yes best not examine that too closely—is your boat rockin' already, Claudra? Harry only just got here! Give him your attention, do. Quick check on the boys: in the far corner, by the Tiffany lamp, two little tykes, kneeling, whispering. Couple of sketch books by them on the floor. From here, the pages seem filled with scribbles. Any customers on the way in? Nope.

Harry's shaking his head. He's pale; he's troubled.

'It's no good.' he says.

'Is this about your latest painting?'

'Yeah.'

You sigh. 'I feel for you. I think I know what you're going through.'

'You do?'

You have his measure. Maybe I underestimated you Claudra; you read him from the first. Yes you know it, already: these last few days Harry has painted, faster, wilder, until you've felt his desperation seep through these walls, the floor, into the tailors' dummies, the phrenology heads, the feathered hat, the china dolls and the teddy bears until the shop drips, wrings with it.

'This problem you have—when it comes to the moment. It's like,' you say, 'you can't see your way out. You're—in a fog. Stumbling without seeing.'

He grabs your hand. 'Yes! When it comes towards the end—when I think: is this it, is this the last touch of paint, the last tip of white on black—then—it isn't. Or not quite. Always—at this point. Something missing. Something not quite captured.' He lets go, paces up, down, up, down, in front of the counter. In the Tiffanied lamplight: phrenology heads, like scolds at a tantrum. You glance down at your hand, fingers, on the countertop, still. The feathered cape; his electric touch. You've never quite believed in instant attraction, have you? And yet, Claudra. Yet.

'I'm painting,' he says, 'like I'm trying to articulate through these seas—something—like—if you don't think I sound stupid, pretentious saying this—my *soul*.'

Through all this, he paces. You try not to reel towards him, steady yourself, keep your backside on the stool. The room mists, tilts with your knowing, shared understanding, quick intimacy, you and Harry (train chugging past plastic cows and into tunnel; boys kneeling, heads touching, drawing in sketchbooks). You're out of balance, you're at sea yourself right now; you'll wash up on his shore if you don't watch yourself. Shipwrecked. Marooned.

He half-laughs. 'I've never actually said that out loud before. What kind of soul is it though, that shows itself in such dark seas as mine. You see I know what it's like. Heartless.'

'You express it pretty well with words.'

'You think? I've read a bit of poetry, written a line or two, in the past. If only words could translate straight to paint. Ah, fuckit.' He bangs a fist on the countertop. The boys look up, return to their drawing. 'And what kind of person is it,' he says, 'who draws these words from me? You're a rare one.'

He smiles; you simper, wilt under his black gaze. Your breath is short, as if you've inhaled the mist that clouds the room, taken it down into your throat. It rasps. So unhealthy in here. In all sorts of ways.

'Come and look. See it for me.' He pulls you from the stool.

'I know nothing about oil painting—'

'But you do—the way you *feel* it. I've seen it in you.'

'You have?'

'I have.'

'What about the shop?'

'Fuck the shop.' He leaves you, to stride to the door to the street, flip the CLOSED sign round.

'Boys, play. I want to show Claudia a painting.'

Decisive, masterful. How does that feel, Claudia, when he grabs you and pulls you off your stool, away and towards the studio? He rushes in, high tide, rogue wave to sweep you off your feet, sand and grit streaming away from under your toes, rakes you face down across seabed rubber-slime seaweed strands, crabs, starfish in the surge and leaves you, salt water up your nose, stinging, gasping in the pebbles and foam. We need to talk—Claudia? I see you following Harry into the studio, obedient like a puppy.

Inside the studio: centre stage on its easel, Harry's latest seascape struggles towards some kind of an end. The waters heave with thick-slaked waves. There is movement, agency in the way the waves soar under lowering skies, their tops pulled as if plucked, twisted from above by wrathful Zeus—white, razored mountains they are, in watered, torn landscapes.

How you stare; how you *connect*. What do you see in those oils, Claudia? I know you drown in those depths, ice-cold submersion, last breath hammered from chest. How long would anyone last, plunged into those tar-black waves? A minute—more, if they're lucky. There's pain in this artistry—pain, and a kind of dying.

'Oh Harry,' you say. 'That's a sea of—of anger, yet there's longing. It's desperate.'

'You don't like it. It doesn't work.'

'No—I *love* it. It's desperately good. I can't catch my breath in this storm you've painted; the sea takes it. Such—anguish. But also such might, such force.'

He digs one hand in his trouser pocket, pulls at his beard with the other. He stares at the painting. You wait, while your stomach pinches. Will he thank you, or protest again that the work is worthless, inadequate? Will he grow desperate, fling paint, tear out his hair?

Eventually he responds, an inarticulate noise, then: 'June says it's just the sea, cold and wet and available to view over the harbour wall any day, why plaster it over the walls as well. But you—you see more. You recognise it: my world view. Maybe you've something like. Anguish, you call it. In your life.'

'Oh no, not—not like this.' You look round the room: seascapes everywhere. This is what you get with Harry, Claudra: so many black, grey seas. Waves. Empty seas. Sky, so much unfilled sky. These paintings are bleak; nihilistic. And storms. You get storms, painted up off the canvas, thick. 'D'you ever paint anything else?' you ask, which is a fair question, looking at wall-to-wall seas and waves.

'I could paint you,' he says suddenly. He does? Does he? Where did this come from?

'Me? Oh I'm not—I wouldn't be—' You're right, you wouldn't.

'You'd look *fantastic*. Wait.' Yes wait. Wait just a minute, Claudra—

Harry marches through to the shop. In the studio, alone, you teeter once more and well you might, Claudra. You had it right: Harry's world is darker than yours. These running, canvased seas. Turmoil, torment, translated in paint—mayhem, in art. There is light from the window; linseed oil smell. Outside, in the yard: the bike—Harry's bike—leans against the wall.

He runs into the room with a waterfall of dark fabric in his arms. What *is* that? Isn't that—that's the medieval gown, the green velvet dress from the tailor's dummy.

'Put this on,' he says, 'and I'll paint you. I'll paint you—' he holds the dress up— 'and your gown will flow into the greenest waters and you'll rise like a goddess from the seas.' Oh, really. Something will *rise*, Harry. Just say no, Claudra. End of.

'Oh Harry. I wouldn't look like a goddess at all. I didn't think fantasy was your thing.' Quite right, quite right. Recovered from your breathless turn, your *fainting fit*, seen sense at last.

'It isn't, usually. But you.' He takes your chin, tilts your face towards the light. The touch of his fingers is gentle.

'Goddess. You will be so right. Fantasy it is not. It will be *real*.'

Claudra. A word. *Girl With a Pearl Earring* this ain't. This is not a good idea. Where are we going with this? You're going to let this guy paint you? You're going to dress up and stand there and let his brush strokes—*the touch of his fingers*, for fuck's sake. Don't get me wrong; I can see you already. The dress will fit just right, of course; you'll be there in green velvet, all medieval flowing sleeves and hip-hugging and it'll fall in *folds*, of course and that bodice will hug your breasts, tight but not too tight, and he'll paint you and you know what he'll be seeing? He'll be seeing you *dressless*, that's what. Dressless and your breasts naked it'll be cool in that studio and your nipples will be probably *pert* and underneath those dark green drapes he'll be seeing nothing but your cunt waiting and wet well is it, Claudra, is it?

We did not discuss this. Are you going to be some sort of Guinevere to his Lancelot? There's history here; there's other Guineveres in his murky, shady, under the table behind the counter past. Lurking, they are and what's more, this is *not* my idea of you striking out for your freedom. He's going to paint you with—is that going to be a *feminine blush*, Claudra? Are you going to *swoon*? Is your hair going to fall like some sort of silk fucking wavy *curtain*? He's going to stand in front of that easel with his fucking palette and his fucking palette knife or probably a soft brush for you, Claudra, soft brush with all those gentle strokes and he, all crooked teeth and bad body hygiene you know, suddenly with his *aquiline* nose and his *chiselled* chin under that beard and his *hard-on* under his pants are you going to let him do this to you?

Listen to me, Claudra. I'm trying to tell you. Wait a bit. Just wait. Besides, it's nearly Daniel's tea time I'm sure the light's fading surely someone will come into the shop a customer after all and the boys are still whispering in their corner and ding-a-ling! there goes the door doesn't it? Why doesn't it? Where are all the fucking customers when you need one? Where's what's-'is-face Whiskery Jim, James the Rave, from Whitby? Don't worry about the CLOSED sign James Jamie Jim me lad old mate just come on in, come in for a bit more jet another necklace the last thing, the *last* thing we need right now is for fucking *Juno* to arrive and take the boys home for an early tea so that Harry and you, Claudra can—look. The sun's setting light's not good enough for drawing and painting now, just—think about it for at least a night. Juno will take the boys for tea and the shop is quiet then Harry can let you go and you can watch the sun set. With me. Please. Let me show you my sunset. I'll show you mine if you show me yours.

Look: here's my sunset I'm out, I'm *for* you, quick, quick I walk up a hill, somewhere. Fridge freezer, fly-tipped on a grass verge. Bastard! The sun is setting, redly. Here's what I think:

You can bury betrayal but you can't erase it

Writing betrayal pulls something from you with the words; you're emptied onto the page

There is betrayal, and there are trees

Birdsong: that's all there is But still: the sky is a red mess and a supermoon hangs.

What's your sunset like, Claudra? Tell me. Share it with me. It was just a game a lark, oh Harry waiting Harry in the north for you just a tease it was, wrestle you from boring Keith and his boring story and settle you here, let you start again. I let you have a new name, let you take control, wanted to set you free, *free*, Claudra, to live and love as you choose look: I'll start the story again there was once a maid with golden curls—

Claudra?

Oh for fuck's sake. Alright then.

The shop door opens. Juno comes in. Harry puts the dress down and goes into the shop. Claudra follows him.

'Shall I take the boys home for early tea?' says Juno.

'That would be nice. Thank you,' says Harry.

'That would be nice. Thank you,' says Claudra.

'Come on boys,' says Juno.

The boys stop playing and go with Juno.

Harry and Claudra are left on their own.

I am *not* sulking. She fetched the boys; you're alone. It's what you wanted, isn't it?

'Let me paint you,' says Harry, and leaves a light kiss on your cheek. And, with time now to spare, another. Kiss to your nose. Kisses to your eyelids. To your mouth.

The grandfather clock ticks. The sun begins its setting. Your hair is wound into his fingers.

'Put on the dress. Tomorrow, I'll paint you.'

Harry locks up the shop while you walk through the streets to the tea-shoppe on the corner, then up the steep cobbled roadway until you reach the grounds of the church of St. Mary which stands on the headland, backed by the ruined abbey. Busy scatter of grey stone gravestones. The raw, spare surge of the ruined abbey; it broods, skeletal. So many windows in the gable ends, arches, dark stone. What eyes these windows are; they peep from twilight world beyond. Last of the sun will be bright on the west façade. On the hill opposite, light falls gold.

There's a bench; you sit. Day fades into haunting darks, all colour blenched and now the ruin sits burnt out, razed catastrophic like a Thornfield—blind Rochester comes tapping with his stick, feels at the face of Jane to find again his lover. It's just the wind. Seagulls sail then dive.

Plume of smoke from the valley below reveals the track of the steam train; follow the smoke signal as the train heads out of the valley towards the North York Moors. The running sun turns hills to grey bulk, trees to mist-witch. Easier now to imagine these last rays as moonlight. The ruin, black-painted, like Harry's fingers. Feel the touch of them, still, as they tilted your chin. Feel lost, again.

You feel

he makes you feel

at sea.

Walking, always and here, trees rise like bars—I must tell you about Juno's house by the way, which is called, most enticingly, Gingerbread Cottage. More of that later, because here, where I walk, where track slides downhill, ancient slopes carry an old wind. It gathers, shifts—but shrill noise—horse's whinny? Scream? If it was you, Claudra, you'd run—twig crack underfoot and even though it's of your own making you jump, your breath short, sob in your throat at the presence coming, coming for you the sky, turned black, races for you it's on your shoulder don't look—

hills, beyond, that mark deep time and between their slopes: killing fields, shells of dead things, skull: sheep, reduced to woolly trace. Bird feathers scattered in bomb blast. Here a pheasant head, decapitated thing, wrenched from torso, brains dug out. Rank smell of decomposing. There's death here, and now wind fingers at my neck, moans its wary chorus through the wires. Crows—or are they ravens?—call in hoarse voices, bend against sky.

I know you'll go to him. And I—I'll split, scatter my bones across these hills, I'll cackle, rant my blood into rain that's surely coming yes as surely as I conjure it I'll stride my gristle through these trees, drag my blacks, rise, soar with this wind or—

I'll just sit in this corner if you don't mind, and watch, and *brood*.

Juno's house: she took the boys home and there are pink-iced buns for tea—she's heard from Marge at the tea-shoppe that Daniel has a penchant for things pink and Skip she already knows has a sweet tooth not surprising really because oh, how Juno likes to bake. Probably dips the odd finger in the mix, sucks it off before it drips, spoonful or two as it goes in the oven fruit cake heavy on the sugar mouthful or two of raisins, glacé cherries crimson red and slicked in syrup. Might explain the fat ankles but Juno makes pies and she bakes cakes and she likes to please young Skip and his new friend and nothing wrong with that, is there.

Gingerbread Cottage: not far from *Art Mayhem* so relax, Claudra; your son's not far away even as you do your thinking on the bench in that sunset then take the cobbled downhill path that leads into the streets once more. I'm presuming there are lamps; the light faded fast while you ignored me and decided to wear that dress of a *strumpet*.

Daniel is warm and cosy in Juno's house which is tucked behind the cobbled street under a brick archway through a snicket into a yard and it's right at the back, etched into cliff—you'll almost miss it until it's pointed out to you. Almost as if the neighbours aren't sure there's another door, two more windows, it's a little hazy in this yard especially in silvered light, yes especially when the moon rises which it won't, this evening—just after sunset a bank of cloud gloomed from the west and now there's a threat of rain and the cottage is—look at the way the shadows cross it: in this light the pantiles on the roof could almost be gingerbread. An outside lamp is lit; Juno must be waiting for you, Claudra. Yes lamp rather than moon but see the way the light catches those windowpanes, turns them to candied frost. Smoke spiralling—Juno's lit a fire and that chimney is black from soot, must have been a chimney fire or two, perhaps, yes black as liquorice. Being more honest, more accurate, those windows are double glazed and that's a UPVC front door. But you could almost lay a breaded trail to that house and watch the birds peck it away. Bread crumb trails and birds a-pecking.

Inside: Skip and Daniel at the table; the fire burns bright while Juno bustles in the kitchen, spreading bread for chicken sandwiches, then pink-iced buns and juice to drink.

Those boys—lots of whispering they did in the shop, lots of pieces of paper scribbled on and here they are, at the table, swinging their legs and Daniel says to Skip, 'Will you use it here?'

Skip nods, and here comes Juno with a plate of sandwiches, couple of packets of Monster Munch. She offers the plate to Skip and says, 'Here we go. Chicken sandwich, Skip? Real butter, no marge I know you don't like it.'

'Yengenes plengenease,' says Skip.

Daniel hides a giggle by taking a sip of his juice.

'What's that?' says Juno.

'Yengenes plengenease,' repeats Skip.

Juno tuts. 'D'you want a bloody sandwich or not?'

The boys exchange looks at the swearword, which *is* a little inappropriate, if we're honest. You were a bit short-tempered there, Juno—something bothering at you? You'd better take a sandwich Skip, June's short on patience tonight. A mite touchy, in fact.

'Daniel?'

The plate is offered. He takes a sandwich, whispers 'Thengenankyou,' into his jumper and eats.

'You boys and your rubbish.' Juno slams the plate on the table, chucks the packets of *Monster Munch* vaguely in the boys' direction and retreats to the kitchen to wash up, probably, or more likely open the *cage door*, boys, don't upset the lady and which of you lads has most meat on your bones, by the way. Have you got a bone in that mouthful? Don't choke, best pull it out, hang onto it, you never know when you might need it, might feel inclined to poke it through the bars. Only joking boys! What d'you take me for? But seriously, I'd cut the nonsense talk; this lady ain't averse to a slap, every now and then.

Oh she's sharp at the sharp end, that Juno. Might look like butter wouldn't melt but there's lemon juice in there alright. But she's washed the dishes and fixed her smile and here she is to join the boys once more at the table, even take a sandwich, look at that. How auntly. Motherly, even. To Daniel: 'How's you and your mum settling in then?'

'Fengenine,' begins Daniel, but he doesn't know Juno terribly well to be fair, and there's a look in Juno's pale eye that speaks of cages and forced feeding. Perhaps a bit extreme but behaviour management of a sort, I suppose. Wouldn't cheek her again after that, would you?

'Fine, thank you,' says Daniel and sees Skip shake his head but Daniel's a polite child; he belongs to you, Claudra, all that early work on manners has paid off.

Juno's smile widens. 'Your mum enjoying working in the shop?'

'Yes, thank you,' says Daniel. 'She likes all the things in there.'

'Lots of lovely things to play with. For you, I mean, not your mum. She must be a bit bored—we don't get all that many customers in the winter.'

Daniel, a word of warning. You're young; you're not to know when you're being pumped. Lovely table manners, by the way—even the crusts. Look at Skip's plate, all the soft middle bits chewed away, bread-edge all over the place. But pay attention, young Daniel. Juno thinks you and Skip are talking rubbish, but you and I know that this is a code you're using, a code that Skip has taught you and you know what? Now is the time to use it, Daniel. All that stuff about cages and fattening up and chicken bones—just fairy tale, of course. Nothing serious. But this—this is seriously not the moment to start gabbling away about your mum—unless you speak in cypher. If you can't shut up, use the code, Daniel. Juno won't be quick enough to unravel it. Annoy the hell out of her, yes; it might mean you lose your pink-iced bun but it will be worth it, young man. Use the code.

'She's fine,' says Daniel. Use the code, Daniel.

'She's getting on well with Harry, too.' Use the fucking code, please excuse my French.

'I think he's going to paint her.'

'How did you work that out?' says Juno.

Look at that smile. That, young Daniel, is a fixed smile. Hear the note of lemon juice in that question, Daniel? Code. Code. The *fucking* code.

'I heard him ask her. When she was looking at his paintings. He said she'll look like a goddess but she'll probably just look like my mum but in a fancy dress.'

'A dress, you say! What kind of dress?' says Juno.

'A long green one from the shop.'

'What did your mum say? Will she let Harry paint her?'

'I don't know but she likes the dress so she'll probably say yes.'

Oh Daniel. What *is* the point of giving you two boys a code to speak in, if you don't use it? Without wanting to put too fine a point on it, you've just lit the fire. The green flame of envy burns bright in Juno's eyes. You can't see it but that smile is now so wide, looks like her head's come off and that ain't natural.

I'll sit here and *fester* while you two get properly acquainted, shall I? While you *cavort* around the studio, all bright white sunlight and just-right lighting for a preliminary sketch—see Harry with his charcoal pencil hanging over the paper, or parchment, or canvas, whatever it is he's got on the easel there. Strike the pose, Harry, go on, I'm no artist but I reckon you need to get a sense of movement, draw with a flourish maybe you should go get a *smock* to wear and for fuck's sake make sure you get her proportions right in fact I'm not sure her nose is actually that long and did you check the distance of her eyes from the wing of her nostrils even? You need to get the fall of the fabric just right, the way it folds in shadows, the line of her neck her exposed skin her shoulder the way the dress falls from one shoulder for fuck's sake pull it up a bit, Claudra.

It's warm in here; your skin's pinked, Claudra. Though actually, in this particular corner it's cool, in fact I'd go so far as to say chilly, in fact I'd go as far as saying there's a chill falling in the air just where I'm sitting and yes, my arms are fucking well going to stay folded and there's a distinct chill. I'm sure I saw my own breath in the air, just then, caught my own foetid stink in the way it misted yes as if indeed a sudden chill has fallen.

Nice clean bright studio, although in my corner, it's a tad dusty and a bit cobwebby in fact I'd go as far as to say there are threads of cobweb hanging, ghosting their greys, just here where I sit and did I say sunlight? I meant moonlight in fact my corner is positively *festooned* with these silvered threads in the moon's pale light. I reckon a bat crossed the window just then just a quick flit—

I'll just sit here and tell stories, shall I?

You pose on a dais, small stage for your LOVE SCENE 1 in the STUDIO. Harry, behind the easel, sketches.

YOU: I feel a bit silly.

HARRY: Ah no, c'mon, you're a natural.

YOU: Have you always wanted to paint?

HARRY: Keep still.

YOU: Sorry.

HARRY: It's the sea—takes a hold of me. You know a little of what I mean by now, maybe.

- YOU: I've seen the energy in your work.
- HARRY: You sound like a proper artist. You paint?
- YOU: No. I studied English literature—Charlotte Brontë, Shakespeare. Probably sounds boring.
- HARRY: Not at all. There's beauty. The aesthetics of words. (*looking up, then back to working at the canvas—busy, preliminary work in progress*)
- YOU: The quality of Brontë's Jane Eyre—others focus on the Gothic—
- HARRY: You think of Jane Eyre as gothic?
- YOU: Isn't it?
- HARRY: You tell me. You're the scholar.
- YOU: Well. Brontë makes Thornfield Hall a gothic space—dark corridors, the mystery of the madwoman in the attic—
- HARRY: I'd call it romance. Fair and Square.
- YOU: That too! There's magic in her descriptive writing—honey—dew and jasmine, moths in moonlight—
- HARRY: Ah, Rochester's proposal.
- YOU: You know it!
- HARRY: '*So, Jane. I ask you to pass through life at my side—*'
- YOU: '*To be my second self*'. Appeals to the romantic in me, I suppose.
- HARRY: Nothing wrong with that.
- Pause while Harry sketches*
- YOU: Your painting: there's a raw quality.
- HARRY: Raw. Is that good?
- YOU: Yes! I meant it as a compliment.
- HARRY: You had me worried. (*smiling, not looking worried in the smallest way*)
- YOU: You love the sea.
- HARRY: It's like—I'm gripped, till I can get it. Really get it.
- YOU: And do you ever—get it?
- HARRY: You're easier. I get you. You bring—something. Warmth.
- YOU: But the sea—
- HARRY: It's a difficulty. In me. Can I come over and adjust the dress a bit?
- YOU: Of course.

You stand, statuesque, while Harry crosses the room; he moves softly, pads, like a cat, or wolf, or tiger. His paint-splotched fingers play with the dress on your shoulder. The warmth seeps into your bones as his fingers move

HARRY: Better. The light—(*adjusts the dress some more, then turns your chin, tilts it towards the window. His fingers on your face, linseed oil in your nose, tiger breath wolf breath on your cheek what a wet tongue you have yes all the better to lick you all over—heat comes to your cheeks. A small smile in his face as he leans to kiss you*)

Pause

YOU: Do you do this with everyone who sits for you?

HARRY: Nobody else sits for me. I don't want to be too forward. Too much?

YOU: Can I move yet?

HARRY: No, no, please keep it there.

You, turned to stone under the painter's gaze but *molten* in your innards what is it about him? I crossed his teeth, dirtied up his shirt, tangled his hair, *fuck* he doesn't even wash that much yet all your strings are twanging—that crooked smile up close fingers on your chin his lips on yours his tongue, searching for yours you're *intruded* upon aren't you; aren't you? Why aren't you? Pink-faced and giggly 'scuse me while I stick a couple of fingers down my throat gag on your wetslop face-mashing. Turn my face to the wall, work up my own thundercloud, small storm of my own.

The time is right. Let me tell you a story, Claudra, of a world turned strange, like a sun in sky when also the moon's full bright in blue beyond. Or a storm, with rains that lash, while here again the sun winks and smiles its yellowed heaven—how can this be? Surely, such a storm will only make a rainbow. But in a world turned strange, things much more than a pretty palette are painted when bright and dark combine.

Sister and Brother Part One

Original version from The English Tales (second edition)

There was, and there was not, an orphaned maid, who grew to be pretty lady with long, dark locks and a name to speak only of summer. June she was called and there was, whene'er she set eyes upon her little brother, a smile of sunshine warmth upon her face, for she loved him dearly. He, orphan also and grown to be quite princely in time, had eyes that spoke of storms and hair in wild

curls that had about them a hint of raging seas, but he loved his sister in turn. Such a mix, they were, of storm and sunshine!

With their mother and father upon this earth no more, the two pledged to care for each other always. But hard, it was, when first they were without the tender protection a parent can provide. The family home must be sold, to provide small shelter for sister and brother in their separate ways—and there was a shop, of sorts, which held all manner of things, from chairs and tables to lights and lampshades, from dresses and hats to toys and trinkets, all collected by their father across the years. The shop they chose not to sell; there was work here, and here also the brother, painter of seascapes, could keep his oils and boards for his craft.

There was much to do in sorting through such belongings as were left by Father and Mother both, and these poor baubles the orphaned sister and brother took to the shop, in the hope that some small knick-knacks might sell. Hard again, it was, to see the things of their childhood brought in among the bits and pieces that customers would pick through, let fall from their busy, searching fingers. There were the spoons that both could recall Mother using when serving puddings to the plate—though that was many years ago, when Mother cooked, still. There was the enamel dish that Mother had baked those puddings in—puddings which had filled their young bellies with such warmth as made them call for more, like open-beaked chicks—though this was long ago, when Mother baked rice pudding, and sprinkled nutmeg over, and sang in the kitchen, and made mince pies each Christmas.

'Oh, Little Brother, said June. 'In the taking apart of our home, it is as if my childhood's pulled to pieces.'

'Such sadness for us both, the selling of these spoons, this dish, will make,' said he, though in truth, the spoons were battered, the enamel dish scratched, and none sold to bring a penny to the pot.

As the days passed, Mother's spoons, her dish, found their way to the bottom of the pile in a large box, where the delving fingers of those who would buy no longer reached.

Harder still were letters, ribbon-bound, filled with lovers' talk of such simple moments as bike rides, and picnics, and beaches, and walks, and a single small photograph: young couple, all smiles, seascape in sunshine, beneath a vast whalebone arch.

'Oh Little Brother,' cried June, 'what shall we do with these? Small stories of love, they are, enough to break a heart.'

'I must paint,' said her brother. 'On this, you alone can decide.'

So while the brother painted his painful mix of grief—love and hurt, combined—in streaks of darkest black across storm-filled seas, his sister held the letters to her breast, and wept a while, then, such sadness hard to bear, pushed the letters down the side of a sofa lately shifted to the shop from the parental home. Olive green, the sofa was, though the upholstery was worn and spoke its years in stain—a Chesterfield, once smart and grand, its seat, though now sagging, deep enough for a mother to sit and take young child upon her lap, for love.

Time passed; the moon tugged at the tides, hauling them out, pushing them in; winters raged in snow and gale hard onto the North Coast, while passing summers made faint the memory of the cut of the brisk easterlies. The tender couple—June and her storm-filled painter-prince—made for themselves a kind of life selling trinkets, and gewgaws, and such things of interest that might prise open a customer's purse.

In the many months that stretched to years, the letters were forgotten, the sofa never sold. The orphaned pair were pulled closer, for the Chesterfield had room enough for two, and who else was there in this world to care?

*

Hold the storytelling, because weeks, Claudra, *weeks* have passed. I'm bored, cornered. While you two: bored you sure are not. Why should I waste my breath? Tedious, watching the pair of you flirt and kiss and you in that long green dress. I'll bet you feel all medieval and flowing.

Which sitting are we on here? How many sessions have we spent like this while the boys play in the shop and Juno slams plates on the table and even breaks a couple. It was meat pie on them and gravy seeps through split porcelain onto the tablecloth, brown stain like old blood. How long is it since Harry sorted out his lines of construction and his light red wash on your face, now gets your all-over face tint rubbed in, background tones round your head, Claudra—and that dress. All the while, in my corner it's grown more gloomy, darker, sure I heard owl-scream, wolf howl, ghostly groan of wind getting up. Spiders scuttle. Yes darkening into shadow and a growing presence, dense, black as the devil just here, something sinister, something menacing, something downright *malevolent* in my corner. Let's have Tarquin's ravishing strides,* let's have pale Hecate summoned,* root of the hemlock diggd i'th' dark,* liver, gall*—plenty of gall—highlights are painted in last, Harry, don't forget. Let me rise, score with sharp nails my hurts in midnight sky; let me blot out stars,

spread my blacks in shrieking storm which tears me open, plucks my heart, spills my blood in soil till
I am nothing but stained earth, leaf fall, things that slide and crawl. Until I am stripped

split

bare-boned

to air.

Oh, Claudra. I forgot a toad; to call Gremalkin,* trees that claw with knobbed fingers. I forgot lightning fork, thunder crack because, so many sittings later, now the painting's finished—he painted like a man obsessed—now that Harry stands back on the final session and says, 'It's finished. I can see it, Claudra; I can see its ending.' Now that he weeps as only a true artist can and says, 'It's done!' and you step down from your sea-scene stage and lay your hot little hand on his paint-streaked, tear-stained cheek—I see it, too. I see it all.

Quite a painter, Harry, isn't he? The way the waves curl their salt-strands into your hair, your fair tresses—I didn't realise you have tresses. The way those ocean depths swell, surge their deeps into swirl of dark green dress. He left that shoulder bare, I see: your flesh, sun-warmed, glows. You're waterfallled in softened samphire folds. Underneath those folds, I see your skin, your breasts, your sweet slit writ in gold. You're a siren; no need to sing, I'm enchanted already. A mermaid, sea goddess, Amphitrite. Webbed, forked, fuckable.

I thought I used up all the shadows in my dark brooding, but here comes another. Looks black over Will's Mother's. Clouds gathering in the West. Storm on the horizon. It's Juno, on her way—nice cloak, Juno—so you'd best let that drop-dead gorgeous dress drop to the floor, Claudra, get your jeans on because here's Juno, black cloak flapping in the first spits of rain and a frown over those pale eyes, striding out from her clairvoyant's shack. Thought she was shut for the winter. Who knows what she's been brewing in there—see her hair wisping ghostlike round her face in that breeze—which is getting up. She's sailing over those cobbles like a ship blown into harbour by the east wind and you can bet your bottom dollar that she'll be just as cutting and inside that vast hold there's a cargo of envious *rage*—

in case you been jolly-rogered.

CLOSED sign up. The boys, playing at pirates in the shop. Get your shoes on, Claudra, grab your jacket, because here's Juno striding over those cobbles, cloak flapping and I'm loving the way that hood is doing a Scottish Widows thing all drapey. Here she is in the streets like a woman on a sailor's mission to find out what Harry's about.

Here's the thing about Juno. Ever since the chicken sandwiches and pink-iced buns she's had something on her mind. She's been filling up with something sour, coming up to the brim, and—maybe it's the rain coming in, or something to do with the way the clouds are hanging heavy—but today's the day she's spilling over so take Daniel's hand, Claudra, tell him it's near teatime, tell him he can read his favourite book, tell him he needs to practise his numbers with you, anything you like but get yourself out of that shop and take him home. Leave Harry to cover *that* painting with a sheet, pop out into the yard for a quick fag, adjust his saddle height, check his tyre pressures.

Ding-a-ling! Juno comes into the shop—CLOSED sign up but door not bolted—the black cloak swims, long nose poking from the hood. Her eyes flicker pale lightning. In the corner, Skip has changed his game to playing by himself with cars. Not many lights on in here, no Tiffany lamp lit, no train chugging.

'Now then, seen Harry, Skip?' says Juno.

'Nengeno,' says Skip. 'Hengene's shengenut thengene shengenop.'

'Why's he put the CLOSED sign up?' says Juno, unwittingly deciphering the meaning behind Skip's coded words.

'Hengene wengenas pengenaintengening,' says Skip.

'Is he painting?' says Juno.

'Nengeno,' says Skip. 'Hengene's gengenone engenout.'

'Has he gone out?' says Juno.

'Yengenes,' says Skip.

'Left you on your own! Will he be long?'

'He said nengeno.'

Juno tuts. 'D'you want some sweets from the shop?'

'Yeh,' says Skip, instantly decoded.

'Come on then.'

Out in the street—but didn't I tell you to go home, Claudra? Look at you, wandering all wool-headed on the cobbles don't tell me you're thinking of buying sweets for Daniel too. Even if it is one of those traditional sweet-shoppes all those jars of Aniseed Twists and Cough Candy and Voice

Tablets—what the fuck *are* Voice Tablets? Suck on one of those and you shout louder? Or maybe they shut you up, turn you to whisper. Try Daniel with one of those, Claudra; he could do with keeping schtum. Listen: you never know who you might meet by the toffee bon-bons. Night's coming on. These streets are darkening. Soon there'll be all sorts of shadowy figures lurking—might be Jack the Ripper out there, you never can tell. Yes all manner of undesirables and ne'er-do-wells Dr Jekyll, Mr Hyde very strange cases* out there headcases, even. In *cloaks*, even.

If you must then, but be quick—I see Daniel's got his eye on the Dracula Fangs—hurry hurry—is he going to go for the Chocolate Skulls? Psycho Mice? Perhaps just get him a fucking great *Gobstopper* Claudra because too late here's Juno black cloak hood down with Skip by the Jelly Bones and this is not what we wanted. Not what we wanted at all.

'Well *here's* a thing,' says Juno. No idea what she means by that.

'Hello, Aunty Juno,' Daniel says, smiling.

'These boys: like peas,' says Juno, smiling. No idea what she means by that. 'From the same pod. Buying sweets, playing in Harry's shop, always cropping up together they are.'

'Oh I see,' you say. 'They've become good friends.'

'And you, lovey. Keeping busy in the shop? Up to much?'

Well, Claudra? What *have* you been up to? Much? This is exactly the moment to not go on, not make a big thing of all that sitting for Harry you've been doing. Why add fuel to the fire? Best to just—

'Harry's finished painting Mummy,' says Daniel. 'He said she looks beautiful, like Amphi—something that sounds a bit like amphibian. What was it Mummy?'

'It really doesn't matter,' you say.

'Yes it does. You said it was important to learn new words.'

'Of course it matters,' says Juno. 'What did he say you look like, lovey?'

Oh well - Amphitrite,' you say. 'Though really, nothing like. Decide please, Daniel. We need to go.'

I'd have left it at small moist vertebrates that crawl to land, rather than go into the whole thing of goddesses that rise from the sea, even if you risk your son forever getting his Greek myths and geckos mixed up. See the look on Juno's face! Too late. Kids: you can always rely on them to put the boot in just where it's not needed. Nice one, Dan. Geckos are lizards, by the way. Just so you know.

'Catherine Wheels, please,' says Daniel.

'I'm sure the painting will be lovely,' Juno says. 'Harry's so talented. I'll have to take a look.' And she will, Claudra; she will. Why does that make you feel uncomfortable? Nothing in those innocent words of hers to worry about. Maybe it's in the body language. Maybe that's why you're sweating underneath that jacket. Perhaps it's the way she plants those big feet of hers wide—something reminiscent of a soldier about to fix bayonet, charge, thrust and scream *kill*. Perhaps it's the way her smile, to risk a cliché, doesn't quite reach her eyes. In fact perhaps it's the way lightning flashes in those eyes and maybe it's just the light in this shop—bit dim, a little shadowy—in fact Juno's cloaked bulk has rather put all those bright jars of sugared tooth-rot into shade—but is that a green *gleam* going on in those pale eyes of hers? Sucking on a Sour Apple. Or sour *grapes*.

You let Daniel buy his liquorice Catherine Wheels—might as well, too late now, he's a right little chatterbox isn't he, then you leave the shop. Get home, Claudra, and put the lights on. You need a bit of protection right now. Bolt yourself in. Did I say there were glass fishing buoys hanging by your front door? They're *witch balls*, Claudra. You'd better check them. Is there any mistletoe growing on that tree in the planter? A small sprig above your doorway should do it. In fact is it a *rowan* tree? Hang on to its magic; fashion a cross from its branches if you've the time. Sprinkle a bit of salt; chuck a few pebbles around the floor; stash a hag stone by your door. That pottery urn next to your woodstove? That's actually a witch bottle. It's probably got ancient nail clippings in there, bit of rosemary to impale her spirit, drop of wine to drown her in. Best not look.

You weren't mistaken: green gleam there was, in Juno's eyes. That's the look of a spell maker, Claudra—one who cuts her flesh, writes charms in her own blood—charms, or curses.

The wind's got up. Dark out there now, very dark. Are you in and cosy, Claudra? Curtains closed, got that bohemian lamp thing going again, fire lit, door bolted like I said. Daniel upstairs, pyjamas, bed, off to sleep already like a good little boy.

Where's Juno? Maybe she's let herself into the shop; maybe she's *at this very moment* putting the studio lights on, blinking in the white light, smelling that smell of Harry's fags mixed with linseed oil. She pulls the sheet, slowly, slowly, from that painting and there *you* are, all siren and sensuous, fair tresses and in that green dress yes once, Juno felt the velvet of that dress over her thighs, flowing like a river from her and now she stands and looks at you there you are caught in the female gaze—a good hard stare because possibly she's thinking Harry's been painting with his *cock* in that studio.

Or maybe she's *at this very moment* sitting in that shack of hers down by the harbour, hearing the wind rage past the harbour walls, those walls where sea water clings like tar to the stone. She sticks pins in a small cloth dolly—did I tell you about the cloth dolly, sitting on the shelf in that shack? I think you'll find I did. Pity you didn't take more notice. *Signs*, you see, Claudra. Signs. Are you getting a pain in the side? Pain in the neck? Calm down, not to worry, it'll be just the amount of standing you've been doing. Something of a draught in that studio, probably.

Or maybe not so calm after all because yes maybe there's Juno in the street outside *Art Mayhem* on the cobbles, unlocking the shop, switching on the Tiffany lamp, feeling for the Bakelite switches as she makes her way through the back room towards the studio. That old clank-handle loo needs fixing, by the way: the overflow's overflowing outside; water's running down the wall, dribbling into cobbles. Or maybe, after all, there's Juno, flapping through the streets, black bat in her cloak, wind smacking her round the jaw as she fiddles with the keys and gets the door to her clairvoyant's shack open. Lights a black candle, reaches for the small cloth dolly, the pins—where is June?

There's a shadow on your door, Claudra! Peep out—wish there was more light out in the yard because it's hard to see through this thick night air like *black fog* all of a sudden it is, crawling round the stonework of your cottage, dark fingers creeping to tap on your window—but there's a figure out there, in the dark, lurking on your doorstep a suggestion of a cloak surely and something raised—a club? Dagger? Axe? Ready for all those splinters of wood that will fly as it's brought down against the green door of Teacup Cottage with vicious strength. Again and again. See the knocker fly, glass witch balls splinter into shards (*clearly* they don't protect), bright flash of blade as the axe smashes through the frail wood panels there'll be blood spatter flesh in tatters *here's*—

so much easier to knock.

Yes someone knock-knock-knocking at your door, Claudra. Peep out and oh my word, oh my heavens, I'll go to the foot of Aunt Sally's stairs, breathe, Claudra it's only Harry—is that a bottle of wine he's holding up there?

Clear the fog, the crawly creepy thick night. Just a bit of wind. Who gives a fuck where Juno is. Let's let Harry in—look: the guy's an artist and he's just finished the only painting in years that he can call an end to and he has you to thank for that. Bit of inspiration you gave him. He painted you beautifully, Claudra. I know, I know I boiled in my own hot oil in my own corner while he painted—

but I've come to terms. I'm cool. Let him in. I won't ruin it for you, I promise. He's only come to thank you.

You open the door and is that a sea breeze that comes in with him? Touch of salt air in your bohemianised cottage as he smiles his crooked smile and holds up the bottle and says, 'Ah hello there. To say thanks.'

Nice shirt, Harry. Green suits you, makes your eyes dark, sea-sparkle. Like jet. I'm sorry I made you all crooked and crossed and dirty and—is it my imagination or have you washed your hair? Those jeans didn't clean up so well but that's oil paints for you.

Did I say I've come to terms? What are promises for if not to be broken. The clock strikes thirteen.*
Hearten the stomach with mulled wine, stir the fire, stoke the embers with another log; sparks will fly in the bright cold.*

Time for you to hear more of my story.

Sister and Brother Part Two

June, so-called after summer's light and heat. Yet her eyes spoke not of blue-bound heavens but shone pale as the glimmer in the orbs of a wolf that howls under tilting moon. Slender she grew as a birch sapling that reaches skyward. Pretty of face but long of nose, and there were those who called this the work of witchery, though not a single wart there was to spoil the effect of the clear gaze of those pale eyes, and certainly her hair fell silken, dark.

Her brother, conjured as a babe from storm-tossed seas and fickle, unknowable wind. Grown tall and sturdy as does the beech, with hair that curled in dark brambles and briars, thick enough as if to stop the sword of Sleeping Beauty's prince, hack his way if he would through thorns to reach his destined love. Yes wild of hair and mood was the brother, and wept not when abandoned by Mother and Father both, to follow the trail of breadcrumbs which led to the shop and no further. Wept not, though his gaze was dark and looked inward only towards his hurt, and he painted his pain into the moodiest seas that ever saw easel, layered his grief with palette knife till oil was gnarled thick, thicker, on the canvas. Some of that paint was thickest, where black anger was hid.

Both parents departed, funeral rites complete, trinkets, kitchen pieces shifted to the shop, June and her brother found solace still in the quiet and shuttered spaces of their mother and father's house, though this must soon be sold. In one room: cup, and plate with crumbs, abandoned on small tiled hearth yes sharp reminder of Mother's last moments in the home—small thing, perhaps to wrench the heart with loss anew, for there is naught in this world to compare to a mother's love, and without, the world turns lonely, as it did now for sister and brother both.

In this room also, the Chesterfield sofa having lately been removed to the shop, a sideboard, adrift still in its sea of carpeted, patterned green. Keen reminder again of moments: a family Christmas—though whether this brought memories sweet and filled with cheer, only June and her brother could say.

Inside its cupboards: great treasure of liquor June and her brother found! Bottle upon bottle: Gordon's dry gin, Teacher's blended whisky, Babydam, Apricot Brandy, Warninks Advocaat, Harvey's Bristol Cream. What taste Mother and Father had, agreed June and her brother. What comfort this would bring. To feel once again the warmth of Apricot Brandy firing their stomachs. It would bring new pink to their cheeks, let laughter dwell more easily in their bellies.

And so it was. June and her brother between them shifted the dark wood sideboard to the shop, to take company with the Chesterfield. They took care to restock its cupboards with great array of bottles, and added several more of their own choosing, especially vodka when discounted in the local Spar.

But the shop: what forest sister and brother were left to wander, orphaned as they were! Yes a shop of deep dark forest, which beckoned with many strange things, odd things, things wyrd. Deepdark, with wolves that howled and ravens which pecked away at bread specks till nothing was left but twigs and leaves, dry earth yes dry, dusty earth of rummaged boxes and threadbare teds and half-lit lamps and a sofa that sagged and a sideboard stocked with bottles (and more, in time) and hands that beckoned (with mummified skin and corpse-fat candle), where jackets hung empty, yet twitched their sleeves in moonlight. Much time sister and brother spent in this weirdland, and indeed it filled their poor lost heads weirdly, as time went by.

One night, after closing time, June and her brother sat on the Chesterfield—the very same Chesterfield they had, as children, tumbled from to land, giggling, amongst soft feathered cushions scattered on green leafy whorls of carpet. The very same Chesterfield they had cuddled on, listening sleep-eyed to stories of children, someplace else, sometime other—children who wore shorts and sailed boats and rode out storms and found gold ingots by torchlight. Yes with warm milk in their bellies, young June and her little brother had settled sleepy on this very sofa, waiting for the Sandman to sprinkle magic on their eyelids, for them to dream beautiful.

The evening's gloom turned all to shadow. A Tiffany lamp cast small slant of light about the corner where sat the Chesterfield. Towards this corner of warmth both jackets and teds alike began to lean, while Sister and Brother sat on the sagging Chesterfield and raised a glass to their mother and father. This they had done many times, though as the days, weeks and months had passed, they raised their glasses no longer to their mother and father, who, after all, had abandoned them early in this tale, but to each other, for the fact of their living, and being in some ways, content.

This one night, there they were, Brother and Sister both, and this was the night the moon came up and it was blue, and they were shocked.

*

But my tale must wait. Claudra, there's Harry in your cottage. Come to say thank you? Surely after all that kissing over the paint box you've an inkling why he's here, small idea why the sudden washed hair. Your LOVE SCENE 2, in the TEACUP COTTAGE LIVING ROOM

You sit side by side on the sofa. Bright fire, lamplight, glass of red to twirl in your fingers

YOU: You shouldn't have.

HARRY: Ah c'mon I wanted to.

YOU: I only stood there.

HARRY: No, no. You brought it. Me. To life. That dress!

YOU: Has somebody bought it?

HARRY: Ah no.

YOU: Shame. It caught my eye the first time I came into the shop.

HARRY: Here's to you, my Amphitrite. *(you clink glasses, both drink)*

YOU: *(settling into the cushions)* If I'm a goddess, what does that make you?

HARRY: The blackest, most murderous pirate that ever sailed the seas.

YOU: Not a Poseidon then.

HARRY: No way. Too much of an old sea-dog. Black seas: glints in your hair.

YOU: I didn't wash it for days. For the shine.

Pause

HARRY: It torments me.

YOU: My greasy hair?

HARRY: Silk-waves hair, more like. *(runs your hair through his fingers)*

YOU: More wine?

HARRY: I'm drunk already.

YOU: Are you going to kiss me—sorry! It's the wine.

HARRY: With your permission—I'm going to *fuck* you.

How very forward! But listen, Claudra. Remember Keith, and the Cornish sea, the way the green of it showed in his eyes on the beach the very first time you met him. You drifted into him, floated, let the tide take you where it would, seaweed on the swell. Make sure the wine doesn't cloud your thinking this time. This is the moment where you take responsibility, Claudra. I'm grounded, talking to you, woman to woman. I've held your hand, got you this far. This is what is known as a *turning point*. What will you do—will you drift again? I know you enough now to know

that you're stubborn and creative and generous and difficult and clever and beautiful and worth so much. Think about the *chains*, Claudra. Don't make the same mistake, don't you dare.

Your story will roll the way you want. So what *do* you want? I'm your narrator, mythmaker—tell me, and I'll draw it in stars, paint it in clouds, fire it in lightning. I'll tell it your way.

Take a moment. Gaze into the flames flickering in the wood stove, see their light reflected in your wine, dancing in its ruby red depths. There's something you should know. Listen to him, Claudra! Your hair: sea-waves, he said. The dress, the velvet green gown which he wanted to paint you in. Old sea-dog, pirate, he calls himself. He's on a loop, Claudra; he's been here before. Lovelocks hanging on the wire, Claudra.

You need to hear the rest of the story.

Sister and Brother Part Three (contemporary)

In the memorial garden, close to the crematorium, two small plaques had been placed, one for Mother and one for Father, set in neat green and gardened gardens. Perhaps, in the years since, the son and daughter had visited. Perhaps not.

In the shop: by now the sideboard had been stocked many times over, with cheap vodka, mostly. The Chesterfield sagging, the phrenology heads forever blinking.

A rush of deaths in the town: the elderly, bodies worn out, come to end. Houses to clear. Victorian sherry glasses, set of six; claw-foot stool, lift the lid: piano music inside, still: *Clair de Lune*, Mozart's *Sonata in a minor*. An upright piano which the brother refused—no market, he said, for these, any more. Keepers of woodworm only. Axed, smashed and to the tip with it. The dead, those who were skilled enough to play the instrument: souls pinched out, like candle flame. Their fingers, which once would have danced across the ivories, now limp in earth, reduced with time (and the work of beetles, worms and the like) to phalange and metacarpal, or ground to dust, scattered to air.

But there was profit to be had in the discarded things of the dead, and June and her brother did well, and soon it came to another Friday and Brother and Sister shut up shop and left the Tiffany lamp lit and sat in the bright gloom on the sagging Chesterfield sofa with the sideboard doors flung wide. They raised a glass or six (Edwardian etched crystal, set of four, forty quid) and got pissed among the dummies and hanging jackets. In a sudden artistic turn, June fetched a paint brush and

tube of paint from the studio and painted a black moustache and spectacles on the nearest phrenology head. She collapsed on the Chesterfield. The head looked like a blind bald professor.

'It'll never sell now,' said her brother.

'It'll never fucking sell anyway.'

'Put the price up—unique piece of artwork. Wash that brush, mind.'

June tucked her legs under. 'In a bit. Tell me some of *Sea Fever*, Little Brother.'

'It's a long time since.'

'Go on. Please. You used to sit on my bed and recite it right the way through.'

'So I did.' Brother raised his glass, twirled it. "*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky.*"

"*And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.*" Such lovely words.'

'Yeah. *And the wheel's kick and the wind's song—*'

"*—and the white sail's shaking.*"

"*And a grey mist on the sea's face—*"

"*And a grey dawn breaking.*"

'Yeah.'

He drained his glass, reached for the vodka bottle.

June pointed at a full length, dark green velvet dress that hung on a tailor's dummy nearby.

'Always loved that dress, I have.'

'Have you?' said her brother. 'Can't remember who brought it in. 'Sbeen here ages.'

'Always reckoned I'd be Guinevere in that dress.'

'Ah, you would be.'

'What about you? Who would you be? If you could be anyone.'

'I'd be – a fuckin' pirate, of course! There's a hat somewhere – where did I see it?'

Another vodka down the hatch and Little Brother found the hat and went a-harrrring round the shop while June swept the dress down and lurched out to the loo in the back and squeezed into the dress and staggered back and stared at herself in a full-length vintage mirror and pronounced herself in need of a bit of Merlin's magic to get rid of the spare tyre round her belly.

'No,' said her brother. 'Don't say that.'

'It's true, though. God, look at it. Make a shit Guinevere. All my *life*. All I wanted to *be*'.

Neat vodka and lifelong regret: never a good mix, even on a Friday night with the Tiffany lamp lit and a little brother to sit her back down on the sofa, pour her another, plonk his pirate hat on the side and give her a hug, give her a cuddle.

'Come on Sis, no, don't do this. You're beautiful you make a beautiful Guinevere the dress is lovely.'

'Don't even have the pointy hat and veil thing to make it look better.'

'You don't need a bloody hat your hair is all long and silky look how it runs through my fingers please don't be upset I hate it when you cry please don't cry.'

'You're the only one who cares.'

'And I *do* care. C'mon now, c'mon.'

June and her brother. This was the night—or was it day?—when the world turned strange, masked sun, eclipse and birds quiet as night in light—yes full day yet a sudden hush on the world. Or perhaps twilight, eldritch world drawn thin across the real. A world where a witch could sprinkle magic—not *nice* magic, not twinkly fairy magic but *strange* magic *wyrd* magic. Run screaming from the room; make sharp the sign of the cross; pray to god, fling garlic, kiss the nearest crucifix. For here was the kind of sorcery that would make a brother give comfort, kiss it better for his sister. Here was sorcery that would make a brother run his sister's hair through his fingers, take a sister in his arms make her turn to him for solace.

This was the night when the Earth sat on its heels and leant to slant and there was carnival magic abroad—or perhaps it was the flung spray of disturbed sea out on the headland, the weeping gulls, sideways and slanting in air above. In the deepdark cavern of the uncanny shop, there was sorcery in the air enough to make a sister melt in her brother's arms, his arms like lover's arms. Yes enough witchery in the night that would make Sister let the velvet dress ride high on her thighs, wrap herself round Brother, make him feel her body rise, make her feel him hard against her, make him bury himself inside her—their tears, mixed, for loss, and love-lack, and black-oiled seas.

Pirate's hat, fallen on the floor. The feather floats, like a lover's sigh.

*

I confess. I peeped through the window of Teacup Cottage, saw your LOVE SCENE 3, no script required as you twined with him, joined in wet-tongued kissing. How gentle his paint-stained fingers

were as they stroked your breasts. Your nipples were hard for him and I flew to churn with you in my bed of bracken, squirmed as damp roots felt between my thighs. My fingers found my bud and all the while the leaves—the treebark scafed me.

The green of his shirt rippled like sea tide; his merman scales were gold in firelight as he sucked saltwet from your cunt. His dark seaweeded hair tangled in you, your own seaweed spread in his. You groaned in your coupling, your pair-spawning, while I—

am rooted, stump-sucked in leaf-mulch. Now the succubus tree rides me the rainspits pelt my skin the gale licks my ear, chews at my three nipples, moans towards climax as you and he twisted like eels in the blackwash of northern seas and he rode you, sea star clutched.

I saw you, your mouth a cave in orgasm and I'm root-pierced, branch-drilled the storm's chorus thrills through my—

wired—

deeps—

till I cry you out loud to the wind: *my extraordinary*.

You should have closed the curtains; anyone could be watching.

Where *is* Juno, by the way?

Sister and Brother: Epilogue

Dark, still. June and her brother, waking in the shop, on the Chesterfield still, into a boozy hangover, little bit of spilt this and that and the other get that dress off June and back on its hanger sure, the small stain would wipe off no one would ever know and Brother put that pirate's hat back in the box and for fuck's sake someone turn off the Tiffany lamp and get yourselves to bed, the pair of you. Clear up, chin up, cover it up no one will ever know.

Next morning, back in the shop, Brother lit the Tiffany lamp, opened up as normal, ding-a-ling customer calling, did a bit of painting, few more black streaks, in fact painted the blackest sea, yes lathered oil up onto the darkest stormiest *deadliest* sink-the-ship drown-the-crew sharks-in-the-water chew-all-the-bits-up sea. Emptied horror and gall out onto canvas, he did. While his sister—no idea what June did. Probably in bed, under the covers for a day or so until she crept out slunk round inched into the shop, shadow on the door, bigfoot through the dummies to her brother and a pledge between the two probably signed in blood probably sealed in spit probably sworn on spilt brotherly semen that it must never never ever *ever*—

*

I'm sleepless in frost-coated night. This sky is glass hard amber. It unsettles me, Claudra. Something's coming.

Dawn brings a sudden world of snow; I slither on rock-rutted ground, kick out at snow humps. Dead crack of my footsteps—my feet leave prints but there are many others—you should see them, Claudra: rabbit, running hare, birds' tiny feather-weights surface-brushed in snow like thin, wind-blown grasses.

Exposed against these whites, I go to earth in stubbled hawthorns. Oh they're gnarled; they're guarded. Their barrooted thickets of blood-brown branches will pierce me till I bleed. Berries hang in wet spike-mass, their moments of red turning to rot. There's madflapping from above: crow, caught. It frees itself from its needling prison, leaves a thorn-suspended fan of black tail feathers for me to pluck. I wrap my bones in these thorn hems. Let the prince ride; like Sleeping Beauty I'll doze.

Sun-up and the forest drips, runs, wet slips in stink, like skin from a corpse. Out from thorned world and here tree roots run like veins in the snow-mushed flesh of forest floor. My own flesh warms—but not my heart.

Yes something's coming.

Where *is* June? Shadow on the cottage door, face at the window. Claw-fingers clutching her cloak about her neck. Sudden dip in the temperature, ice in the air, in her face, on her breath snow coming oh she's Ice Queen she's forever winter long nose pinked with cold. Or *red* for danger. Like a beacon, it is, firing out in deep night maybe she's taken herself up onto the headland for a bit of a wander. Ho there! Light the faggots, shine the lamp swing it in the wind there's a storm brewing and for sure you'll smash on the rocks if you steer towards the light like teeth, they are, such daggers those rocks ship to shore SOS Mayday calling—there she is.

Like Lucy she walks, 'tween gravestones darkly. Cancel the wind (for now); get rid of the fog let's go with snow on the air, flew flakes drifting, so June can pull her cloak around her more tightly oh *dark* it is, here. She feels the presence of the ruin, feels its weight on the horizon its bulk it leans into the ghosting snow; its yawning jaws gape. It towers, stealthy while all the while she shrinks to tiny spot before it.

I'm sliced air, razor sharp, jagged; I'll cut. I'm thick black night of spiders and bats and running wolves and things like that look: see my horns? What red animal eyes I have, my gorged belly see my teeth bloodrunning all the better—

there's so much wrong in this world, Claudra. Like mothers who grow small babes in their innards then go screaming unbirthed into the next world; mothers who shackle their daughters yes bind them with their own motherly chains. Mothers who spin from this world leaving daughters to weep and collect the shattered pieces of lives around them. Let the flakes fall to deaden for a time this stinking world, layer it in something more palatable frost it pretty and all the while beneath, such foulness, such wrongs. For wronged, we have been, even as the cold chills our lugs and pipes.

Come to cliff's edge, June. Below, the white edge of waves as they chunder onto shore. Up here, the air, thin, sharp, breathe in frost, snow-coal smell in her nostrils, pain behind her eyes. Let a flake or two settle on that black cloak till she's mottled in snow. Still she stands, till the sky clears and she's star-topped, star-backed, thin moon a rip in the night somewhere over.

A small scroll in her fist: paper, red cotton tied. What spell is it she casts, June/Juno? See her raise her arm, turn widdershins, call the elements to her aid—feel a shift in the air as her lips move—she's come some way from Tarot cards and fortune telling and what's in that small pouch that rests near her breastbone? Pinch of agrimony or cockleburrr; I know it well, wore it next to my own skin though it failed to protect—and salt for purification oh for Juno, it would take all the salt in the world to unwind the tangled stems, pull off, let wither her own small leaf.

She pulls her lighter from her pocket somewhere underneath the cloak, strikes a flame, holds the small paper scroll to it until the flame crawls across now watch her as she holds the paper high, reaches as if to scoop up sea from rocks below then lets the half-charred thing fall away from her fingers.

Into air, it falls. Like a snowflake it wanders, over cliff edge, dark spot into darkness. The spell is made; she can stop muttering. Now she can have a fag and draws on it, all the while standing out on the edge, arms folded, working it between her lips, squinting against her own smoke. The fag end, spot of red heat in cold black air, while Juno in her cloak blurs to nothing. The snow drops on her shoulders have gone, melting towards morning and a pale-hard sun.

Wake, Claudra. Is Harry still here? Did you take him to your bed last night, upstairs and between the sheets while your small child slept in the room above, or woke and heard your whale song, your dolphinesque clicking, and took fright against the spirits? 'Twasn't I who stood in his bedroom corner and thickened shadows into black mass of flesh and blood and bone to come taunting malevolent out into the room, come lurking over his bed, scare him till his hair stood on end, till his eyes started with tears, his teeth rattled, bones shook, till he pissed the sheets. Not I, for I was on cliff edge business, spell-watching. Not I, for 'neath bramble roof, on forest floor was I, snow-angels a-making—or were they devils, my 666 after all? Did you heave Harry-lover Harry-fucker yes chuck the fucker out into the snow-dotted night? I care not.

Dreams, Claudra. Small-hours nightmares your son had to bring him to waking, see that tiny shred of moon from his window, catch a whiff from your *fish-market* on the floor below, shiver at the baleful, watching corners of his room. Were they *my* red eyes staring? Were they *my* teeth bloodrunning? 'Course not. But sit up in sheets wet from his own fear he did, thinking he'd heard a scream or ghost in full moaning. Did he urge to call you—you, his mother, to make his nest dry, warm once more, settle him, leave a kiss on his forehead, sing a little, wander from his room as he fell once more into snow-dazed sleep?

Yes he saw the moon's sly smile and though he was afeared, he wondered at the snowflakes and soon was rocked till he slept once more and I saw to it that he dreamt of trees and branches, forest floor, all white-laden.

Come the morning, all that was good and white was gone.

Go to work, Claudra; go to the shop. Will Harry be there? Bundle your coat behind the counter; put Daniel to play amongst the curiosities then trip lightly, flicking the Bakelite switches, humming as you set the train in motion, light the Tiffany lamp, add a bit of muzak, swivel on your stool behind the counter, tap your fingers in time. I care not, but I've been thinking. This is, of course, not to be confused with *plotting*. Yes thinking, and what I think is that *you* should take care; the moment will come when you'll look around you, check the corners of the shop—

here's Harry come at last—late today! All wind-ruffed from his riding of you; he's white-shirted, clean-jeaned. Did he park his bike round the back in the yard or did he wade through water, rise from the lake to meet you this morning? Ding-a-ling! Look sharp, Claudra, your man's here, your lover, come to wander with you among Sumneresque fields of barley, kiss your mouth, feel your body rise, while the jealous sun*—yes look sharp, check your hair, flutter your eyelashes, pout—

YOU: Hi, Harry.

HARRY: Ah hello gorgeous! Sleep well?

YOU: Not at all!

The pair of you, morning-after *rank*. Like skunks in full spray. None of that sea scales and merman stuff yes forget all that; you were like dogs, cock-joined and running.

In the shop, the hours tick by on the Grandfather clock, while you two dance the day long, tango amongst the jackets and dresses, waltz past the dummies. The green velvet of that dress slides in your fingers as you flit and turn. Such rich kissing, behind the coats and shirts.

How many customers today? None. Thought I heard a quiet ding-a-ling to announce a caller didn't you hear anything, Claudra? Your tongue too far down Harry's throat to take note? Looks like you lost a sale there. You should take care, leave Harry to take himself off to the back room to make coffee while you check behind those jackets, under a box or two—

sure I saw a shadow at the door, just then.

I've been thinking. This is, of course, nothing like conspiring. Or scheming. Hatching, dreaming up, cooking up—there's changeable weather coming. Whereas yesterday's wind calmed itself into bright freezing; whereas yesterday was fog and frost and snow-covered hard cold hearts, today is definitely warming; today is absolutely on the move. Brisk wind is rising, heading in off the sea—but not yet, not yet, all sunny look, all mild, slight breeze that's all, nothing to worry about but later! Later it will bring the greys with it; a shadow will gather across the wave tips out in the bay yes the wind will bring with it the blackened scarred northern water hard up against the harbour wall. The Kraken mass will boil all suckers and tentacles, all slack bladder-wrack sliding, sliming, in a *foment* it will be while you, Claudra, should maybe think to search behind the phrenology head, chuck aside that pirate hat, peer into the gob of that fat crocodile *mean*-looking, he is, such red eyes, *mangle* you, he would, chew off an arm or two if he could, *spit up* the bits—you've lost something. Someone.

No shadow after all, no one darkening the shop doorway for surely, there's June! There she is, busy in the kitchen of her cosy cup-cake sweetie biscuit cake 'n' crumble Gingerbread cottage making sandwiches. And biscuits. And cakes. How so, June? More than enough for one, even if her tooth is plenty sweet these days. Little Skip under her feet, wanting to lick the spoon, scrape out the last of the cake mix from the bowl and she lets him—moment of childhood memory, for June: small girl in the kitchen, Mother in apron, fairy cakes baking, warm-brown smell, bowl and spoon, lickety-lick—

June, in the kitchen, Skip pestering for cake mix. Buns out of the oven, cooled on the tray, icing over, steady with the hundreds and thousands there June lovely pretty cakes perfect for a picnic into the basket tra-la-la she's all Little Red Riding Hood. Off to the forest, weave between the stalks of trees watch out for Mr Wolf drooling from the bushes oh hold one out for him, he'll take your cake in one great gulp, munch it down without so much as a by-your-leave then start on your *arm* if you're not careful, if you don't run for it yes crunch your bones down to your ribcage he will, split your innards spill them lick up your juices—not going to the woods after all, then?

June, picnic basket over her arm, her little boy holding onto her hand, heads over the cobbles into town.

Perhaps there *was* a shadow. Maybe there was a moment; maybe someone crossed the doorway after all, while you, Claudra—have you started checking all the corners yet? What are you looking

for? This'll be fun, this'll be playful, this is hide-and-seek, I-spy, blind man's bluff (ready or not, here comes the big bad wolf!)

Try in the studio, Claudra, through the back room with the squished teabags and the rock-hard coffee grounds and the brown-stained mugs and the stench from the never-cleaned lavatory, clank and splash. Yes take yourself off into the bright-light studio and wander amongst the artwork (they seek him here, they seek him there); see what you can find in the corners in fact in *that* corner don't worry about the dust not touched in years, this corner spiders and cobwebs there are but take a look, Claudra, see the single small painting turned to the wall turn it round Harry won't notice he's not even in here maybe he's in the loo—go on let's see, blow the dust off—is he in heaven or is he in hell?—ah. *Oohhh*.

It's a beautiful little painting. Nothing like the turbulent seas of Harry's oils that litter the room. This is a watercolour, quite different—how light the touch! Background a simple wash of shadow, and in the foreground: woman, reclined on chair, in dark green medieval dress. Her head is thrown back. Her hair is long; it flows like night clouds across a sunset. Such pale eyes, fine point to the nose. To the side, windowsill with small vase, single red rose; note of a summer, long past.

High breasts, hard nipples that peep their browns over fine velvet—d'you remember how the dress fell from your shoulder, Claudra, and the way that Harry—always gentle with his fingers—lifted it and your skin smouldered under his touch?

Look how the rich fabric folds at her thighs to leave her legs bared in their pale porcelains—d'you recall the velvet falling smooth across your hips as you posed and he painted, Claudra? Later, much later: the way Harry's warm hands stroked your flesh, knee to thigh, nearer, ever nearer.

This is another painter-Harry altogether. This is risqué; this is soft porn. Between these spread legs: small cunt, fuzzed with dark hair, and her pale fingers, at work there. The back, arched. Note the half-closed eyes; observe the mouth, open in expression of her ecstasy.

Turn the painting over: small inscription on the flipside: *My Guinevere*.

Take a moment; you're clearly a little—come undone, you could say. All to pieces. Perturbed, disturbed—are we anywhere near *outraged* yet? You're the other woman, Claudra. I hope you're beginning to see this now. You'll always be the other woman, because in the end, there's only one, there only ever was. Harry, Claudra, is a man ensnared in a web of his own making. Once, there was prettiness. Long legs, night sky of hair, falling. Oh yes there was beauty. But mired, so mired in unhappiness.

I'll *show* you. Wait: on a clifftop, I'll make it clear, for there you are, still looking everywhere—it pains me that you have to find out this way, yet wicked as I am, *you* are the cuckquean, Claudra. Puppet, I called you, early in your tale. Yet I think—it is I who has been dancing to your strings. There is *betrayal*, and there are trees. So go! Search the shop, call out. It's your son you've lost, is it not? Shout for Daniel, bring your small boy to you, make good your exit together. Swipe tears from your cheek; you know you need to leave. You're on the way out of this shop—only leaving will clear the stench of weird from your hair—or you would be, if you could only find him. Search amongst the teddies, Claudra, among the glares of their amber eyes: 'Daniel? Are you hiding? Come out, please. Mummy needs to go. I need to go.'

Your heartbeat, a hammer in my bones; I'm shivered, saltwater running, yet wicked, so wicked—the goblin runs, see him bounce on his toes all black eyes and razored teeth do we laugh, gleeful, or cry? Delve into boxes, rake through the jackets and shirts, call out your mounting fear. 'Daniel? Where are you?'

Only dead air will answer his absence. For my part, I'll—

wait. Too much hurt done already. Let me draw my blacks about me; I need to think. Chuck that old painting on the counter, Claudra; this is far more important.

Where is Daniel? Where in the world could the lad be?

Yet some spells, once wound, are hard to unwind.

Little Red Riding Hood, cloaked and eager, basket swinging, two small boys with her, into the forest or, more accurately, up the steps, uphill towards the clifftop where the lovelocks hang. Beautiful spot for a brisk-winter sunny afternoon picnic. Graveyard, backed by ruined abbey.

Just here, turf path leads towards rough grass, cliff edge—watch those small boys play as June leads them through weather-worn gravestones. Giggling as they go—yes, even Skip! Out loud!—pulling handfuls of ivy from the granite walls that line the way—ivy grown from the dark, like mushrooms. Stand still for too long, it twines round your ankles. Leathery stalks bristle, bend, resist the hard snap. Handfuls of glossy leaves thrown up into the mixing air, thrown at June, who tuts and smiles, such fun in the unwarm sun come on Aunty June keep up!

'Wait boys, pair of pests, you! Let me catch my breath.' Yes steep, it is, that path. Going high, we are. Little Red Riding Hood, dear Little Redcap skips lightly or, more accurately, plods with those big feet of hers, pressed dirt under, while ahead, the boys skip lightly or, more accurately, fling ivy leaves. They run around being airplanes, fighter pilots, come on June, keep up!

At the top, a corner. Bench, stone wall behind. Wire fence, big red sign: KEEP OUT. It's not that pretty just here, but there's a waste bin for those empty crisp packets and bun cases, handy concrete plinth just right for young boys' backsides to sit on, fit on. Have the bench to yourself, June. Worth the climb for the view. From here: concrete causeway, twinned lighthouses; they stand guard against the churning sea.

'You can see the pleasure boat out at sea, look.' says June. You been out on it yet Daniel?'

'No,' says Daniel, as June hands him a cheese sandwich. 'I don't think Mummy would like it. I think she reckons she might get seasick. Or I might.'

'True. Probably a bit choppy, this time of year,' says June, munching. 'Some whopping white horses coming in on those waves. The flags on that boat are flapping well.'

'Surprised they've taken the boat out, to be honest,' she says to herself, which is true. All that flapping bunting is a sign of rising wind; all those white horses galloping, a sign of rough weather to come. 'They'll need their hats on out there,' she says to no one. 'Did you know the waves look white, boys, because the wind is turning the water to bubbles?'

'Can I have a packet of crisps?' says Skip.

Kids: just not interested.

D'you ever feel it when the weather's on the change, Claudra? A shift in the wind, smell of something colder, something more *salty*, more *laden*. Grasses stir, trees fidget. When you look skyward, you see clouds beginning to pull up in the sky, building greys, higher, higher. The restless Earth whips the wind round cats' arses, makes them scat, tails-up. It ruffles the hair of young children playing yes young boys trying to finish their crisps when the seagulls dive, wheel away screaming at clouds that frown, darken. Wind that begins to blow, harder.

Batten down the hatches, they say, whoever *they* are, getting the washing in, grabbing their smalls, their linens, from the line, chucking the pegs in the peg basket double-quick. Storm's a-comin'—heave-to! Trim the jib aback! Lash the helm! Or run before the waves—bind the captain fast to the helm lest he's man overboard, bound for Davy Jones's locker, in his watery grave oh see the size of them raindrops, proper two-bob bits they are!

D'you ever watch the clouds mass darkly on the horizon, feel the air humid, pendulous with its undropped load? The small hairs on your arms rise. Take a moment, listen for birdsong but the birds are silent, waiting, while the world holds its breath and—does the first rumble send shivers down your spine, Claudra? You catch yourself watching for the first flash, counting the seconds, one elephant, two elephant, three—while all the time the clouds tower and the light's smothered under black menace—

all these things happen, yes all of them, on a clifftop near Whitby, while two small boys lick the last bits of salt crisps from their fingers and don't notice until the first deep grumble of thunder and June pulls her cloak about her, and notices. Did she conjure it? Did she, while Skip and Daniel were fishing in the bag for another cheese sandwich, have a quick stand up, fling her arms around yes do a quick bit of spell-making? Wind and dark and cloud and growl—all of these and darker still it gets—d'you ever feel the sky pressing down on you, Claudra, like I do? How it burdens me; how you and he, together, burden me. Watch the pleasure boat beating it into harbour—lawks, how that bunting flaps *now*. How up and down it is, out there. It dips and tosses sufficient to make a man taste his meat and mead all over again!

Here's June, hunched on the bench, pulling her cloak—or is it a shawl—about her shoulders. She should put her hood up—or is that a bonnet perched on her curls?—how *grey* they are, of a sudden. Sure, bit of knitting she's doing, knit one, purl one, click-click the needles go like any good granny with Little Redcap just about to call—how are you, Granny? All the better for seeing you,

dearie but let me put down my knitting, place to one side my little half-moon reading glasses, take a gander—and don't you look a picture! All long hair, you are, and lips, and breasts—for sure the woodcutter will just love you, love you he will, hump you yes *prong* you with his dingdong are you prongable, Little Redcap, little Claudra new-to-the-north, are you fuckable in the way that I can't be? You twist and sigh, open yourself to him under his hard sweat, uncurl your petals, daisy under sun while I smoke the last roll-up, stain my teeth yellow see my fingers the colour of mustard their ends are. I seethe and conjure the dark, the wind to whip you skinless if only I could.

Such a storm coming, and another brewing in that shop because there you are, Claudra, running from corner to corner slow down, take a breath, stop your hiccups. Daniel's gone; you won't find him in here. Where's Harry when you need him? Come out of the loo, Harry, into the SHOP and into your SCENE 4. your new assistant and fuckbuddy is in a right state.

YOU: Harry! Daniel's gone!

HARRY: Gone where?

YOU: He's missing!

HARRY: No, surely. Probably playing a silly game, hiding behind the dummies. Come out, Dan! Your mum's not enjoying this. Made her cry you have, boy.

YOU: *(grabbing at Harry's arm)* I've searched everywhere. She's taken him!

HARRY: Whose taken him?

YOU: June! She's taken Daniel - where will she go? What will she do?

HARRY: Wait a minute. *(runs his hands through his blackshock hair)* What's all this about June?

Outside, the afternoon seems to have moved on; the light's dimming. In here, the Tiffany lamp glows hellish; the dummies gather, awkward. They shift, unlistening

YOU: She knows. June knows about you and me. I think she saw us. She was watching, last night when you came to the cottage—

HARRY: This is my sister we're talking about.

YOU: I know but—

HARRY: June wouldn't hurt a fly. And she's not—like—some kind of spy.

YOU: But she *is!* She's been watching. She knows about you painting me. She's probably found the painting, seen the dress.

HARRY: You're taken mad. *(runs hands through hair again)*

YOU: No, Harry, I'm not. I'm talking about the velvet dress you painted me in. The one June once wore herself. I've seen the watercolour. I've seen—the way you painted her.

Pause, while the air's pulled tight; the corners of the shop disappear into black, each one a devil's lair. In here it feels hot, charged, overloaded. In the half-light, Harry is new-shaped, Machiavellian

HARRY: Where did you find that painting?

YOU: I was searching—for Daniel. It was in the studio. In the corner.

Oh Claudra. Look at him—look at your lover. He's sprite, goblin, *worse* see his eyes redden in the dark, watch him paw at the ground with his cloven hoof! He's sweated, *foul*—did you think his hair curled, bed-tossed? There were *horns* embedded in those curls, Claudra, that poked their rib-grown tips to rake you end to end like his cloven-fingers—did you think those fingers stroked you to your climax? They *burnt* you into scars with their sharp rendering. His bladed teeth gnawed into your fine and delicate skin. Did you think his lips were soft, his tongue gentle in its searching? 'Twas a forked tongue he unravelled, gagged you with. Yes you gagged, choked on him—you thought him kindly in his probing of you. He *bunged* you, full proper, hard and again—he's beast, Claudra. He's Incubus. They are Incubi, come to ride us to our deaths.

HARRY: She can be a jealous girl. But she wouldn't hurt your boy. (*His breath, scoring the air. His eyes, full of your knowing*)

YOU: Then where is he? I heard the bell, Harry. She came in the shop—when I think of it I'm sure. She's taken him. Why didn't she say something? Why didn't she ask?

HARRY: We were probably otherwise engaged.

There's something shameful in that goatish look. See him sigh; see him wait. See his braincells ticking on oh slow, they are. Catch up, Harry. 'Tis out, your secret, and June is full-knowing of the fact of your new lust for Claudra here. You know your sister, Harry; you know June will have gone in jealous rage perhaps, but to who knows where?

HARRY: Wait here. I'll check at your place, just in case—and I'll call at June's.

YOU: I'll come—

HARRY: No. Stay here. They may come back. What a fucking mess.

End of scene? Oh I'm plotting I'm scheming—we've only just begun!

Did you ever notice how the colour of the sea changes when a storm's coming, Claudra? It turns from clear and simple green through grey to jet-black seethe. Light fades, darker, dark. Makes night of day.

Out at sea, white horses gallop wild. At the clifftop, the boys kneel, chew on fairy cakes, poke fingers into glacé icing, lick. June stands, stretches, turns her full attention to the sky then takes herself to where the chain-link fence protects. Below, the sea claws at the rocks. Last summer there was a storm and the tide rose mightily. Punched the lights out of the rocks, those waves did. In the afterlight: all sand was gone from the reaches of shoreline around the bay. Just rock, and stinking seaweed, fly-clouded. Seaweed, and smashed crabs. That was last year, but after every summer comes a winter.

Did you know that the colour of your eyes will change, with the colour-change of sea? Most days, the pale greys of June's eyes mirror the shifting silvers of those chilly waters. Today—perhaps it's the lowering clouds, reflected in restless waves. Or shadows of cliffs, the ruined abbey shell. Maybe it's just the darkness of her mood that turns her eyes to blackest black.

June, lone figure on the cliff top. Chain-link fence (not that high, but high enough to stop her from stepping over to plummet)—shawl a-flapping over her furs that ripple with the wind, thick pelt, lice-ridden, clumped and bloodied from recent kill. Uncloak, Granny, do. What big ears you have! All the better for listening, my dear, at cottage windows, behind studio doors, animal squeal and grunt in mating, my big feet planted, my long ears twitching oh cast aside those glasses, Granny, do, for what dark eyes you have! All the better for plotting, planning, scheming in general, my dear. What do you see in my black gaze now? Murderous, those eyes are but what big teeth you have Granny! All the better to howl at the sky give you a proper chomping see my spitstring hanging, my tongue slide, my molars—tatters of skin and bone raked up in them a bloody sight, they are go on take a look I'll open wide I'll—

so high, it is, up here. That chain-link fence, though: so low, when it comes to it. Grab hold the metal rail, look over: cliffside in free-fall to those oh-so-sharp rocks below. Like spears they are. Like incisors—

fairy tale rocks, but how cruel fairy tales often are yes even for the poor witch scalded, her bones burnt, her frame pinned by iron—

here's Daniel, come to the fence to keep June company. Hold fast to the fence rail with your small child's fists, young man, lest the wolf-wind knock you right over. It's not that high, that fence, after all. Not much protection, when it comes to it.

'Is there going to be a thunder storm? What are all these padlocks for?' Daniel says.

The rocks are sharp. Did I mention that?

All those padlocks, hanging along the chain-link fence, caught for eternity—or until they rust in this salt-sting wind—like their wishes, cherished by timeless lovers: *Stay forever in my heart. Love you always.* Not a single key to unlock these long-dead loves. Trapped, eternal. The padlocks shift miserably in the wind.

A small one: *J and H.*

Here's Skip, come to join the party, hanging off the fence. Like a mackerel caught, he dances on the line, making the padlocks rattle where they touch like secret lovers' hands. These boys: two small waifs, follow the breadcrumbs, nibble at gingerbread roof, spun-sugar house come in, come in my dears while the birds peck away your trail. They hang on the fence, look out to sea, June and the boys, as—see where it has brought you, Claudra!—I rise the wind, pull in the waves, then crack the thunder.

Into the dim recesses of the shop, the dark corners, the shadows on shadows you peer yes so many recesses in here, so dim, shadowy, so misty, so dark they are. You search, in some hope that Daniel will jump like Jack from the Box, spring up and shout, 'Surprise!'

Imagine, Claudra: 'Surprise!' shouts Daniel, and springs from the box of dressing up clothes, pirate hat on his head, Davy Jones coming up at last for air. 'I hid for ages, Mummy!'

'Oh Daniel,' you sob, rushing to help him from the box, pulling him into your arms. 'Mummy was so worried! I thought I'd lost you!'

'I got a bit bored in the end.'

'Never mind. It doesn't matter now. Silly Mummy thought—I thought—but I was wrong. I've made things seem worse, much worse than they really are.'

'I was only hiding, Mummy. Playing.'

'Yes. Oh my angel. You're back.'

Shall I bring him back for you, Claudra? Shall I spirit him in amongst the jumble, call Harry back in to tell you that June is having tea with Skip in her cosy cottage no cage no bones to poke

through the bars just crisps and a cola for a treat on a stormy day in fact shall I subside the storm, bring on the sunshine, winter sunset across the bay, let the twilight settle over you, fairy-dust you into peace and harmony? How real would it be, if I placed you in a fairy tale of your own, you, Harry, couple more kids, ding-a-ling in the shop happy ever after—but how cruel fairy tales can be.

Catch that first flash of lightning, burst of thunder and check it if you like, Claudia but the dressing-up box is full of nothing but sleeves and shirts and hats and rags and not a young boy anywhere because see where this has brought you!—your happy ever after isn't here, your son isn't here, and the storm is beginning to hit—

here's Harry, flinging his bike up against the shop window, flying back into the shop (ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling!), rain-pelted and wind-blown and come to tell you, come to ditch the fairy tale.

HARRY: I've checked. She's not at your place, and no answer at her cottage. She's out somewhere—there's hell of a storm coming. She'll have our boy with her too. Shit.

YOU: In this weather? Where on earth could they be? Where would she go? The tea-shoppe maybe? Another café? The sweet-shoppe? Her cabin? *Think*, Harry! She's your sister, you must know what she'd do—

HARRY: (*shaking his head*) No sign anywhere. Let go of me now. Don't get hysterical woman; let me think.

YOU: Don't get hysterical? That's my *son* out there somewhere with that crazy woman!

HARRY: And mine too, don't forget. He's mine, young Skip. She'll not hurt a hair on his head. *Several more flashes, decent claps of thunder.*

Ah, young Skip. Patchwork nipper, little Lord Jumblesale, playing in the shop, in and out of jackets, stroking with small hand the cold-shine scalp of the phrenology head, running jet necklaces through his fingers, watching the grown-ups with his odd eyes, saying about as much as one of the dress-draped dummies he hides behind. A little Coraline with button eyes, stitched lips, sweet crooked smile and out in the storm—rain, running down the shop windows, tears of a clown (but there's no one around).*

Inside the shop: dim recesses. Outside, rain like teardrops, naturally, on the windows, wind beginning to blow a hoolie; wicked stepmother, patchwork kiddie and little Daniel scribbled out of his mother's fairy tale and into something much darker. All out in it and soaked already.

HARRY: There's a place—we used to go there, June and I, when we were youngsters. The kind of place June liked to spend time at. When things were difficult at home. There's a bench—

YOU: Where is it? (*You drag your coat from behind the counter*) Where is it Harry? Where will they be?

HARRY: The clifftop, where the lovelocks hang—

YOU: I know where it is. (*Pulling your coat around you*)

HARRY: Wait—I'll come with you—

you're already out of the door, running.

June and the boys at the clifftop, at the chain-link fence, and how the wind swirls round this little spot. Have you ever felt the start of an electrical storm, Claudra? The way the air lays heavy, heavier still and all the time it grows darker, and darker, more ominous overhead. You become aware that the wind has picked up; it bends the trees back, whips dust into small tornadoes in corners, spins it across cobbles, through streets, alleyways, along paths yes such steep paths up onto clifftops, hurls it out to sea, only for it to hurtle back churned with salt and spray and your eyes sting with it, your mouth is gritted and all the time you try to fight the overwhelming urge to get down, hide, flatten yourself, curl into a mouse-ball—all these things this storm does.

The beast-wind lifts June's cloak; the hair on her head spins in wild spirals as she turns to Skip and Daniel. 'Boys, I think the weather's taken a bit of a turn.' It has; it has, June. Does it suit your purpose?

'It's amazing!' shouts Daniel. 'Look at those white horses now! They really gallop don't they, Aunty June?'

'Yes, they do. Rain's coming, boys. And the wind's getting up. Daniel let me take hold your hand—'

Let me *take hold* of you, Daniel! Let me pull you—which way? Away from the cliff edge beyond the fence, or *towards* it?

For here's my storm. Talk about sudden squall! I've winds to shriek and rain to pelt how merciless it is as it pummels at rock, beats at cliff face, what would you give, June, to conjure *this*? Try it, why don't you with your pathetic shreds of paper, your small cotton windings. You think you can stir the elements to your support? Put away your fags, your cheap spells, your Tarot cards and all that—you want the real thing? *I'm* the real thing I *am* the black, the pock-marked crone I'm out in it, I'm wetted, I'm soaked, I'll rain—I'll rip myself in shreds across the sky oh watch me fly, I'm tatters in black-smoked air I *rake* this earth with my talons—ever seen red lightning, Claudra, June? How I split the sky! I fork to earth I'll break your ear drums I'm crackled oh we'll smoulder we'll burn—

here's you, Claudra, running up that hill *lawks* how the earth splashes up your legs as I turn dust to mud. I dance in puddles, pull thorns through your hair throw sticks, branches how devilish how *wicked* I am in my storming! Here's Harry too, coming up fast behind look at that shirt *ruined* it is in

all this mayhem run, Claudra, run, Harry, see if you can catch them before my winds pick up the more!

June holds fast to the metal rail of the chain-link fence and whoops! off the bench behind her goes the bag with the fairy cakes and the crisps in it *high* in the wind that bag is, riding like the gulls bent into cloud I'll rain your bun cases down in the streets of Whitby, June!

Look at Daniel—not quite so excited now, is he? Bit scared, I'd say in fact are those raindrops or tears on his wind-slapped cheeks as he shouts something what is it, Daniel? What are you trying to say? Is it I want to go home? I want my Mummy? Is this a bit much for you, my elemental self, my lightning strike, my thunder-brawl above? Hold on, Daniel! Grab tight with your small hands to the handrail but wet with rain it is look out or your fingers will slip from it but June will take hold of your hand, she'll save you—will she?

Dragon wind, I flame, rage; I swirl, round and round over rooftops in the town, fling rooftiles, scoop up abandoned brollies, juggle them, somersault them through the streets, scatter them like bruised flowers. Hold fast to June's skirts, Skip. How round your button eyes *now*, how bird's nest *now* your hair! Mesmerised you are by sea and sky churning as one oh *watch*, Skip while I upturn that pleasure boat—*raced* towards harbour it did, but too late, was it not? That'll dampen the bunting! The reds and yellows sink what's the view like from *underneath* d'you think? Black, nothing but black in my northern angered sea and in the depths my tentacles wind about the wide-eyed drowning to squeeze the breath from their mouths in bubbles—d'you think they make good white horses, Skip, the dying as they come gasping to the surface? See their white mouths blow spray like whales! Whited from the cold, bloated from the salt how their thick lips would call, if they could! I'll yank 'em under once more, squeeze the last air from their lungs, send 'em water-spinning to sea-rotted corpse—I see your fingers at your own mouth—shocking, isn't it what a storm can do: split starfish, dump them in their dead thousands, scream away the sand to leave bare rock, smithereen the crabs, hurl seaweed—don't let go of your mother's skirts, Skip, lest this maelstrom should—

on the clifftop, by the fence, June staggers in the gale, under the slapping dead-weight of her cloak. Her hair flies, wetly. She pulls the children to her but Daniel's fingers, rain-wetted, slip from both rail and her hand. Thunder-crack once more and, underneath the vast noise, in the huge wind, Skip puts his hands to his ears and comes away from June's skirts. She grabs for the handrail with one hand, reaches for the boys with the other.

'Boys! Take my hand!' she shouts. Reach for her, Daniel—June's not trying to take you to the edge, after all—but *save* you from it! Reach for your mother's hand, do, Skip—

but my whirlwind wolf-wind storm is in full howl; bestial giant, it lopes towards its prey, takes hold of two small boys in its slavering jaws, snaps, bites, drags them away from June to strand them, two splatted flies up against the chain-link fence, just as you, panting, soaked, muddied, arrive. Just as Harry, rip-shirted, hair blown and wetmessed, arrives.

Block your ears, Claudra, for Daniel's cry will freeze your bones, clot up your blood. Cover your eyes, June, for young Skip's mouth is a gashed scream you cannot hear as he's wind-whipped over the metal chain-link fence—too low, too low, after all!—over the lovelocks that catch at flesh, hard rock beyond to bruise and split skin widely. Scream at the cliff edge, Claudra. Cry out through thickened tears to match the rain's fat falling, as thunder humps and grumbles. Fold you, heart-torn, Claudra, June, as both your children are caught up in my vortex wind and pulled to cliff edge—and over.

It's done. My wind I bring to calm.

June, in wolf-wind caught, but she, no wolf—no jaws, no musty pelt, after all. A mother, stunned; her son, gone over. See her bend and wail, make to climb over the fence to follow but Harry catches at her cloak, drags her back. Know this, Claudra, even as you scream your son's name to the wetdropping clouds above, rush now to the fence, clamber over, drop to your knees to grab handfuls of grass, drag yourself to the edge to see for yourself the damage far below. Your man's deserted you. He's left you for another, his true heart—what legacy Mother and Father left!

Come away. Don't look. Who wishes to see their son, small dot below, smashed onto rocks then drifted redly on the swarming tide?

Watch through your tears, Claudra, as Harry sweeps June into desperate, clutched embrace. Here's *J and H*; here's trapped, eternal. Here's true, enduring love. You had to see. I had to show you. Harry was never yours; he would always have abandoned you. But are you not, with my assistance, cruel Medea after all? I *see* you, through all these masks, these veils. We'll not be tamed, you and I; we'll tip on—do I not speak for us both, for us all, in my keening? Such aberrations we are, such monsters—through time we tread; our Medusa heads swarm and hiss; our demons crawl fawning at our heels yes such *malevolents* we are. We're mothers wronged and all the more

monsterish for it—are we not? You and I? So *long* it is, I've wept—I smoke and burn in the very moment I call for justice. For *justice*. I thought us both as one in grief, brought close. But—this is not; this is not how—

see where this has brought you! Yet I see you there, your small boy gone over to dance in waves, spilt on those sharp rocks—Daniel, got from Cornish stock—no Poseidon perhaps, but did we think to punish Keith so harshly with the dashing of his son on hardened spikes?

I saw the birthing of deep despair in you as you watched your child go, the red rope that conjoined you with him strained tight—but never will it break. You'll spend your lifelong time in sorrow and loss. I think—

I understand it better, now.

I called you from his story into mine, yet—I own it again—it is my story after all that finds itself caught up in yours. Your hurts, mine. You weep, and my eyes are wet with scorching tears. You call, and my own mouth cries our pain out loud to the elements. Your heart splits, and my heart will surely burst from our anguish. If I could only hold your face, cupped in my wreck-less hands, kiss your shocked tears away, cradle you, rock you gently into sleep from which you'd wake without these hurts—

I fade. I make the world night, go to ground, pace my dark-twiggged passages. I curl up under these new-blackened shields of trees, soak my sorrow into this tunnelled earth. An earthworm comes to surface, drawn by the tremors of my raindrop tears. In here, no blackbird hauls it from its sweet, damp home. Small spider runs across my mudfurlled palm; I watch its moonlit wandering path: 'tween my thumb and finger it tracks, web-making to and fro with busy strings. It is but a tickle on my skin.

Sleep, sleep. When I wake the spider's work is done, its web complete: veil drawn across my hand, each fine thread laced with dewdrop, which in dawn's first paling shows silvered message of the coming sun. The spider moves; I hear its miniscule footstep to bring my first small smile in half a century, it feels. Beneath my winter hedgerow wraps, I take an age to work the web from my hand to stanged branch, then, freed of its sticky threads, I sit back on my heels and watch the spider run, repair. As must I.

Hold, time! Sink, moon—put your face back below the hill; keep your deadwhite frown for later, for I've work to do. Up, sun in erstwhile sunset—stop your dipping! Put back the reds, fill the sky with smoked slips of cloud, the vestiges of yesterday's wild weather—make it *today, still*—where the tides? Which way the winds? Put it all back—sea still knocking at the rocks stiff breeze loaded with heavy rain still but the worst done: roofs lifted, chimney pots tumbled, storm-swollen sea in its early subsiding do we really need to shift *all* the sand from the bay? Oh shove it back, do, unstun the fish, upright the pleasure boat (maybe a couple of lives lost, man overboard, keep it realistic, couple of ne'er-do-wells or maybe just him with the flat cap and greasy hair, total loner, for sure no one never loved him I'll bet) and let's to the small group at the clifftop where the lovelocks hang and the couple, in each other's arms—fixed, eternal love and sadness perhaps for them, but you, Claudia—

listen to me! By all means grab hold of the grass to keep yourself steady, haul yourself to the edge, but stay on your belly—don't stand and risk a sudden gust—then wipe the rain from your eyes. Can you look? Yes on your belly, bring your face to the edge, open your eyes, peer over. Look. Look, Claudia.

Not more than three feet below: small ledge, small dark, wet head, small boy clinging—which one, which one? Muddied he is, yes scraped and dirtied, jumper ripped, fingernails torn from his hanging on against all the odds he flattens himself against the rock and fights for a foothold there's a fistful of turf, grasses in his fingers but slipping, slipping those fingers are while the rain hammers, still and the last rumbles of thunder echo round the cliffside—oh hold on, little one! Hold on!

'Harry! June!' you cry. 'Help me!'

His poor, pale face, filled with fear of his life, looking up at you. Here's shock, here's terror—small mouth, trying to form words where no words can come. You see him slip some more, you cry out to him as he screams, scrabbles at the stone with his feet—a shoe loose, then lost, tumbling against sheer rock face to fall to nothing in the mashing waves.

'Hang on!' you shout. 'Don't look down!' 'Just hang on!' You reach, an arm over. The distance is too far, too far! Then Harry and June are alongside you, belly-crawled to edge; they add their cries to yours.

'Don't you dare let go!' shouts Harry. 'I'll have you up, just you don't let go! You reach for me—c'mon now!' He reaches down, his paint-stained fingers spread as if in a handshake welcome.

The child quakes, cries. 'I can't! Mummy!'

'Yes, you can!' says June. 'Don't take your eyes away from Harry now, just look at him, you can do it, you're nearly there, just one try now, not far for a big boy like you—'

Harry stretches out his hand. The boy wails, reaches, grasps air with one hand; their fingers meet—so close, so close! But slippery fingers! The child screams, grabs once more at tufted grass, shuts his eyes tight, sobs. Those small fingers, coming away slowly, yes slipping away from rescue, life.

'Now listen to me,' says Harry. 'I'm reaching for you now—open your eyes, look at me—this time we're going to do it. You ready? C'mon boy—reach!'

Oh treacherous cliff face: it runs with water, streams with stick and stone and gushing mud in hair and eyes but again Harry stretches out his hand and again the child reaches up and this time—this time their fingers meet and Harry grabs and he has the small hand in his, he has it! He hauls, and the storming rocks spit up their prey: the small boy comes over the clifftop and sprawling onto grass. Quickly, quickly all, carry him Harry, take him back over the fence—to safety with you. Set him down there.

'Mummy!' sobs the boy again, and now, at last, you can hug your child to you.

'It's ok Daniel,' you say. You stroke his rain-soaked hair. 'It's ok. You're safe now.'

'Oh Harry,' you start to say in thanks and grief, mixed, but Harry's on his knees right now. He's inward turned, Claudia. See how his hair hangs with all its wets around his face, the way he runs a shaking hand through those dark, soaked locks. His has been a life so far spent trying to capture on canvas the black heart of the waters he lives by. At the last, that fierce northern sea has, in its foulest mood, claimed *his*, instead.

As for June—where is June?

She breaks from all embrace, runs, bruising, scraping, her scream—again and again in wild air Skip! Skip! My child my baby! Skip down the cliff path all the way to the wet sand and bedevilled shoreline, beyond which—but she sees nothing, in all the sloshing sobbing mix of rain and sea. Such darkness, beyond all else.

Small comfort I can be to June. On her knees, she clutches at sand and stares at a dark sea crashing. Look again: is that a small buoy, small head that the waves bob onto rock, claw back, then bob to rock again? No way to tell, from here. No way to see two button eyes, sealed watertight. Nest of hair, working in the water like seaweed.

A small mouth, salt-water filled, sings a young merman's cry to the sea fish. They come to his call, dolphinsong, whalesong, take him dipping on the current, while overhead the gulls cry.

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The sky is righted. It's an early moon that rises with the clouds' thinning, pokes its face earthward. Let's see, let's see. The sea has pulled back from the shore, leaving crab-clawed, weed-wracked shallows in the sand that lies across this bay. Each step in water that sits now in these gritted frills is a small shock of cold to the soles of my feet. How these puddles stare wide-eyed in my searchlights. Mesmerised they are, by my falling gaze. I bend, dip a finger; water ripples into moonlight.

A snippet of wisdom comes to mind: a bright coin, placed in a small pot of water, carried into full moon's light to catch its silver: blessed, the water will be, powerful, your spell-making. Who told me this? How did I learn it? I remember still the warm touch of a hand, a goodly woman. Centuries ago, it was, is.

I put my finger to my lips, taste cold salt as I call the world to hush. Look up: myriad stars span my centuries. I do not feel moon-blessed. I feel old—how *worn* I am. As if, despite my ages in trying, I'm ground to dust. Those men that do their worst: do they step sprightly, still, over the many, many dead of their making? Have they a merry jig to dance, tread pain into those trodden faces even now? I think, in truth, they are but a mangle of insignificant bones. Our frail heads long burned or buried. Their broad bonces, over-sized pates, their socketed, wide-jawed howl.

Claudra, June. Unsnake us. No stone-making gaze and I, no Circe, never more to turn all men to beasts.

June. What will we do with you? You're cloak-hid, black-hooded, look at your curled fists fingernails digging, *cutting* into your palms, they are. All you want to do is sit and rock, rock yourself but there was so much going on, so many bits to get past: emergency services flashing lights, ear-rocking sirens there were, blokey-blokes running, high-viz jackets and shouting and all you want to do is sit and rock yourself.

You ran down the path, got yourself to cliff bottom, to the inhospitable, groaning rocks. Vast barriers of stone and foam in the dark, shouting night: elements in wild violent dance. Nothing to see, nothing for Harry to see, tipping up beside you as he did. Yes of your child: nothing. How you screamed at the sea! What fresh sweep of horror and hope mixed there was, at the sight of a small bobbing nothing which, as the seconds, as so many minutes ticked by, ticked by, ticked by, failed to wash to shore.

This morning: they gossip in the sweet-shoppe. The inshore lifeboat *again!* Not that many minutes before, they say, it was already out to the pleasure boat as it came limping towards harbour—how those brave men searched, stared into the deeps for the guy in the cap that someone said went over, caught by the waves. Local, was he? *Heck* of a storm, bit of a tornado through the town, by all accounts. Searchlights there were, and round and round the lifeboat went (and true, you'll remember later, June how you saw the swim of bright orange boat, pitching, searchlight-lit, from your wet dark moment) but nothing, not a barnacle anywhere but they kept looking, those brave men, tracking back and forth and especially round the base of the cliff near as they dared come but not too near, like *fangs*, those rocks are, claim somebody every few years they do.

Not a sign of the young nipper, they say. Probably wash up further down the coast somewhere. *Devilish* weather, it was. Not that you'd expect much left, small young sprat like that. Such a shame. Always was a bit—those eyes: bit odd, weren't they. Never saw him in school, clung to his mother's skirts. Always in that shop, playing, or bobbing round to the Spar with his mum. And she, always a bit—you know. And him. Always been close, the two of them. Devastated, the pair are. Did she ever say who the father was? Bloke from Scarborough, wasn't it? Upped sticks and left her to it. Just goes to show.

What does it show, June?

A coldsilvered morning, a beach. Stiff breeze from the east has pulled the sky apart in thin, grey strands. The tide is out. On the stretching wet sand: lone walker with dog—*always* a walker with a dog. The cocker spaniel runs, nosing amongst piles of brown-leathered seaweed. Here, a colourless bundle—the dog scratches with one paw, snuffles in tangled strands, whines, and his alert fetches his owner to take a closer look. She comes, each footstep leaving a boot print trodden into wet sand, that fills with sea water.

'What you found, Pups?' she says, squatting to peer. Early sunshine picks out a small disc of blue-white parchment. Look closer: not weeds, but tendrils of hair; not seaweed strands but unstitched wool. Closer still: small face, an eye. Her brain takes moments more to fit together the jigsaw pieces that make up the picture of a child.

'Jesus Christ,' she says, and stares while shock registers and she shudders, stands. The eye appears to blink. This could not be: the swollen lips, small, shrivelled fingers are of nothing that could live. The cocker's bathmat ears droop; it tucks its tail. The owner calls her dog away; with hands that shake she pulls out a phone to make the call.

So much to do, so much stuff, police and no doubt post-mortem and coroner and funeral services the bloody money-grabbing bastards Harry says and his anger doesn't help because what's the point? There's official this and form-filling that, your life's not your own in these last days, last few weeks, when all you want to do, June, is sit, and rock and there's Harry, wanting you to help in the shop oh you know he does it to keep himself moving keep himself patched up come *unstitched*, he will, if he stops but there's too much of Skip playing amongst the shirts and coats.

'Just shut the fucking shop!' you shout. In its familiar gloom, there's too much space on the floor, by the radiator, in the light of the Tiffany lamp, where Skip knelt and drew his hieroglyphics onto paper. Too much space on the carpet where he parked his cars. The pirate hat, the bits and pieces he and the young lad Daniel dressed up in. Yes little lad Daniel shocked, traumatised even, but pulled to safety, into his mother's arms, taken home to a warm bath, hot drink, bed—I see you beginning to ask a question, June. Lord above help me, I'm not sure I can answer it.

No better at home for you: more Skip-less places—not just his bed, his room—solitary one-eyed teddy on the floor that makes your heart swell, burst. Downstairs: the table, chair where he swung his legs as he ate his tea each day. The sofa, where he read his books. The kitchen, where he hankered after picking dried currants out of the bag to pop in his mouth when you were cake-

making. So much space, and here's your heart, no space at all but filled, crammed. Yes I see it burst, regularly.

I watch you, and try to comprehend the most particular pain that you're in. Your own red rope of love, come apart most brutal. Yet and all at the same time stronger still it's woven, rope of love now tangled in pain, and ache, and grief.

How do you find things, June, when you call to see his small confined shape, adrift amongst lilies? Does your throat clag on their perfume? Re-stitched, arranged in pose of peaceful sleep for your viewing. Candle-lit room, catafalque, the small body floats in peach-coloured silk. Chapel of such unrest! What kind of a crib is it? Bottom drawer of quite another kind. How does he look? His skin treated, coloured to resemble not the ghost-oval that showed itself on the sand of the shoreline to make a small dog whine, its owner fight not to bolt in fear, but instead the living hue of a young boy's face. Too yellow, I'll be bound. Yes too waxen, sunken, for a real boy. Dolled, in his linens. I see you, June, as you look upon his body, place a kiss on his chilly forehead, weep your mothering tears over him. His skin is truly shed. How *unrequired*, what empty chrysalis the body is, when soul has flown.

What clothes did you ask for him to be placed in? Clean jumper to gain swift entry at St Peter's gates, one-eyed teddy tucked under his arm. Death: how they dress it up in these times. Better a simple winding-sheet—but see how my mind flits.

Do you take his small hand up in yours, June, and find yourself again in shock at its cold? Each finger, pale replica of those warm and living ones that often wound themselves up in yours, young boy hanging onto his mother—such safety in the simple act of holding a hand. D'you remember the moment of your child's birth, and after: those tiny pinked, perfect digits that grasped instinctively at your finger? At his coffin-side, you examine the whorls of his prints, small callus where he sucked his thumb, snipped nails you cut only last week. Search the bin in your bedroom, you'll find them still: his miniscule dead sheddings.

At last, a funeral. No Father for you June, of course, no Mother and just as well as *scandalous* Mother would have thought it. Outrageous. Not to be borne. And many other unhelpful things no, much better that Mother's shuffled off, gone on before. Perhaps in her afterlife she'll call her grandchild to her, hold his hand, sit him up on her knee, jig him a bit now he's orphaned. Perhaps not, if the blank black beyond is to be believed. Which is it? Not for me to say, in my lonesome haunting. Can only speak for myself.

Small white coffin, couple of hymns, prayer or two. You falter, sing, say *The Lord's Prayer* out loud because everyone else does. No Mother or Father then, but James the Whitby farmer, who shakes Harry's hand, clasps him on the shoulder. Marge from the tea-shoppe, who wears pink (well she *would*), clutches you in an embrace; gets tearful; dabs her eyes with a pink hankie. You won't remember any of this, June. Smattering of locals who know Harry, know you, knew Skip. Locals whose steps find not their way to the sweet-shoppe and its sugar-coated small-talking gossip. Instead, small circle of folks in this hard-as-brass, no-nonsense North Coast seaside town who gave shelter for a small boy of few words, scrawny young pesk-patch of a lad with bird's nest hair who hid behind his mother's skirts, clung to his father's leg. Little lad with a sweet crooked smile.

How curious I am to see the coffin, flower-topped, come trundling through the curtain to this, beyond: a simple room, white walls, catafalque for queue of coffins. Out there: the chapelled final hymn, a button pressed, the curtains close oh out of sight, allow us not to see the mechanisms of deathly ritual laid out too obvious.

Yes in here: a room of already-dead. How bizarre its workings: row of brick ovens—yes nowhere to proceed except towards fierce heat, crackle of burn. How hellish this strikes me in my musing, while out there, the organ plays, still, and I know the black-jacketed weepers rise with you, dab their eyes, take their sadnesses outside with yours to admire the flower garden. D'you think the curtain hides a Stairway to Heaven,* you mourners? Laugh me, nought but flames, nought but flames! Oh keep your eyes on the flower beds do; lift not your eyes to the chimney, you funeral-goers, lest you see the smoke that drifts loved ones to heaven, or perhaps to choke in hell. Or worse, see nought at all. Nought at all, you weeping fools. Look to your god blindly; you'll weep forever I do b'lieve. Being honest, being more *realistic*, a clever device will decide on heat, and the timing of things yes some such thing will arrange all to avoid the sight of smoke-stacked dread-black billows from fat-fuelled flesh that burns. In short: these things are digitally controlled. A smokeless burn—how times change! Time was, June, when a body would be laid open on plinth and set to fire and the column of smoke would fetch all to keen and mourn and watch the spirit lift from wearied bones to air, and certain glory in heaven.

Go home, June. I'll stay to see your son through his particular burning; it's the least I can do. Meantime, in here, under my watch, the small white coffin waits. Beneath its rose-strewn lid: silk-padded bed, wax-fixed shape of boy in dead-sleep. Dwell not on my own piled bone, hot-ashed, hand-sorted; I marvel instead at the ovens, clean-swept between each occupant to ensure no mix

of dusty remains. What fresh devilment would there be, if Sire X was partly spread, part-scattered wide with unknown Lady Y?

Quick, oh quick Skip's burning is. No fat on these bones yes his narrow bones, poked through iron bars of cage, would send the witch packing to her kitchen, boil up another feast to fatten this one. Through the small glass pane, the oven for him alone, I watch him in his broiling down to scant sticks. That much I can do. For how would it be, to see your own child reduced in hell-hot flame yes to see your own small product, so rendered? Oh June. All life's promise broken, reduced to leaking grief. My Medean self clutches my own throat, scores my own skin; my mouth, wide, ululates, wails.

Small boy, now panned scraps, for the most part coffin ash. I watch him through his grinding to the last, the last. This is the truth of it: living, running child, cremulated to fine dust. How do we bear it?

After this, more days for you to tread, until your son's spare sift of ashes will be ready for you to collect, scatter where you will. Wait, June, wait. Rock yourself, sing songs below your breath to your bruised and pained mothering. It will help, it will help, though it will not ease. Not yet. Not ever.

You can collect your child now, June. If you have it in you. Such a small box, it will be. At home, you rocked; you rocked. Now you come to the crematorium desk, sign out your box of boy, cradle it to your breast, take him home where he takes up residence on the dressing table. Ah Skip, sit you there a while. Your mother feels you with her through these first pain-filled days. Bit of comfort, you are, through the night. Yes as if you're with her, still.

Daylight stretches; there's birdsong—my winter will diminish. I gather frost about me, would turn all to white, but the sun pulls branches to bud and coming leaf. It will melt me. I sit under, frown at these new greens. Out to stride—here's beeches—how broad, steady their storm-stopping trunks. I lean, place my hand against long-yearred, unyielding bark. These beast-trees: they thunder, vast, through ages, round, and again. I'm reminded: in dying, there's a kind of life.

A sharp shower—I see cloud browning the horizon. A hillside nearby, misted. I meet the raindrops that spatter at me, iced, sharp—on the hill: full rainbow, its tip against the hill, arc buried deep in valley beyond. I drown under its bright rim of colour against darkening hillside, push against rain towards fresh shelter.

I think—it's time, June. It's time.

A day with wind, and sun, then shower. You take the box, hold it to you under your cloak, march the steps to the clifftop where the lovelocks dangle on their fence. No Harry, June? He's in the studio, painting, I see: night ocean, in blackest mood; waves that cluster thick to canvas, boil up in storm. How silently he paints, purse-lipped. But there, look—in one corner of the canvas: small figure swimming, leaping—see how the moon lights the layered scales, catches the flip of his tale, flicker of silver before he dives. Unworried, he is, young prince, oh let him grow, he'll be Father of the Tides in times to come, trident of his very own—paint on, Harry. Perhaps one day you'll reach an end, of sorts. Though it will probably be black, and oiled.

While you, June, on the clifftop, again, come to have your moment of symbolic leaving, come to spread your boy's thin film. The waves below crash grey, white-topped, then green in sudden sun. They're probably in a bit of foment, or something. Seems a good word. Yes bit of fomenting going on down there.

June, a word about the wind. Tends to swirl a bit, round here. Got to be practical. If you're thinking of scattering—wouldn't want any blow-back, not nice, ash in the face, son or no son. Whole other way of knowing someone. And dogs with walkers; plenty of canine sniffers if you're thinking of leaving a small dusty pile. Got to think this through, choose the right moment.

Okay we're clambering over the fence, not a bad move (dogs, and all that) but watch that cloak wouldn't want to catch it—that's pretty near the edge, if you ask me. June, you've got to think about this. Sit on the edge by all means, dangle your legs but you need to take care—to be fair, you've got me a tad worried. Not thinking of *going with* your son, are you? Wouldn't launch yourself—wouldn't open the box, lift it high in the air, tilt it to let the ash come drifting—then do a bit of drifting out and down towards the sea yourself, black-cloak-parachute, sea all arms open, ready to take you in, give you a watery welcome—would you? Will you? June? You think it's a good idea to stand, with all that wind? Because you wouldn't drift, you know; without wishing to be rude—you're substantial. The idea that one *floats* to earth—all bollocks. Bash yourself open on the way down, you would. That stone is *hard*.

You stand, open the box and lift it high in the air, tilt it. The ash drifts—so little after all—as your lips move in prayer, or spell, or lullaby perhaps—step *back*, June; step *back*! The wind takes the ash, shifts it, spreads it, disappears it. You let the box go, watch it tumble down the cliff face to the water—you wouldn't, June! Please don't! Think of Harry, think of—just think!

Out across the sea, clouds darken for the next shower. In the sudden gloom you pull your cloak about you. How long will you remain standing here, as your son leaves you all over again? Too long, too long! Nothing now but memory—d'you recall your abstract pain, his battered face, small cat's wail of his birthing? The countless other moments that made up your mothering—truly sorry for the past tense, there, June. Now easy does it. Step away from the edge. Of course you will recall, always. Patch up your heart, little by little. Perhaps the stitches, in the end, will keep, and you'll hold your child there, sewn with love into your soul.

The shower comes. You climb back over the fence.

Let the clouds spill. Walk the return journey, June, wet-haired, tears and rain, homeward bound.

Thank *fuck*.

I felt the question come in you—and answer it I cannot. But you'll still ask, that I know. How will I answer?

Here's you, June—how long after? It matters little, for these days since have all been grey and how the drizzle works into your bones when it comes daily as it does. It should be early summer, but for the dawns that open as a kind of dusk, and the wind that takes the trees while in their full leaf and shoves them hard against their backs so they lose branches, which come down cracking. The birds attempt to land, sea-sicked sway in high-topped perches. Nests are blown from their forked cradling; fledglings lie grounded, bloated. Their eyes pop, huge beaked. Grey-pink plucked before they were feathered, they've been. Yes, my world is drenched, my words non-lyricked. My sentences fall shudderingly.

You wander the shop, in the dark space it provides, the CLOSED sign turned to face the street: June is not available for sympathy givers or, for that matter, anything else and certainly not buying or trading and especially not for any Tarot readings or any of that spiritual stuff. Can't put your mind, to it, June? Take rest, shelter from the hard-turning outside world, flump your backside down on the green Chesterfield.

You settle yourself. In the gloom: jackets; their dark arms hang limp. Solid lumps of unsmiling phrenology heads; display cabinet; tailor's dummy, the dress, liquid green like seawater, after all. Beside you, shadow-Skip turns the page of a *Famous Five* storybook, fresh off the second-hand bookshelves near the back of the shop. You reach for another tissue. Sweet dot of a child who looked just like you, and his father. Had your eyes. Crooked little smile just like his dad's. Your arm feels heavy, where Skip's head, his soft thatch of hair rested, not so long ago. Your hand—how perfectly Skip's small hand used to fit itself into the cup of your own. The warm pink smell of his skin, just after a bath. The shape and weight of his body on your thigh when you carried him, sleepy, to bed. You wipe at your eyes with the tissue, lean against the Chesterfield's button-backed back. Which book is it? *Five go to Smuggler's Top*? *Five get into Trouble*? The rowing boat, the dog, the tattered pages—your old copy: *Five on a Treasure Island*, once shared with your little brother, on a sofa, sometime else. When you open the mindpages, the jagged words of Mother and Father's rowing come flying, still.

Far back as you can remember: your father's heels, tapping across the yard, into the porch, home. His last Christmas, his face, waxen already, his ill, shrinking self. After the funeral: Roger, helping himself to sherry. Long before: Mother on the sofa, in her white coat, laughing; dancing in the kitchen as she made cakes; pegging out washing. Mother in her floral dress, clipping roses; Mother in her leisure trousers; Mother's embarrassment on the carpet. The nurses were wonderful, she said, and of course they were, because she was dying.

Jelly shoes in rockpools, ballerina pirouetting in a jewellery box. From the mess of childhood recall, a memory pokes: you, in nightdress, on the landing, clutching the stair rail with one hand, favourite toy, cloth dolly in brown dress, in the other. Awake and out of bed, when grown-ups were downstairs still. The shadowed corners of your room were filled with monster-menace, hagged fingers which reached for you, witch-croon in the darkness, sleep my little one, yes with my winking eye I was, I think, unshaped menace from which you fled. There, on the landing, small light there was to see by and in your fierce and afraid sleep-walk, terror of an unknown fire somewhere as yet hidden—shriek, in crackling flame you heard. Smoke, you smelt: my pyre, across those wicked centuries.

From the living room below: cigarette whiff and televised laughter: the *Morecambe and Wise Show*, because yours, June, was a family that sure as hell never made it out of the Dark Ages but to go down—to trespass in the grown-up world of after-bedtime! You dared not, and crouched instead to listen in dread for the dragon-fire that would surely soon feel its way through the house and burn your parents to crisp then come snorting after you, catch the edge of your nightie with flame fingers, send such heat to scorch your breath inside-out, skin peels away, bones are wracked—such fevered nightmares. As child, second sight you had, enough perhaps to glimpse more than your own world—though just bad dreams, your mother said.

Holding dolly tight to your chest, you rose and tiptoed in your bare feet to the top stair, June—dared you? But from below: such hot words your father's growl, you mother's bestial whine, he rearing up on hind legs, she craven, on her belly crawling, on her back, fawning to lick, and he then mounting, her pelt in his clamped jaw as together they bucked and grizzled—what fairy story *this* for a small child.

Come away, young June. There's no fire here will burn you, I promise—but there, beyond the next bedroom door, if you peep in you'll see the shape of your younger brother in full sleep as only younger, pesky brothers can be when their older sister is awake yet dreaming and nightmare-filled. Tiptoe in, and lift the covers. Here's warm; here's the rough dark tousle of his hair smelling

still of Vosene from his earlier bath; here's another thumb sucker and no Mother to pull his fist from his mouth. Small sigh in his sleep as he turned and you climbed in carefully, moulded yourself to his shape and the pair of you lay like spoons and there, June, you and your brother could both suck your thumb no fire-monsters would find you and no one came to wrench you apart.

Let's put this off no longer. To your Tarot shack, June—I would have words with you. Look, it's early summer and even if it rains, still—even if there are floods. Even if, a little further south, the coastline cliff has subsided and taken with it the nearest retirement bungalow—look at that: house half-hanging, pink-patterned wallpaper, bed-end, crazed jangle of pipes and here a pair of pants caught, flying out like a flag on the easterlies—how grey our whites turn, if we use not bleach in the wash! How flimsy our shelters show themselves, with their guts exposed. Clearly the residents of said bungalow thought that velvet flock classy, at one time, though the effect is now somewhat spoiled by the knocking wind, salted and sand-filled. Yes a house taken, and a couple of caravans too—together with a couple of caravan dwellers, sad to say but there you go, living in something so insubstantial, all that plastic-covered this and lightweight that, surely going to end in grief in a stiff gale and a tidal surge.

Even if you think the weather foul, June, it's surely time to throw back the shutters, dust off the phrenology head, for all too soon visitors will come wanting their cards read, little bit of comfort, spot of advice, bit of bolstering of the ego and you're good at it, June; even in your grief, you have that much to give, believe me. It'll be a few quid in your pocket; it'll do you good.

The harbourside cabins are getting going—shutters are open, fat-fried heavy sugar doughnut stink. A shack sells chips; another is festooned with flip-flops and inflatable beach balls, at another the first holidaymakers can buy a little cone of glistening mess that reports itself as some seafood or other. Makes me want to gag but still: that's the seaside for you. Raw fish and flip-flops.

On with the black velvet dress, shake out the black velvet cloth, smooth it over the table; light a couple of tealights—quick fag outside—how many you got in your tin today? Not too many, mind. Got your health to think about, June. No good smoking yourself to death when you got to be thinking about *living*. Fold your arms, pull that cloak tight, scan the sea beyond the harbour wall. Stone grey, it is, and plenty of grey clouds above it today and they look like they're heading this way to drop their load right in Whitby bay. More rain, then.

Back in your shack, you sit yourself at the table, arrange your veil, shuffle the pack of cards. Let us *play*, June; it's been ages and you were getting quite good at it—go on, shuffle them again, make ready to lay the first cards out—but while you do, take a quick peek through the doorway because it's grown awfully dark out there in these last few minutes—see how *heavy* that sky, how

lowering and in the corners of your shack, thick shadows form. Mr Phrenology glows ghostly *now*, doesn't he? Sea fret coming all of a sudden, few tendrils of mist creeping in through the doorway—rub the gooseflesh on your arms, feel the chill, June. Because it *is* chilly, isn't it—do the hairs on the nape of your neck rise? D'you feel the need to look over one shoulder, but see only gathering blacks?

Lay out the first card, June. Which is it? *The Knight of Swords*. Such energy he brings, with his white horse charging, his sword held aloft as if to split the enemy—yes he rides out to battle. As must you, June.

I whisper your name, but soft, and see you start! Only the wind, only the wind, surely.

The next card: *Death* on horseback. White horse, perhaps but see the absolute black in his withering glance. Yes see his skeletal grin and all before him are prostrate—a peculiar combination of the cards. D'you feel something building, a presence perhaps, almost as if—someone sits with you? Listen: outside the sounds of sea, and wind, still, but where the shouts of children, the chatter of passers-by? Gone, all gone and in here, the music silenced and here you are, wreathed in shadow and I see you grow pale, your hand trembles. Be not afraid, June. 'Tis only me.

A third card, to complete this small set. Lay it, June. Let us see. *The Four of Swords*. A knight, or some such noble man, lies in tombstoned sleep. Such mourning, this card depicts, and contemplation of the past, as I—or you—have undertaken.

How shall we interpret these cards, June? D'you see in *The Knight*, a sudden coming? And Death himself, though he's not to be feared unless—unless the card sits in combination with *The Four of Swords* to look to the future and see only loss, and pain of mourning. These three cards together—what meaning for us? I see you shudder when you comprehend, at last, the way they point—you're better at this Tarot lark than I thought! Study them, June. Whose death do the cards indicate? Not yours, not yours! Lift the air, mist it into breeze. Deepen the shadows, swing the door shut. Bring it chillier still, for you're in the presence of *One Who Is Dead*, June. I see your hand flutter over the cards. Leave them; their job is done. Slow, now, in your dread astonishment. Draw back your fortune teller's veil—

'June.' I work at it, to make my words more than wind, more whisper in this dark shuttered meeting place. 'D'you hear me?'

You sit in such fright! Words abandon you.

'Only nod, if you will, to acknowledge my presence.'

You catch the dip of my head in bob of curtsy? Your eyes start from your own poor head! My shape in grey-smoked air is half-drawn, of a ghost, I know it only too well. If I could only make

you less afeared—what d'you see, June? Fierce glitter of my socket eyes, sunk in my bone cheeks; my teeth-chopped hairless skull that nods, grins; my bone-jangle self, won back from twisted root, clinging earth. Here I am, June. See you my hand, these burnt-away fingers, their ends tapered suggestions of nail and skin only. Makes a good Hand of Glory, does it not! These two hands I hold up before you—what claws of clicking joints they are! Once, June, they clapped to Bel Teine music or were paired in righteous prayer.

Oh June! What it is to look down, and see my skirt's hem, gone in flame, my own foot, blacked in pain! The flames rip up. My hair! 'Tis caught! It fries 'gainst my flinching ear. My skin blisters and peels from my joints; my blood froths to the boil, my fat runs to fuel the barbarous pyre. You sicken, I see, at the smell of my singed flesh, I am twisted turned crackling gurgled scream rips from me as my body shreds my animal howl into wind that fans flames—

you gasp, rise—but sit once more, flee not—don't close your eyes! Allow me to take the horror from it—see you now instead my wide-eyed, brown stare? Fair, I was, June—once, about these scorched bones there was skin, flushed bright with my own blood. Let me show you. Look: there was once a maid with golden curls.

'Feel my hand stroke your unhappy cheek.'

You put your own hand to your face, in scared wonderment.

'Oh twine your fingers with mine, June. Here I am, in warmth. My arms are about you. I would comfort you. Weep not.'

Your eyes spill, despite my efforts. Put away the burning from your mind. Too much. Too much. Your breath, in gasps. I would calm you with my own sigh, poor shaking creature.

Time passes. I must speak. 'Your poor child.'

You manage a word, at last: 'Skip?'

'It was my storm that did take him that day, gave him to the sea. I conjured it.'

I see you wrestle with my story, watch your mouth try for words: 'He died. My little boy is dead.'

'I know, and I see your fresh tears, hear the break in your voice. I'm sorry for it, for ever after.'

We sit in pause, you and I. I grey-swim before you, watch you find the first question.

'What—are you?'

'I am a woman, wronged, and it has made me sour, heartless. Yes heartless I have been, and thoughtless. I have dealt in bitterness for so long, I did not anticipate my game's full cruel outcome.'

Your eyes blacken to match my own. Fierce wrath I see in them. 'The storm—was—somehow—in some way, some—supernatural way—*your* storm. You killed my son.' Then the next question forms. Oh inevitable. I knew it would come to this.

I hear your whisper: 'Why? Why *my* child?' Your pale eyes leak, still. Your nose drips.

Your sobs bring you to shudder as the three cards fly from the table.

If I could change this; if I could change the past. It would be a better story for you, June, bearable—more than that!—if I did, would it not? You'd stare at the world through your tear-wetted fingers and believe it not, at first—till you allowed the smallest wonder to creep—the most tiny hope—then the miracle of it would fill your soul, stop up your leaking eyes, turn your world from sheeted deluge to rainbow arc.

Your palmistry and I—how would we do this, we magickers? We could float us among stars, June, and call up the sun from its erstwhile sunset—stop its dipping. Put back the reds, fill the sky with smoked slips of cloud, the vestiges of wild weather, make it *another day, bit of a while ago, still*—where the tides? Which way the winds? Put it all back—sea knocking at the rocks stiff breeze loaded with heavy rain still, yes never ending, it would be but the worst done: roofs lifted, chimney pots tumbled, storm-swollen sea in its early subsiding—we'd laugh like crazies in our relief, wouldn't we? Shove it back, do, we'd cry! Unstun the splendid fish, upright the pleasure boat, bring its bright red and yellow bunting up and flapping brisk as you like—maybe a couple of lives lost, keep it realistic, couple of ne'er-do-wells men overboard but not him with the flat cap and greasy hair, for sure he looks like a total loner, but there's a woman on the harbour waiting for him, heartstopped. His mother, maybe, with a hot flask and a scold for him—let's call him Norman!—why did you take that pleasure boat in such weather? Get you home and into a hot bath young man! (he's about forty I reckon). Ok not to run away with Norman's small scene let's to the group at the clifftop where the lovelocks hang and Harry and Claudia, in some state, run all the way up here to find you—

clifftop and in full gale still and whipped straight over the fence, oh God oh God you'd grab hold of the grass to keep yourself steady, haul yourself to the edge but on your belly then you'd wipe the rain from your eyes yes stay on your belly, bring your face to the edge, open your eyes. You'd peer over—

not more than three feet below: small ledge, small dark head, small boy clinging. Muddied he would be, scraped and dirtied, jumper ripped, fingernails torn from his hanging on against all the odds he'd flatten himself against the rock and fight for a foothold there'd be fistfuls of turf, grasses in his fingers but slip, those fingers would while the rain would hammer, still while the last grumbles of thunder echoed round the cliffside—oh hold on, little one! Hold on!

'Harry! Claudra!' you'd cry. 'Help me!'

His pale face, filled with fear, looking up at you. Small mouth, trying to form words never spoken in his young life. You'd see him slip some more, cry out to him—your child, screaming, scrabbling at the stone with his feet—a shoe loose, then lost, tumbling against sheer rock face to fall to nothing in the mashing waves.

'Hang on!' you'd shout. 'Don't look down!' You'd reach, an arm over, the distance too far, too far!

Then Harry and Claudra, alongside you, belly-crawled to edge, Harry's shout: 'Don't you dare let go! I'll have you up, just you don't let go! Reach for me—c'mon son!' His paint-stained fingers, spread as if in a handshake welcome.

'I can't! Daddy!'

The boy would wail, reach, grasp into air with one hand; so close, so close! But slippery fingers! Screaming, grabbing once more at tufted grass, eyes tight shut, sobbing. Those small fingers, coming away slowly, yes slipping away from rescue—

Harry would cry, 'Now listen to me. I'm reaching for you now—open your eyes, look at me—this time we're going to do it. You ready? C'mon son—reach!'

Treacherous cliff face, running with water, streaming with stick and stone and gushing mud in hair and eyes—small reaching hand grasped, hauled, and the storming rocks would spit up their prey.

At last, you'd hug your child to you. Feel the life-throb in his small heart against you. Wrap him round in your desperate love.

'It's ok Skip,' you'd say. You'd stroke his rain-soaked hair. 'It's ok. You're safe now.'

'Oh Harry,' you'd say, and here is Harry for you, June, after all. His has been a life so far spent trying to capture on canvas the black heart of the waters he lives by. That fierce northern sea, in its foulest mood—but here's Harry's bruised heart for you.

I conjured it, just for you. A happy ending, like a fairy tale. But fairy tales can be cruel.

This shack, its folding dark corners where you now sit unveiled, where you show me your naked loss. It will take the breath from me, smother me, suffocate me too small it is, too confining *how* its boards press in on me. My ancient rage will split these wooden struts, send them hurtling towards sea and sky but heartless, I have been. Soulless, I have been made; I see myself in your enduring anger.

Your question forms. I knew it would come to this. I hear your whisper as the three cards scatter from the table—watch them fly to earth: *The Knight of Swords; Death; The Four of Swords*. There are so many combinations to choose. But these three contain within them some sense of the telling of your grief.

'Why? Why *my* child?' you say, and your sobbing shudders in you; your grief spills over the table it will wet it, soak it, it will send your salt tears dripping from its velvet-covered ends to warp and smudge the floored cards, spread in their dead formation.

I shake my head. *There is no logic.*

'Why my little Skip?' you cry, and I can only answer this:

Why not?

Swing open the door. Let in the light. I am done here and rise, on air and wind till the shack is as a small dot below and still I climb, frozed self in heartless, frozen air.

What will you do, Claudra? After all was done, I saw you there, in the warmth of your small burrow, curled by the wood burning stove, your small child with you after all. You stroked his hair, nestled him to you, let the flames warm you both. A hot drink, then bed.

Your son will always have nightmares, Claudra. He'll wake, and call out, crying, for elsewhere he'll have been while sleeping, hanging from sheer rock, scrabbling with his feet at bare, wet stone, slipping from safety into fall—yes in dreams he'll let go, turning on air as ever closer the waves come—but always, you'll be there to catch him up in your arms, pull his sprawled small body to you, hold his time and yours with a lullaby. You'll keep the monsters from him: ogres, giants, trolls, beasts and witches—yes you'll keep him even from my witchery.

But now. What's for you, Claudra? All these weeks later. Could you return to work in the shop? Harry, not painting but pacing in the back. Skip's small absence—how the drapes and dresses will swing silent. Dust will gather. Don't bother with the Bakelite switches, the Tiffany lamp, the trainset. All's to rubbish. The day after's a cold light, a hard light. Each morning a stare, wide-eyed.

June will take comfort where she can. A mother bereft. They'll need each other: where there were three, now only two remain.

But you. Did you make the decision, Claudra, while you stroked your lad's hair, sipped on your hot milk, gazed at nothing in the swimming fireside heat?

How time plays with us. It has been passing, all the while. The days are longer, warmer. I'll help, I'll help—this much I can do. How shall we play the next scene with Harry? Will I write it, or you? What scenery? Which characters? Let's dim the lights, feel the hush in the audience—curtain up, yes here's your next scene, Claudra—which act is it? Let's take it somewhere new—let's have a STATION, somewhere in the northeast. That's sudden! That's a sudden leaving, a decision made after all, a bag packed, keys dropped off. I hear trains, and there's a rush of people off, and on, announcers—huge board, Arrivals, Departures, pasty shop if you're hungry, quick cup of coffee in Costa if you've the time or buy a newspaper for the crossword, bar of chocolate for Daniel, chewing gum for yourself—Teacup Cottage: you left the red rug and the bohemianised lamp for someone else to enjoy. You could have driven away in your car, to be fair. You sold it? I didn't know. I didn't—see it.

Let's place you and Daniel in front of Arrivals and Departures—all trains on time—there's a novelty! Costa takeaway cups, newspaper, bags, cases, all that travelling gear to juggle, nightmare isn't it? Nice to see the smile on Daniel's face, bit of pink coming in his cheeks.

You check the board, looking for platform number, your destination, let's see where—but who's this running through the crowd? See that black hair bobbing, 'scuse me, could I just get through—that hair is a touch on the wild side to be honest—is that a paint-stained shirt maybe? It *is*—here's Harry after all, for you—he's come to see you off, come to persuade you to stay—which is it? Shall I decide, or you? Puffed, isn't he? Must be all that running. Where'd you leave your bike, Harry? Just threw it down on the pavement outside the station? Lucky if it'll still be there when you come out.

All rather impersonal here, bit busy, bit loud—look at that Hen Party coming in lawks, two sheets to the wind before those ladies even step foot off the train in their party heels! Maybe this is not the place, not the time—tell you what, let me conjure you and Daniel on the platform with steam, and doors slamming, and whistles blowing, and you in a hat and seams in your stockings and Harry in a suit and slicked down curls—side parting, Harry, side parting. Daniel in shorts you can tie a notice round your boy's neck if you like, cardboard does it, and string round your cases much better! Much more fitting for a long goodbye—or a reunion or an evacuation which is it d'you think? Here's the station master with his cap and whistle and yes more doors slamming so much steam get on, Claudra, don't want to miss this train hold Daniel's hand tightly mind the step!

Here's Harry running you'd think he'd wear suit trousers without more paint stains, wouldn't you. Nice braces, Harry. What's this he's carrying? Red roses. Push down that window, Claudra, you can lean out no problem not that fast even as you feel the train begin to move you've ages yet, so slow these old trains—you'll get smuts on your face in your hair you can smell the dirt—never mind what is it you want to say?

YOU: You came!

HARRY: Had to bike the last bit.

YOU: Thank you – thank you so much!

HARRY: Ah, what did I do?

YOU: You saved my son's life! I never had a chance to say it properly, in all this time. I'll never forget what you did. What lovely roses!

HARRY: They got a bit squashed. (*hands roses through the window as the train begins to gather speed*)

YOU: I'm so sorry—

HARRY: Don't be.

CLAUDRA: For your loss.

HARRY: It's hard. But—if you stayed. With your help—

YOU: (*shaking head already*) June—she needs you.

HARRY: I need you.

YOU: No you don't, Harry. Go to June. Don't listen to what other people may say; it's where you belong. And paint the seas; paint him into them. I'm sorry, so sorry for you both.

The train pulls away, leaving Harry to shout

HARRY: So—you're really going? This is it, then? Will you let me know where you are?

YOU: Take care, Harry.

So much steam and here's the train picking up speed give him a wave, Claudra see him there, figure on the platform, alone in blank smog he lifts a hand as he disappears into the smoke and smuts. Don't look. Pull up that window.

Actually before you do—they *are* lovely roses, aren't they? In a box of chocolates, Valentine's Day, for-sale-in-the-shop-just-outside-the-station kind of way. What will you do with them? Can you juggle them with your luggage, keep hold of Daniel's hand while you find your seats in a carriage, get your cases stowed overhead? If you kept them, managed to take them all the way with you, stopped them getting even more squashed, managed at last to stuff their stems into a vase, top up with a bit of water, what would you see—who would you think of, each time you looked at them? Probably easier to let them go, let them fall outside the window. Now you can pull it up.

Soldier sitting there, look—can you believe they still smoke in here? Twinkle in his eye for a lovely lady like you but I think I know you now, at last, Claudra. Yes I know you: you're not stopping; you're travelling under your own steam. Don't think of the past. Don't worry about Keith, and he soon planning to re-wed, with bride who, in time, will give him two sons and a daughter, young Cornish maid. He'll banker be, until retirement—so will end his tale, Claudra. In a house, built at last as he always wanted. By green sweep of sea it will be, and true, he'll be rheumatic in his older years; that fair hair will fade and thin and so *stooped*, he'll be, but still his wife will cook, and clean, and his three kin will visit, and a grandchild will be added here and there, until—

Once upon a time Keith will step from the house to walk the beach—the very beach where you yourself once walked with him, tumbled in the sand with him, Claudra—Barbara—

he'll walk, slow footsteps in the warming sand,
'till on a rock he'll perch to take the view,
and here, his heart will stop.
It's not a bad end.
It'll do.

Each tide sweeps away footsteps left in sand, does it not?

But I didn't say where you're going! Let's take you back to Arrivals and Departures, all trains on time,
platform 5—is that north or south bound? Let's see where—

CURTAIN

Oh come on! What d'you mean LIGHTS UP? How very dare you! I didn't realise this was your *last*
scene, Claudia! Didn't know it was the final act. Could have told me, could have given me a
moment's warning, haven't even finished my ice cream yet acting all very out of character you are
very independent very on your way, if you don't mind me saying. Catch your reflection in the
window, see my cheesy grin—

you sit, watch the fields pass, all grass-green nicey-bright, and there's a warm wind scarpering in
you.

You, in your new wherever-you-are. I, with you still, in the corner, blank shadow. I could
reach, but you'll not feel me; you'll brush me away, cobweb strand. I could sigh, and you'll only draw
the curtains tighter against the draught. I'll call your name into the rafters, and you'll think the winter
wind got up again.

The night long, I'll rattle up my bones against the wall, bleed my blacks into the floor yes
but—

come the morning, I'll be nothing but a stain on the boards by the coffin hatch.

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Part II: Exegesis

Introduction

Personal element

I began the PhD process by walking the East Yorkshire Wolds and noting my responses to the environment; I believed I might have a story to write about a woman's healing from grief through immersion in the natural world. When I look back, this simplistic model of grief that reaches some kind of an end sounds naïve, now. I'm grateful for the turning point that came when I attended a Master's level autofiction writing module: when I wrote from memory about my past losses, I realised my own grief still needed articulating; it wasn't done with at all. A question began to form, that became the basis for the exploration this thesis undertakes: how can I use creative writing to deal with the pain of loss?

To try to find an answer to this question, I researched contemporary women's writing which might articulate healing through a connection between the human and the natural world. My initial focus was memoir. Karn and Hattori (2018) cite Dan McAdams in their assertion that memoir is part of a story-telling process that makes sense of events in one's life (Karn & Hattori, 2018: 27). They argue that it is a process through which perception of the self is adjusted in terms of repair, so that 'positive meanings may be found in negative events' (Ibid.). My research supported this view: in her memoir *H is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald (2014) charts her journey of emotional recovery following the loss of her father by training a wild bird. Katharine Norbury (2016) finds emotional healing from loss in *The Fish Ladder*, a memoir which charts her redemptive journey tracking rivers to their source.¹ But as my research progressed, I found myself questioning whether repair through writing memoir is always possible. Can it be assumed that the memoir writer will find sufficient distance to get some perspective on personal loss? Denise Riley (2019) explains that to write the story of her son's death risked a 'lapse into melodrama or self-regarding memoir' (14). Isn't it the case, then, that writing about loss risks looking inward like some kind of therapy, rather than outward, connecting with others who might have suffered similar pain? I wanted my writing to resonate, yet in these early stages I was reluctant to write from my own experience. The risk of personal exposure or of writing something too inward-looking, that risked being self-indulgent, felt too great.

¹ Also Amy Liptrot's (2016) memoir *The Outrun*, where she is both literally and metaphorically immersed in the seas and island culture of the Orkneys, and recovers from alcoholism.

I also felt a growing dissatisfaction with the conformity I found in British women's nature writing. Perhaps other women found writing a linear account of recovery through immersion in the natural world satisfying. To me it seemed ingenuous, not least because writing from personal memory had taken me, like a thump to the chest, right back to the emotion of the moment and taught me that there isn't always recovery from grief. Grief can be unrelenting, cyclical. Another difficulty was that my research revealed a dominance of male writers in the field. I was getting the sense that women writers sought acceptance or approval from those perceived in the field as the Male Greats, whereas my impulse was to resist, break away. I can see in this resistance the re-emergence of my past undergraduate study into feminist theory which, as the PhD process continued, I would revisit and re-engage with. Most significant was my personal response as a reader: I didn't see my own experience of grief mirrored in these narratives.

I persisted, however. I carried out practice-based research, walking hills, noting my emotional responses. I was still finding it difficult to relate to a human/natural world dynamic expressed in terms of progression towards healing; my instinct is that grief is a more complex state of being—not progression, but stasis. I widened my research beyond the more narrow focus of British women's memoir. I was impressed by the way that Barbara Kingsolver (2013) depicted the migration of butterflies in religious terms in her environmental protest fiction, *Flight Behaviour*. I read Annie Dillard's (2011) *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and tried to emulate her sense of celebration in my writing. After reading Mel Harrison's fictional *At Hawthorn Time* (2016) and *All Among the Barley* (2018), I explored writing a more romanticised, nostalgic perspective of the natural world. But I kept returning to my model of grief, which was taking shape as broken, unhealed. This sense of emotional fracture was worth exploring, and I began to find it in fiction which disrupts the redemptive metaphor in nature and instead disturbs: Daisy Johnson's (2018) *Everything Under* closes with death by drowning as 'The river dug him down, held him under' (245). Andrew Michael Hurley's (2019) *Starve Acre* ends with a grotesque tableau of a hare which 'latched tight and drank' (241) from a woman's nipple. These models pull apart both normality and positivity, in the way that I was also seeing grief as the self, painfully unable to heal. This negativity was evidenced in my own nature writing which began to turn increasingly bleak. Furthermore, during this time my writing stuttered: I would tie myself in knots of sentences that needed to be utterly, grammatically correct. Finally, I acknowledged that this suffocating process of trying to write was a reflection of my own repressed

emotional state: the buried griefs of my own past now threatened to surface. I was forced to ask: how could I break out from this state of suffocation to find a release, allow my writing to breathe—could I take the risk and interrogate my own experiences?

I needed to acknowledge the root cause of my repressed grief. I had lost my first child—a baby all the more precious because she had been conceived only after some years of medical intervention. I also lost my father early to cancer. Further, I miscarried another child three days prior to my father's death. Although I have gone on to have other children, my raw emotions from these losses had been buried for years. There was anger caught up in this too, at the loss of loved ones too early. There was also complexity in that I was grieving both as a mother and as a child. Now I questioned what sort of a model of nature writing could deal with this more complex grief which I had come to understand was my own. This was a catalytic moment: once I acknowledged that my own losses had created personal pain, I understood my bleak contemplation of the natural world as the beginnings of a mode of expressing this pain. But would my more complex characterisation of grief be supported by others? To find out, I took a sample of writing by those in the field of grief therapy across the last twenty years or so. Initial research into current online sources revealed a reliance on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' widely known five stages model of grief² (Goodtherapy.org, 2019). The complexity of grief is acknowledged only in the context of medicalisation, as a disorder with 'symptoms that persist' (Ibid.).^{3 4 5} Earlier online sources characterise grief in terms of complexities involving anger and 'a sense of rupture' (Kersting, 2004). While Regnard and Kindlen's (2002) work (on palliative care in cancer) insists on 'a beginning and an end' (136) to grief, they also locate grief as 'a chaotic process' (Ibid.). They contend that a range of feelings are experienced, such as disbelief, anger, anxiety, guilt, sadness, pining and despair (136-7).

Together with my personal experience of the cyclical nature of grief, I could pick up on Regnard and Kindlen's chaotic characterisation, and I was satisfied that these could form the basis for an

² Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

³ Goodtherapy.org (2019) cites the manual of mental disorders produced by the American Psychiatric Association, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), which defines complicated grief as a "persistent complex bereavement disorder".

⁴ Andrew Marr's (2021) podcast *Defining Mental Illness* notes that in the latest version of the DSM, the terminology is amended to clarify that those experiencing grief following loss can be diagnosed immediately with depression.

⁵ In her radio programme *What We've Learnt About Grief*, Cariad Lloyd (2021) draws attention to the way in which our culture now asks, 'Is your grief normal or not?'—a question which, she contends, in the past would not have been posed.

interpretation of grief as a complex mix of unhealed anger, sadness, despair and fear that I will call throughout the thesis complex grief. My research also revealed the recent trend for medicalisation of grief, which I found disturbing; it was difficult to relate my own experience of grief to the concept of mental disorder—grief is a naturally occurring feeling state. I was driven to articulate this creatively and I needed to find a form of writing with the potential to resonate with others who might feel the same way. However, to do so I needed to break away from the suffocating process that writing had become—by focusing so closely on grammatical accuracy, my writing had become about control rather than freedom. Further, even though I had acknowledged the source of my grief, at this stage it was about hiding from it, rather than confronting that grief.

If I began to challenge and stretch what I understood as the rules of writing, there would be potential for freedom, and this formed the basis for a shift of focus in the PhD process. It now became a search for freedom to express my own hidden story in terms of the complex emotion that comes with loss. A key focus, then, became my search for a new, unrestrained narrative voice. To allow myself to experiment with constructing this new narrative voice, I took the decision to write fiction. It is fair to say that at this point, I was heading into uncharted territory: I had no idea what I would find when I explored my own losses, or how I would articulate these creatively through fiction. Would I be brave enough to allow my creativity to reveal my own vulnerability? How could I turn my writing outwards to reach others with a universal message: it's ok to feel this way. In addition to these uncertainties, I returned to the question I began my PhD journey with: as a writer, how can I deal with the pain of loss? More specifically now: how can I manipulate form to articulate grief that follows the trauma of loss? More widely, what sort of a re-engagement with my own past will be achieved by revisiting loss? While I needed to address these questions, I also felt drawn to exploring critical theory for its potential to support the PhD process. I revisited two theories I remembered from past study before engaging more deeply with the Gothic as a new field of research, and I will now outline in more detail the scope and structure of the PhD exegesis.

Scope and Structure

Chapter One charts my exploration of postmodernism. As an undergraduate, I was drawn to the subversive character of postmodern narratives, and wanted to revisit this. I find it interesting that to re-engage with the theory is to begin to look back, explore memory even while the PhD process

means moving forward into new areas of study. In fact this sense of dualism—of exploring past memory, or so-called truth, through writing a new fictional present, if you like, is a thread which runs through the thesis.

As a first platform of analysis, my re-engagement with postmodernism resulted in a major shift in my writing towards freedom in terms of constructing a playful and intrusive narrative voice. While a full examination of postmodern theory is too wide for the scope for this study, I offer a brief definition of the characteristics of the theory relevant to creative practice. Postmodern theory has also been influential in that there are moments when I collapse the redemptive metaphor that other women writers have seen in nature and replace it with something more negative, to fit my complex model of grief. Furthermore, the challenge that postmodernism brings to universal belief systems means I can use my writing to question, within the frame of loss and grief that my novel provides, the logicity of life and death.

Having established a sense of freedom, in Chapter Two I examine my search for greater empowerment in the narrative voice through my re-engagement with second-wave feminist theory. I am aware that currently there is debate around gender and sexuality which takes into account a range of voices. Against these complexities, the binary male/female character of second-wave feminism is a more simplistic, oppositional model. I remain drawn, however, to the sense of empowerment that feminist ideology brought to women's writing of that time and wished to revisit this—again, I note that it is a remembered, feminist understanding which I am revisiting. To contextualise, I offer a brief overview of the first and second-wave feminist movements and their expression in cultural and theoretical terms. I locate empowerment in second-wave feminist theory's shift from the female body as site of oppression to site of power. Drawing on 1980s feminist narratives which were and still are personal favourites, the thesis identifies ways in which I absorb feminist sensibilities into the construction of an empowered narrative voice for *Wyrđ Magic*, but notes that I then took the decision to gift the narrative voice to a narrator as a fully-developed character. If readers could empathise with a character, become entangled in the text (Iser, 1974: 290) the complex model of grief I wanted to share would have the potential to resonate (Gardner, 1991: 31).

My decision to construct the narrator as a witch-figure character was a pivotal moment in the PhD process where I shifted away from research as part of a process of remembering and began to engage fully with the Gothic as a new field of research. The Gothic is a diverse area of study that, in addition to literature, manifests itself in many aspects of culture and theory (Spooner, 2006: 8). Chapter Three is largely theoretical: I offer an overview of Gothic literature and theory, drawing together relevant characteristics to establish a Gothic sensibility that I am comfortable with. It is one rooted in wildness—a sense of rebellion, unmanageability. In these elements I could see creative freedom. Indeed, as I have indicated, the Gothic has given me freedom to break out and find the strident voice I was searching for: the witch-figure's glare is intense, unforgiving, as the thesis explores.

Positioned as central to a subversive postmodern narrative, empowered by feminism, the witch-figure can say what she damned well likes, and the focus of Chapter Four is the development of the witch-figure narrator-character in my novel. The witch-figure is well documented in literature, film and history; to contextualise, I offer a brief history, with emphasis on monstrosity and underpinning her empowerment with feminist theory related to the Gothic. Taking into account the diverse nature of the Gothic, I note also the place of horror and the Weird; liminality and transgression; the dynamics of terror and horror in the Gothic, each related to the witch-figure. Drawing on the Gothic's engagement with postfeminism, I consider the need to shift from empowerment to complexity, if the witch-figure is to articulate my complex model of grief. Against the theoretical and cultural framework the chapter provides, I then examine several examples of contemporary literary models of the witch-figure, before bringing the focus to the construction of the witch-figure in *Wyrđ Magic*.

Chapter Five turns the focus towards the way in which, underpinned by Gothic theory, the novel *Wyrđ Magic* becomes a narrative of self-haunting. The chapter considers memoir related to *Wyrđ Magic*, drawing on the work of Donna Lee Brien (2015) to explore encoded elements of my past in the narrative. I make creative use of the Gothic's sense of unreliability or instability (Chaplin, 2011: 182, Hogle, 2014: 2). This sense of unreliability or instability permeates my narrative, and in this way the Gothic sense of mystery that I find so compelling is articulated: where, in the liminal space between fiction and memoir, is authenticity? I also examine the way in which the transgressive nature of the Gothic gives me the freedom to take risks and explore not only complex grief but other

difficult, often painful elements from my past which are embedded in the novel. Indeed (and in spite of the witch-figure's intense glare) the Gothic acts as a protective veil through which I can view past moments of pain with some sense of shielding. Furthermore, the Gothic constitutes a distance frame (Shaw, 2013) where I can gain some perspective on my past and reconfigure elements of personal relationships from that past.

Part III is a discussion about the process of writing *Wyrd Magic*. To contextualise, I begin by reiterating briefly the explorative journey that constituted the early stages of study and the intent behind the novel, before examining the writing process behind the crafting of the narrative voice. The chapter locates the postmodern sensibility of my narrative in my manipulation of chronology and temporal disjunct. I then focus on the need to exert control over narrative structure. Here my feminist impulse is again revealed in my development of a structural model as a challenge to the Aristotelian model. Finally, I address the question I noted earlier: would I be brave enough to allow my creativity to reveal my vulnerability. Here, a discussion of the role of characters related to the witch-figure leads to my admission that although I took the decision to write fiction, nevertheless I am revealed inside my own narrative.

To close, in the Epilogue I consider the impact of the personal journey of the PhD process. In the novel *Wyrd Magic* I manipulate form, using the Gothic as a frame through which to explore and articulate my personal experience of complex grief. I acknowledge that while grief is one secret held close, in the interface between memoir and fiction other, past difficulties in relationships also surface. In this way my vulnerable self as writer is exposed, but in such exposure there is the potential for me to renegotiate some elements of these past relationships.

Chapter One: postmodernism

Earlier, I established a complex model for grief which is cyclical, unrelenting, random, and includes anger, despair, fear. This chapter will chart the early stages of the PhD process where I re-engage with postmodernism as I begin my search for a narrative voice to articulate this complex, unpredictable mix of feeling. If I break the conventions of writing, I may find freedom. There is excitement in this, but I need to assess if the postmodern sensibility will support my textual breakout. To do so, I will begin by outlining briefly the existential concerns of postmodernism, relating these to literature and feminist perspectives, before considering *Wyrd Magic* as a postmodern narrative.

I remember postmodern narratives as ironic, self-conscious. As an undergraduate, the best I could grasp of the theory was that it conceived human existence as pointless; I probably enjoyed the undergraduate kudos of being able to use the word *nihilistic*. Postmodernism still feels vast to me; its reach through time and across cultural modes of aesthetic expression can be intimidating. A starting point is to comprehend it as a philosophy and here I consider Brian McHale's (1987) assertion that 'the *thing... does not exist*' (4). I am drawn to a concept which both constructs and negates itself in the same moment—I see its playful quality, that irony again, the subversive potential where now, creative possibilities may open up. Beyond the appeal of its intangibility, I can't better define this 'fiction of modernism' (5)—but McHale's comparison helps: if modernism has as its dominant problems of knowing, then postmodernism is concerned with the nature of being (10).⁶ This existential focus resonates once more with me: implicit in my creative intent to articulate grief lies the question which the latent existential fear behind religious belief systems poses. It is a question which destabilises the notion of stable self and which my writing has the potential to ask: in life and in death, where is the reason?

Postmodernism and the literary narrative

The vastness of postmodernism, then, is that it asks huge questions of what it is to be human. Others have addressed this, of course: as an undergraduate, I was a devotee of Samuel Beckett's landmark 1950s play *Waiting for Godot*, which articulated my then understanding of the theory in its challenge

⁶ McHale (1987) draws a comparison between modernism's epistemological questioning of this world (What is there to be known?) (9) and postmodernism's ontological dominant: what is a world? (10).

to the concept of belief systems, its depiction of human existence as meaningless.⁷ ⁸ David Lodge (2015) foregrounds, in addition to Beckett's work, other postmodern writing as 'imaginatively liberating to a high degree' (300). Whereas Lodge sees liberation, however, Fredric Jameson (2009) reduces the postmodern to pastiche, or 'blank parody' (5). Further, he contends that 'writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds—they've already been invented' (7). In this sense, Jameson's assertion that we are now in a world in which 'stylistic innovation is no longer possible' (Ibid.) is a truism, but means 'imprisonment in the past' (Ibid.), whereas I seek forward momentum, freedom, and locate support in Lodge's more celebratory perspective.

Beckett evoked the pointlessness of existence by breaking rules: writing meaningless dialogue, subverting the convention of plot. I also see creative potential in 'a rule-breaking kind of art' (Lodge, 2015: 300). Indeed, Lodge assembles a list of rule-breaking, postmodern literary characteristics (which become in effect rules) which includes narratives where the author steps outside the world they have created to comment (273); the effect is to collapse the fictional construct and throw the reader both into metafiction and out of balance.⁹ John Johnston (1990) draws on Jean-Francois Lyotard's assertion that postmodern works 'are not in principle governed by pre-established rules' (Lyotard, in Johnston, 1990: 183). John Gardner (1991) discards the term *postmodern* entirely and instead contends that "'Metafiction"... is a more precise term' (86) for 'fiction that, both in style and theme, investigates fiction' (Ibid.). Kathleen Puhr (1992) elucidates the concept as 'pulling the rug out from under readers' (65) and lists her own set of characteristics.¹⁰ Critics across the years have sought to locate tangibility in the intangible and I am fascinated by the paradoxes that these perspectives create.

Postmodernism and feminism

⁷ Lawrence Graver (1989) describes the play as an 'Absence... of... physical world, solid facts, logical explanations' (25).

⁸ The erosion of the concept of realism and therefore certainty (Graver, 1989: 24) in the narrative results in the postmodern sense that 'there is no order, no shape or significance to be found anywhere' (Lodge, 2015: 273).

⁹ For his full 'profile' (Lodge, 2015: 270) of postmodernist writing, see Lodge, 2015: pp. 280-293.

¹⁰ Puhr (1992) highlights postmodernist technique in a number of novels, which I summarise here as fragmentary plots; jumps in space and time; non-linear plots; metafiction, eccentric characters; inconsistent tone; frenetic language and allusions to mass culture.

I am also interested in feminist perspectives, which foreground an affinity with postmodernism (Flax, 1990: 40) in its destabilising potential to 'make us skeptical [sic] about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language' (41). I can see why feminist critics support a challenge to the 'single overarching theory' (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990: 23) of 'universalist' belief (21), since space can then be created for feminist theory to position women's experience of 'intuition, ritual... instinct' (Probyn, 1990: 185) as beyond the scope of so-called unassailable scientific fact. In addition, if I think about postmodernism in terms of deconstruction of a stable self, I see how the feminist perspective may challenge the 'universal female body' (Probyn, 1990: 177). To write from the particular, with 'the fragments of one's own body' (Ibid.) is enabling: I can own my grief as my individual reality. I can't assume universal experience, but I can use my creativity to ask: is your experience of grief similar to mine?

Feminist academics continue to engage with the postmodern: Kathleen Fleishman (2019) challenges Jameson's perception of postmodernism as 'impenetrable' (Fleishman, 2019: iii), contending that the postmodernist movement produced space for women to write 'difference and diffusion' (v). I am comfortable with postmodernism as a platform of analysis that supports my desire to subvert convention, write with difference. I am excited by the potential for my writing to be inventive, provocative. If I break rules, I may find the freedom to construct a narrative voice that can articulate my complex model of grief more effectively.

Wyrđ Magic as a postmodern narrative

A more effective articulation of my complex model of grief begins when in *Wyrđ Magic* I reverse the healing metaphor where, as I explained earlier, immersion in nature assumes redemption. Instead, I break down the positive comparison.¹¹ As the narrative voice roams alone in the natural world, I articulate an unredemptive relationship.¹² The world is as a coffin;¹³ it is a world that suffocates.¹⁴ In this bleak place the narrative voice weeps;¹⁵ angry grief scorches, burns.¹⁶ There is no healing to

¹¹ 'on the hill: full rainbow... I drown under its bright rim' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 174).

¹² 'my mood's turned dark... Yes I'm dark in the darkening' (15). I emphasise the narrator's wretched, angry mood using repetition and harsh consonance.

¹³ 'windless lightless sightless' (16).

¹⁴ 'Cloud is a... hand across dimmed sky' (Ibid.).

¹⁵ 'quiet, shuddered breath'; 'My stiff throat' (16).

¹⁶ In a declarative emphasised by assonance, her grief sears: 'My eyes bubble, run' (Ibid.).

be had here. Instead, there is only bleak, gutting sorrow.¹⁷ 'What's left?' (16) the voice asks, a question which is rhetorical because there is nothing; only anguish remains. In this negative rendering of the relationship between the human and the natural world, I feel the narrative voice becoming more meaningful; in my writing I experience a sense of letting go; it is as if I am finally able to reveal anger, despair in grief.

The postmodern influence begins to permeate my writing as I become more textually free. Firstly, I construct the narrative voice to be intrusive: it steps outside the fictional world I create to make overt comment¹⁸ and so shift the narrative to metafiction. As my desire to write with empowerment increases, the compulsive, rule-breaking voice takes control and discards unwanted male characters,¹⁹ and I will explore my closer engagement with feminist theory in more depth in the following chapter. There is satisfaction also in the playful juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary: the voice asks, 'D'you think the curtain hides a Stairway to Heaven, you mourners? Laugh me, nought but flames, nought but flames!' (*Wyrd Magic*: 173). The oblique reference to contemporary rock music²⁰ is juxtaposed with the archaic 'nought but flames'. The reference to flames is ambiguous: it could be an antithetical reference to hell—or it could reference the practice of cremation. It really doesn't matter, because finally, ironically since this is about grief, I am beginning to have fun, and there is relief in the humour.

Creatively, there is something opening up: an irresistible desire to peel away layers, look at what is exposed—stare out grief, death. Later, this will be manifested as the witch-figure's gimlet stare, and I will return to this in my exploration of the Gothic. At this point in the PhD process, I challenge the overarching narrative of religious belief by critiquing the societal practices and values it imposes. Firstly, I depict cultural funeral rites as pointless. The narrative voice pokes fun at the ritual of scattering ash.²¹ The voice also mocks ceremonies of mourning which are more concerned with propriety and decorum than the open and free expression of grief.²² Finally, the narrative voice shifts away from ironic humour to articulate the bleak feelings of loss and pain when unredeemed by any

¹⁷ 'my innards out pain' (*Wyrd Magic*: 16).

¹⁸ 'I'm the narrator in your story, Barbara; I'm coming for you' (79).

¹⁹ 'I wrote you out, Keith' (76).

²⁰ The 1970s Led Zeppelin hit *Stairway to Heaven*

²¹ 'a word about the wind. Tends to swirl a bit... If you're thinking of scattering—wouldn't want any blow-back, not nice, ash in the face... Whole other way of knowing someone' (*Wyrd Magic*: 175).

²² 'Oh keep your eyes on the flower beds do; lift not your eyes to the chimney... lest you see the smoke' (173).

faith²³ and I am satisfied that again, it reveals the unrelenting despair that is part of my complex model of grief.

To return to postmodernism's huge, existential question. I am driven to use my creativity to articulate my interpretation of the postmodern perspective: that the only truism is the literality of existence—the molecular fact of the human within the natural world cycle of life, death and regeneration. Other than that—what else? What if life—just is the way it is? I think that through all these years I have been repeatedly asking this question, because implicit in the cyclical, chaotic characteristics of my complex model of grief is the randomness of death. In *Wyrd Magic*, when June's young son falls from the cliff edge to meet his end, the narrative voice uses a declarative to say, of death: '*There is no logic*' (185). June asks, '*Why my child?*' (Ibid.). The voice addresses both June and the reader: 'I can only answer this: *Why not?*' (Ibid.).

Conclusion

My re-engagement with postmodernism means I can use my creativity to begin to open up and explore my complex model of grief and also to address longstanding existential concerns. I question the lack of meaning behind cultural ritual and expose the way in which faith-based systems of mourning seek to ameliorate grief but succeed only in suppressing it. Postmodern theory is influential in terms of my technical decisions regarding language and metaphor: I reverse the positive natural world metaphor and so collapse the redemptive relationship between the human and nature which my earlier research noted and which sits uneasily with me. Instead, I depict a relationship that is bleak and unredemptive. The postmodern influence also underpins the shift in my writing to find a more unrestrained, expressive mode and it is satisfying to acknowledge that I am now firmly rooted in writing which disrupts or subverts its own conventions. I am constructing a narrative voice which is beginning to run free and unruly, but it is still in development and Chapter Two charts my re-engagement with feminist theory as a platform of analysis to support my decision to gift the narrative voice to an empowered female narrator.

²³ 'Look to your god blindly; you'll weep forever' (*Wyrd Magic*: 173).

Chapter Two: feminism

In the previous chapter, I explored the way that postmodernism grants me the creative freedom to subvert convention and break rules. I am constructing a narrative voice that is more provocative, textually unruly and as the PhD process continues I find it fascinating that there is a growing sense of a female persona behind the voice. I therefore take the decision to place the narrative in the hands of an overt essayist-narrator with distinct character and personality (Gardner, 1991: 159). It is my own version of the pyrotechnic storyteller (Dawson, 2009: 152)²⁴ that Salman Rushdie (1998) constructs in his novel *The Satanic Verses*,²⁵ and I see in mine a similar sense of play²⁶, mocking humour.²⁷ But if the narrator is to possess a voice capable of articulating complex grief, the voice needs to be more than playful or amusing: I am looking for stridency and I locate it in the potential for empowerment that feminism may offer. After referencing relevant feminist theory to contextualise, this chapter will explore female empowerment in Fay Weldon's popular feminist novels *Puffball* (1981) and *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* (1983), and Margaret Atwood's (1985) feminist dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. I will then examine my construction of the female, empowered narrator's voice in *Wyrd Magic* through the frame that feminist theory provides.

Feminist perspectives

Early forms of feminism, articulated largely through the actions of individual women in the 1800s and culminating, arguably, in the Suffragette Movement (Sanders, 2001: 27), locate the female body as site of oppression.²⁸ My focus, however, is second-wave feminism that emerged from the 1970s onwards. As a young woman in the eighties, like many others I experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and the glass ceiling impacted on my early career development—yet I was also conscious of this time as one where there was a significant shift towards the body as locus of female empowerment. This remains relevant: though the collective militancy (Thornham, 2001: 29) of

²⁴ Paul Dawson's (2009) pyrotechnic storyteller is 'typically humorous or satirical... a flourishing and expansive narrative voice... to assert control over the events being narrated where 'the narrative voice often overshadows the characters' (153).

²⁵ There is a sense of flourish in Rushdie's use of slang: 'Yessir' (5); 'vamoosed' (12) and the playful quality: 'he would sotospeak... walk out of his old life... vanishing, poof!' (11).

²⁶ 'Lawks who gives a fuck. Let us *play!*' (*Wyrd Magic*: 3).

²⁷ 'big red sign: KEEP OUT—all the niceties of holiday-land, no expense spared' (4).

²⁸ Stephanie Hodson-Wright (2001) highlights the historical, societal inequalities faced by women (4), while Valerie Sanders (2001) highlights the oppressive nature of laws such as the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1880s, which permitted intimate examination of women suspected of prostitution (26).

second-wave feminism is no longer current, my sense is that women still strive to claim their body and voice as empowered female territory.

In the seventies, battles in the social arena were mirrored in critical theory. The names of feminist theorists from the era²⁹ are iconic to me and it is satisfying to revisit them and find relevance now to my writing. I am drawn again to Hélène Cixous' (1976) call for what I remember as *écriture féminine*, where 'Woman must write her self' (875). She contends that 'Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly' (887) and this resonates with new meaning as a call upon women to write freely, gift the body to the voice. For me, Elspeth Probyn's (1990) characterisation of women's experience as 'intuition, ritual... instinct' (185) that I referenced earlier is also significant. She positions femaleness as individuality: distinctive, particular—unassailable. In fact I locate Probyn's triad of female empowerment in 1980s literature where the sense of empowerment that women's writing of the time delivered was heady material, as I will now explore.

Narratives of empowerment: Weldon and Atwood.

In the 1980s, Fay Weldon's narrative style was singular. Her popular fiction novels *Puffball* (1981) and *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* (1983) both depict female witch-figures using an empowered narrative voice. In *Puffball*, Weldon explores the potential in the female domain of witchcraft as power base, locating this experience outside the constraints of the physical body, in the universal or spiritual. The woman's power wielded by the witch-figure of the novel extends to the cosmic: 'She, Mabs, could... put her powerful hands before her, and spread her fingers wide, and the whole power of the universe would dart through them' (129-30). Likewise, Weldon shifts the woman's experience of pregnancy from physical to spiritual—from the universal narrative of science to the particular of the ritualistic and instinctive: 'She [Liffey] felt a presence: the touch of a spirit, clear and benign... 'It's me,' said the spirit, said the baby' (138-9). The presence of the baby empowers its bodily host: 'Liffey's baby had spoken to her; settled clear and bright inside her... Liffey, now, had powers of her own' (142). In *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*, Weldon again draws on the witch-figure, this time exploring notions of monstrosity linked to female power. Here, Weldon constructs the voice of the

²⁹ Simone De Beauvoir's earlier (1949) contention that women are culturally constructed as 'other' (Thornham, 2001: 35); Kate Millett's widening of the term *patriarchy* to signify 'the institutionalized oppression of all women by all men' (Thornham, 2001: 36); Germaine Greer's identification of 'penis envy' and feminine passivity (Thornham, 2001: 39).

narrator-protagonist, Ruth to operate beyond the limits of the female body by aligning her more closely with the monstrous and devilish. While the 'giantess' (45) describes herself in terms of witch, with 'one of those jutting jaws... and a hooked nose' (10), Weldon empowers Ruth further by shifting her from female power base of witch to appropriate the male power base of devil: 'I am a she devil' (49). Weldon's narratives locate the instinctive, ritual or intuitive female body-experience as chief site of power, articulated through a voice which moves beyond the physical to draw strength from the cosmic and supernatural. I am drawn to the idea of articulating this triad of empowerment using the monstrous witch-figure as a figure of power, as I will explore in more depth later in the thesis.

The cultural resonance of Margaret Atwood's (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale* continues, since the novel has recently been dramatised for the screen. In terms of feminist empowerment, the original written narrative remains significant.³⁰ Cixous' concept of the never-ending potential of the woman is imbued in the voice that Atwood constructs for her female narrator, using language of the body, specifically the womb: 'I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which... glows red within its translucent wrapping... Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars' (84). It is the physical and creative expression of a woman, the body gifted to the voice unconfined by bodily limits. The narrator moves beyond to where she is larger than, greater than, empowered by.³¹ She is also deeper than: 'I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing (83). The repeated female 'I' is positioned deep within the natural world's immense dimensions, to articulate the powerful, centred woman.

The narrator's voice in *Wyrd Magic*

Both Atwood and Weldon's novels still resonate with the feminist in me and it is gratifying that I can re-engage creatively with them now. This re-engagement supports a further step in my break-out which leads not only towards creative freedom but also towards empowerment. In *Wyrd Magic*, I have absorbed a feminist sensibility in that my narrator's expression of female experience, as in Atwood and Weldon's work, is not confined to the limits of the body. She is aligned with the natural

³⁰ I first analysed the narrator, Offred's voice when I co-revised education resources for York Notes, in York Notes for A Level Study Guide (2016) *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: York Press.

³¹ The sense of empowerment is intensified by the dynamic verbs 'sparkle, burst' and the vast, ethereal simile, 'countless as stars'.

world's planetary forces.³² Like Atwood's *Offred*, she is greater than, deeper than, empowered by.³³ I articulate her voice as earthy, raw, rude: 'rooted, stump-sucked'; 'root-pierced, branch-drilled' (147)—the natural world is her witch, her rough lover.³⁴ I construct this more strident expression of my complex model of grief to articulate the 'raw skin-sting' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 16) of pain that follows loss: 'Now the night comes in thick dread, cat scream... My smell of fox piss, my drysour stink' (*Ibid.*). Here, the language is visceral, to reflect the despair of unrelenting grief. I anchor the experience in the purely physical, the animal, using sibilant, sensory detail. I push at the boundaries of the physical: the narrative voice turns the body inside out, to expose raw anguish: 'my skin will peel arterial throb vein network revealed (*Ibid.*). The narrator demands of the reader: look: see for yourself my pain.

Conclusion

My re-engagement with feminist theory means I can construct a voice for the narrator that not only exerts postmodern freedom in subverting convention, but which is also a strident feminist voice. My writerly decision to construct the narrator as a witch-figure means I can draw on feminist theory, situating in the witch's experience Probyn's triad of female intuition, ritual and instinct that I referred to earlier. It feels right that a feminist witch-figure can draw on Cixous' (1976) declaration of women that 'We're stormy... laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end' (878). I note here that Weldon's work articulates the more combative sensibility of second-wave feminism's militancy. There is a sense of latent aggression in Ruth's declaration in *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*, 'What I want is power over the hearts and pockets of men' (29). This sits uneasily in the current moment where, as I have indicated, the binary male/female model is shifting towards more fluidity in gender. However, I am pleased with the potential for empowerment in a voice which shifts beyond the limits of the physical body to the spiritual and infinite. The construction of a narrator as witch-figure is a shift towards writing in the Gothic genre which I am aware is drawing on Weldon's influence. Going forward, however, my intent is to develop my witch-figure narrator further: to be multi-faceted, so that she is capable of articulating my complex model of grief. The next chapter charts the beginnings of my engagement

³² 'I thicken into dusk. Yes I'm dark in the darkening' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 15).

³³ 'the storm's chorus thrills through my- wired- deeps-' (147).

³⁴ 'Now the succubus tree rides me the rainspits pelt my skin the gale licks my ear chews at my three nipples moans towards climax' (147). Note how the lack of punctuation allows the narrative voice to roam.

with the Gothic as a platform of analysis to support my construction of a more fully developed witch-figure narrator and my creative shift to write *Wyrd Magic* as a Gothic narrative.

Chapter Three: the Gothic

A significant shift in the PhD process occurs when I take the decision to write in the Gothic form. In fact, I realise my creative desire to write a Gothic narrative already exists in the dark, bleak landscapes I have been creating, and it feels appropriate for my witch-figure narrator to inhabit those dark landscapes. In addition, new understanding comes when I write about my dad's illness and death;³⁵ the emotion of the moment is still intense. The experience of writing from memory is a lesson to me: grief does not necessarily lead to recovery, and I want my writing to resonate with others who might feel the same way. I have been working with empowerment in a female narrator's voice; now I want to manipulate the Gothic form to construct a witch-figure who, within the dark spaces of a Gothic narrative, can express more effectively this new understanding I have of the unrelenting nature of despair and anger in grief. To contextualise, in this chapter I will offer a brief history of literary Gothic and Gothic theory as a new field of research. I will explore horror and the Weird, noting also the Gothic's constant referencing of the past. I will then focus on the witch-figure related to liminality and transgression, also referencing a small sample of contemporary Gothic narratives before examining the transgressive nature of my witch-figure narrator's voice.

The Gothic: a brief history

To attempt to define something as disparate as the Gothic is a challenge: Anne Williams (1995) defines it as 'a "something" that goes beyond the merely literary' (23). Fred Botting (1996) locates in its history a pejorative interpretation of the Gothic that 'conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices' (22) of the Middle Ages and which led to the perception of Gothic representations as products of 'uncultivated if not childish minds' (Ibid.). He points to the Gothic's retention of 'negative connotations' (Ibid.)—its 'disturbing ambivalence' and 'instability' (23) which critics of early Gothic condemned as not quite 'proper literature' (22). Catherine Spooner (2006) notes that 'Gothic narratives have escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media' (8). Sue Chaplin (2011) foregrounds the unreliable nature of literary Gothic, situated for example in its habitual use of the lost manuscript or unreliable narrator (182). She characterises the Gothic as 'disorientating, ironic and multi-layered' (Ibid.) and contends that a major narrative strategy of the genre is to create a sense of uncertainty.

³⁵ In Chapter Six of the thesis, I describe the way that 'the memory came with a rush, and it was as raw as if I was still in the room'.

Nick Groom (2012) locates the first eighteenth-century Gothic novel in Thomas Leland's (1762) *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance* (Groom, 2012: 70). Noting the appearance of Gothic tendencies as far back as Shakespeare, Groom charts the development of the genre through Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis' novels³⁶ to the nineteenth century (and beyond) where, he contends, the literary Gothic novel became established or had 'properly arrived' (75).³⁷ Rather than seek classification, however, Jeremy Hogle (2014) locates in the Gothic 'a set of often-linked elements rather than a fixed genre' (1) and, like Chaplin, notes its 'inherently unstable' character (2).

More recently, critics emphasise the potential of the Gothic in terms of critical theory: William Hughes (2018) locates a significant shift in the Gothic from the literary (and popular) genre to the platform of academic study, contending that 'Theory has become central to the study of Gothic in the twenty-first century' (9), while noting that 'Gothic criticism and Gothic creativity are now intimate' (9-10). Hughes' work—and that of other critics—characterises contemporary Gothic in terms of more disparate elements of theory. These include queer theory, cybergothic, postcolonial theory (Hughes, 2018: 9) and EcoGothic.^{38 39} Indeed, in their inclusive definition, Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (2019) contend that the Gothic is now understood as a 'wider term' (1) which 'encompasses horror, certain strands of science fiction and speculative fiction, especially the weird tradition, magical realism, the supernatural more widely (even fairy tales) and all generic hybrids that contain elements traditionally associated with the Gothic' (Ibid.). I have an initial sense, then, of the Gothic as something slippery, difficult to contain, and already I am drawn to the notion of instability. I see dynamic potential in Wester and Aldana Reyes' definition of a mode which engages with fairy tale, magic, the supernatural—forms which can entwine other-worldliness with the real.

Horror and the Weird

³⁶ H. Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764); A. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); M. Lewis, *The Monk* (1796).

³⁷ Groom (2012) specifies literary Gothic as ruined castles, secret passages, murdered bodies, skeletons, assassins, whispers and groans. Also weather, landscape, buildings, material, textual elements; spiritual and psychological elements (77).

³⁸ Corstorphine & Kremmel (2018) note Simon C. Estok's work on ecophobia, which interrogates the way in which "'we respond emotionally and cognitively to what we perceive as environmental threats'" (Estok, quoted in Corstorphine & Kremmel, 2018: 13).

³⁹ Spooner (2017) also reconfigures the Gothic as more positive, contending that 'There are a growing number of Gothic texts that are distinctly celebratory in tone' (11).

Thinking how I might position my witch-figure, there is also appeal in horror (and therefore the monster) and the Weird. Wester and Aldana Reyes' examination of 'The Gothic's dark scenarios' (5) notes the impact of early horror film such as Hammer which, they contend, built visual cues as strong bonds between the Gothic and the monster (4). Drawing on the work of Joseph Crawford, they point to the way in which, in today's society, technology as a new focus of horror (8) is, if you like, the new monster. They contend, however, that monsters 'no longer have to remain the direct... catalysts for horror' (6). Likewise, Mark Fisher (2016) characterises the Weird (and the eerie) as having 'a preoccupation with... The Strange—not the horrific' (8). Carl Sederholm (2019) contends that the New Weird is a mode through which writers can demonstrate 'just how strange and unknowable everything really is' (165)—his interpretation of China Miéville's (2000) novel *Perdido Street Station* as the 'standard-bearer for the New Weird' (Sederholm, 2019: 165) examines 'unusual and overwhelming' (166) characters.⁴⁰ Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's (2008) definition of the New Weird as 'Transgressive horror... repurposed to focus on the monsters... but not the "scare"' (p. x) with 'intense use of grotesquery focused around transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body' (p. xvii) is for me a more accurate characterisation of the genre.

Like VanderMeer and VanderMeer, Fisher (2016) appears to dismiss terror (9) from the Weird yet he will allow 'apprehension, perhaps even dread' (8)—a sensibility which is not dissimilar to the anticipatory terror we might experience in traditional Gothic literature. However he rightly contends that conventional Gothic monsters such as vampires or werewolves are now so recognisable that they have lost the capacity to provoke feelings of strangeness or weirdness (15); there is no '*wrongness*' (13) about them. Such monsters, we can acknowledge, now have their place in our world, while being Weird, Fisher contends, means not belonging (*Ibid.*). The same could of course be said of the witch, which supports the more complex interpretation of the witch-figure I expound in this thesis. It is interesting to consider that to work creatively to give the witch new complexities—to make her less easy to recognise or interpret—is to Weiriden her.

Referencing the past

⁴⁰ In the short story *Jack*, a boy exists 'with eyes gone and in their place an array of dark glass and pipework' (Miéville, 2008: 131). *Jack* also contains moments of torture where the victim is left 'red and dripping' (138) and in this respect certainly has one foot in horror.

It is therefore possible to characterise the Gothic in a number of different ways, and the evolving nature of the Gothic and its subgenres means it remains open to debate. One constant, however, is the Gothic's reach into the past. Even the Weird's preoccupation with that which '*does not belong*' (Fisher, 2016: 13) relies on knowing what previously did, while Fisher's contention that 'the sensation of the eerie clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes' (61) leaving the 'eerie dimension' (63) of 'traces of a departed agent' (64) is an overt reference to the way in which historical (traumatic) events can shape—or have 'stained' (97)—the landscape. In fact for me, the Gothic would be nothing without its referencing of the past and its own history; certainly, its capacity to haunt—for the past to intrude upon the present—draws me as a writer, as I will explore later. It is therefore helpful to understand a little more of the history of the Gothic.

Catherine Spooner's (2006) tracing of its past reveals how old the Gothic is. Whereas Botting (1996) positions the Gothic as a reaction to the Enlightenment's 'sense of morality and rational understanding' (22), Spooner contends that it is a sensibility which references a time before the Age of Science, before Reason (14). Spooner's explanation of the historical development of the Gothic begins with the ancient, nomadic Goth tribes whom, she asserts, have been constructed in history as the brutal half of the dichotomy of barbaric and cultured, or 'primitive versus civilized' (13). Spooner characterises the Gothic as 'the passionate overthrow of reason' (Ibid.); her use of the word 'passionate' is apt: she foregrounds, for example, the 'wild, fantastic shapes' (Ibid.) that work a sense of extreme spiritual uplift into Gothic ecclesiastical architecture. She also notes the historical resistance to political (Roman) influence (14); to follow her argument is to interpret the Gothic as an ideology which does not accept but which rebels.

Both Spooner and Botting evoke the Gothic in terms of a past which, as I have suggested, haunts, still, the present—culturally it seems the passion or sensationalism of the Gothic is still everywhere. It is articulated externally in film, interior décor and art, and also in contemporary Goth dress, brutal body-tattoo and music such as *Bauhaus* and *The Cure*. While I understand the Gothic as a vibrant platform for contemporary creative writing, many will be familiar with the examples of eighteenth-Century Gothic literature I have already referenced here, and will interpret the Gothic as a mode which deals in the extreme emotion of passion, and fear, and terror often realised into horror. I see the Gothic as characterised by its origins, which lie in the time before universalised, religious so-called knowledge was imprinted upon the cultural consciousness. It is from a time of barbaric other-

knowing, of wildness, deeply rooted in the ungovernable, the unmanageable. I also think of it as a Janus, concerned with past and present, endings and beginnings; darkness and light; the divide between civilised and wild. This preoccupation with duality extends to the crossing of thresholds and I will now explore liminality in more depth.

Liminality and transgression

The witch-figure in my novel is positioned as a hedge witch—defined by one online source as 'an homage to the wise women of old who often lived on the outskirts of villages, beyond the hedge' (Wigington, 2019). Rae Beth (2017) offers another popular interpretation which offers a sense of comfort in positive, contemporary spiritualism. Beth defines the hedge witch as 'one who practises spellcraft for the purposes of healing, and teaches the mysteries' (8). I am happy to run with these popular concepts of the witch in my creative work. I note, however, that the OED's definition of 'wicce' (meaning witch) or 'witch' is more negative: 'A person (in later use typically a woman...who practises witchcraft or magic, esp. of a malevolent or harmful nature'.⁴¹ I like the antithesis of good/evil in these definitions for the ambiguity it creates—as the narrator teases at the start of my novel: will she sing 'hymn number 111—or is it 666?' (*Wyrd Magic*: 3). Located, then, at the physical boundary between the civilised and the wild, the hedge witch—known in my novel as Hedgewicche—is a liminal,⁴² transgressive figure. Having established her as such, to contextualise further I will now explore liminality and transgression related to the Gothic.

Fred Botting (1996) locates the transgressive nature of the Gothic in the eighteenth century where 'Transgression, provoking fears of social disintegration, thus enabled the reconstitution of limits and boundaries' (8). Earlier, I noted the Gothic concern with duality, and indeed Botting emphasises the Gothic play around interdependences such as good, evil, light and dark (9). More recently, Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019) reaffirm that 'The very foundations of the Gothic lie in the traversal of boundaries: between good and evil, between black and white, between living and dead' (2). In an echo of Botting's (1996) contention that 'the uncanny renders all boundaries

⁴¹ While I am aware that there is currently debate around the identification of the witch with trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERF), this thesis does not form part of that political discussion.

⁴² The OED defines *liminal* as from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold. 'Characterized by being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate between two states, situations, etc'. Also, in anthropological sense: 'Of or relating to a transitional or intermediate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life, esp. as marked by a ritual or rite of passage'.

uncertain' (11), Parker and Poland (2019) also point to the Gothic's antithetical play, foregrounding 'the blurring of distinctions, and the destruction of dualisms' in the Gothic (2). Manuel Aguirre (2017) locates the origins of the liminal in the anthropologist Victor Turner's (1969) identification of the 'liminal states of rites of passage' (Aguirre, 2017: 297), 'where alone transformation occurs' (296). Aguirre focuses his discussion on 'the boundary between the ordinary world and some 'other' world' (300)—the dynamic between rationality and order, and '*the realm of the Numinous*' (299). The Gothic, then, is concerned with crossing—both literal and figurative—boundaries (301), be it a physical boundary such as a door, fog, or cloth—identified by Aguirre as 'standard symbols for the threshold that separates the two worlds' (302)—or 'transformation, transgression, imprisonment, haunting, escape and pursuit' (301).

While exploring the Gothic preoccupation with boundaries it is worth noting, albeit briefly, the relevance of the nineteenth-Century Enclosures Movement.⁴³ As Jonathan Bate (2000) comments: "Human civilization' has always been in the business of altering the land, whether through deforestation or urbanization or mining or enclosure' (171). While there is insufficient space here for further discussion, I contend that one impact of the Enclosures Movement is that freedom to roam has been replaced by an enduring perception and indeed reality that land is private, property is not to be trespassed upon.⁴⁴ The national psyche is one which now perceives locality and landscape in terms of ownership, marked by boundary, fence, gate—it is a psyche which concerns itself with the stability of limit. However Bate (2001) draws on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work to argue that 'to be in touch with nature—is to be at liberty' (31) and my witch-figure would agree; she would prefer the instability of freedom. In *Wyrđ Magic*, her refusal to be confined is her own rebellious act: she challenges, refuses the limits that living under the rule of law brings. She will roam, and the wilderness where she strides is a transgressive Gothic landscape of freedom and power.

The witch-figure in *Wyrđ Magic*

⁴³ 'Between 1809 and 1820, acts of enclosure granted the local landowners permission to fence the fields, the heaths and the woods, excluding the people who had worked and played in them' (Monbiot, 2012).

⁴⁴ Bate's (2001) examination of John Clare's poetry foregrounds Clare's expression of the 'known and loved' (161) in the natural world. Bate charts Clare's shift to what I interpret as protest poetry: 'And birds and trees and flowers without a name/All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came' (Clare, in Bate, 2001: 163).

The witch-figure in *Wyrd Magic* operates as a transgressive character in that I construct her as a figure who refuses to take proper form. This is in contrast to, for example, Daisy Johnson's (2018) contemporary Gothic novel *Everything Under*. Johnson addresses transgression when her protagonist alters her gender, then crosses a second, liminal threshold to join an insular houseboat community. Whereas in Johnson's work questions of identity and motive become clear, in *Wyrd Magic* Hedgewicche remains undefined: these questions remain in part unanswered. I recognise the difficulties for the reader in a narrator who is not fully realised (something to consider when the novel is reworked with publication in mind). At this stage in the PhD process, however, I enjoy constructing a figure who refuses any threshold. I remove all limits, and allow her undefined form to roam and transform at will: she is maid with golden curls, ghost, witch, rain, wind, storm. Such transformation leads to empowerment: indeed, the witch-figure in *Wyrd Magic* has power over life and death. Similarly, in *Hag: Forgotten Folktales Retold* (2020), a collection of short Gothic tales, Natasha Carthew tells of a mermaid with the power of life and death over a fisherman rowing at sea. In Carthew's work there is powerful simplicity of transformation in folk tale: human to mermaid. In contrast, I build complexity in Hedgewicche's impulsive nature: the storm, the replaying of the storm, the unfair death of June's child, and I am pleased with the development of Hedgewicche into a more complex, transgressive figure in this way.

As I indicated earlier, with witch-figure's empowered voice is unconfined by the limits of the body. I also manipulate form to gift her a voice which is free to shift through time and across register. It is a voice fitting for my complex articulation of grief: as the witch-figure declares, in a natural world turned mysterious—dark, fitting for the black humour that grief brings—'I hide in earth, in timeless, private light' (*Wyrd Magic*: 15). I am pleased with the way the iambic rhythm here gives her voice a measured, thoughtful quality, intensified by the assonance; it feels right for a hedge witch who has literally gone to ground. In her symbolic, liminal space of hedgerow, her voice articulates the unrelenting nature of grief as closed, inward-turning. The witch-figure's omniscient, ironic gaze observes all as she ranges from threshold space of hedge across the novel to other, significant places where I shift the voice to become informal, flippant: 'Lawks⁴⁵, watch me dance in these cacophony streets with me flat cap on!' (81). Both imperative and exclamatory, the voice here is energised,

⁴⁵ The OED defines the term 'lawks' as a vulgar form of 'Lord!' (origin: 1800s).

strong, the irreverence in the grammatically incorrect 'me flat cap'—an ironic reference to northern stereotypes—satisfying.

Conclusion

The different elements I have explored in this chapter constitute a Gothic sensibility which appeals to me as a writer: instability, uncertainty, a sense of haunting; a sense of rebellion, transgression. I see in these elements textual freedom: the creative potential for behaving wildly, if you like, on the page. The Gothic sensibility sits well with the playful nature of postmodernism that, as I have explained earlier, underpins my writing. It is also a sensibility which is fitting for my creative expression of anger and despair I want to model in my writing. As a result of my engagement with the Gothic, the witch-figure narrator in my novel now begins to take shape in terms of what I think of as empowered Gothic monstrosity: I develop her as a complex, transgressive character: an undefined form who roams at will and has power over life and death. This in turn impacts on my choice of language: I construct her voice to roam, transgressing temporal boundaries and moving between different registers. She is still in development, however, and the next chapter will focus more closely on the construction of the monstrous witch-figure as the narrator of my novel.

Chapter Four: the evolving witch-figure

In Chapter Three, I established a Gothic sensibility that I feel comfortable working with—one rooted in wildness, a sense of rebellion, unmanageability that translates for the writer into creative freedom. Crafted from these empowering characteristics, the witch-figure is a transgressive figure of potency whose feminist voice demands to be heard. In fact, the strands of the witch-figure (or witch), feminist empowerment and Gothic theories are interwoven and it is difficult to separate them. Rather than try to unstitch them, therefore, I will allow the triad to remain closely knitted while in this chapter I will draw out elements which warrant particular focus, beginning with an examination of the monstrous witch in her historical and cultural context. Focusing on empowerment, I will explore feminist and postfeminist theories related to the Gothic and their capacity to inform and influence my work, and the dynamic between terror and horror. I shift Catherine Spooner's (2019) model of the 'barbaric feminist' (141) expressed in the 'savagery of girlhood' (142) forward by constructing a grown woman model: a more complex, properly monstrous witch-figure narrator, capable of articulating fully my complex model of grief. I will also examine several contemporary literary models of the witch-figure, before focusing more closely on the construction of my witch-figure in *Wyrd Magic* as she evolves into character.

The monstrous witch

Barbara Creed (1993) locates the cultural reconfiguration of witchcraft as heresy in the 1400s⁴⁶ and women as monsters in the European witch trials⁴⁷—though I note Marion Gibson's (2018) perspective that to view the prosecution of witches as 'the subjugation of women by patriarchy' (120) is an over-simplification.⁴⁸ Creed contends that the witch is often depicted as an 'old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts' (2). Indeed, the 1950s EC Comic horror-suspense series *Tales from the Crypt* regularly carried graphic representations of the witch-figure as monstrous, the Old Witch character drawn with stereotypical hooked nose, jutting chin and beady, malevolent eye. While acknowledging historical and cultural context,⁴⁹ it is interesting to note that women who

⁴⁶ The inquisitor's manual for witch prosecution, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1484 listed women as 'necessary evil', 'domestic danger' and 'evil of nature' (Creed, 1993: 75).

⁴⁷ Creed (1993) asserts that women were accused of 'cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims, and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague' (2).

⁴⁸ Gibson (2018) points out that 20-30% of those accused during the European witch-hunts were male (107).

⁴⁹ The idea for the original Educational Comics series was conceived in 1944 by the US publisher Max Gaines and established as Entertaining Comics (EC) by his son, Bill (Carver, 2013).

stepped outside the then cultural norms and expectations of feminine behaviour were objectified in the EC Comic series or punished using the language of monstrous witchery: derogatory terms drew on terminology such as 'DRIED-UP WITHERED *EXCUSE FOR A FEMALE*', '*TOADFACED*' and 'SNAGGLE-TOOTHED HAG' (EC Comics *Blind Alleys*, 1950-1955). (I note also, however, that the graphic artwork and text in the EC Comics series constitutes at least in part an aesthetic of its own).

So far as filmic representations are concerned, Creed (1993) offers a brief history from the earliest cinematic depiction of the witch as evil in *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939 (73). She identifies a shift in the 1960s towards the witch as present in horror film but not central. She then reconfigures the witch as primary and dominant in films such as *Carrie*, *Inferno* and *Witches* (Ibid.). Her canon of the witch is therefore a feminist one, where she identifies the witch as a figure which 'has inspired both awe and dread' (74). She notes also the witch's characterisation in film as 'usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil' (76).

Like Creed's negative, monstrous characterisation of the witch⁵⁰, Marina Warner's (1998) work on the witch related to fear in fairy tale draws no distinction between witches and the monster, in this case in the shape of the ogre (11). She locates the witch's origins in Slavic folklore with 'The predatory witch Baba Yaga, who has a special liking for children' (25). Warner notes the development of the witch over time into a more distinct individual⁵¹ who operates as a liminal, transgressive figure, positioned as one of fairy tales' 'anomalous outsiders' (28) in 'her lonely cottage on the edge of the forest' (Ibid.). In contrast, Morgaine Merch Lleud (2008) foregrounds 'the facelessness' (298) of the witch, noting her as 'an icon rather than a real person or individual' (Ibid.). Merch Lleud also notes the potential of the witch to threaten as liminal figure where she is, like the liminal, 'both unpredictable and indefinable' (357).

Monstrosity and feminist/postfeminist empowerment

It is also interesting to explore ways in which feminist and postfeminist theory can engage with the Gothic witch-figure. Earlier I noted the second-wave feminist perspective of the female body as site

⁵⁰ 'dangerous and wily'; able to 'control forces in nature' and associated with 'filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews, potions and even cannibalism' (Creed, 1993: 76).

⁵¹ 'a cunning woman, in control of natural and supernatural magic' (Warner, 1998: 26).

of empowerment, and here Linda Badley (2012) positions the witch as a central figure,⁵² emphasising the duality of the witch and characterising her as both (and simultaneously) 'female monstrosity and female power' (4).⁵³ The postfeminist agenda is to 'displace the essentialist and simplistic identification of femininity as unequivocally repressive and passive' (Genz, 2007: 73) and thus reposition femininity as more powerful. Postfeminist engagement with the witch constructs a new 'monstrous feminine' (69), which Stéphanie Genz characterises as 'strangely conventional... more *Pretty Woman* than *Bride of Frankenstein*' (Ibid.). Yet others have located a challenge to the feminine body ideal: Fiona Carson (2001) emphasises the potential for volatility in 'The visceral, fluid and boundless body of the witch' (125), citing Diana Purkiss' (1996) concept of the witch's 'unruly body... leaky vessel' (124) as a challenge to the idealised, 'patriarchal representation' of femininity (Ibid.).⁵⁴ Genz sees the postfeminist feminine body as contradictory: while seeking re-engagement with 'feminine materiality' (74), the postfeminist heroine is subversive; she refuses 'modesty, chastity, and innocence' (Ibid.) and is repositioned as 'linked to unnatural and devilish pursuits and desires' (Ibid.). For Angela McRobbie (2004), the postfeminist model becomes the 'undoing of feminism' (255) where the female subject is both liberated yet constrained. McRobbie contends that naivety or victimisation in the stripped female body is replaced by 'choice' and personal 'enjoyment' (259). Yet 'the new female subject is... called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl' (260). Fred Botting's (2007) focus is the witch *per se*; citing Linda Badley's work on the *Blair Witch Project*, he notes the domestication and homogenisation of the postfeminist witch (Botting, 2007: 172),⁵⁶ contending that the "'Post,'" in postfeminism becomes 'banal monstrosities, commodified presentations'. Indeed, Badley (2012) contends that the witch in the 1990s is described as 'more often airbrushed, domesticated, and self-congratulatory' (6). She notes in particular the 1987 Hollywood film *The Witches of Eastwick* (Ibid.) which starred A-list celebrities; "'sisterhoods'" (Ibid.) of witchery such as Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series and TV representations of the witch in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1997) and *Charmed* (1997) which, she contends, became 'non-threatening because domesticated within patriarchy' (Ibid.). I agree

⁵² The witch was an iconic figure for first and second-wave feminism and the 1968 political feminist Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) movement (Badley, 2012: 3).

⁵³ Badley (2012) draws on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and Hélène Cixous' (1976) 'unruly laughing Medusa' (4) to emphasise both female power and monstrosity (Ibid.).

⁵⁴ Carson (2001) cites Luce Irigaray's concept of the female body expressed in terms of "volume fluidity", or 'open container', which collapses the illusion of the 'closed' and therefore controllable body of masculine fantasy (124).

⁵⁵ Carson also cites Mary Russo's (1995) characterisation of the female grotesque body as 'connected with animals, degradation, filth, death, and rebirth' (125).

⁵⁶ as articulated in popular witch characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Willow (Botting, 2007: 172).

with Botting and Badley's assertions; the omission of monstrosity in the witch positions the witch-figure as something more like a domesticated commodity.

In contrast to this absence of threat that Badley identifies, the film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) reclaims the witch from the more problematic domesticated arena and seeks to reconfigure her as central, monstrous—yet she is never revealed in the film. Instead, the titular witch-figure operates through a series of signs and symbols in the forest: hanging figures, a stick bundle, slime. Without a realised self, her presence becomes, paradoxically, an absence: a space filled only with malevolence. Rather than reclaiming the witch's monstrosity, the unrealised self in the film in effect denies it, since the witch is unable to shift from the 'subtlety and suggestion' (Hughes, 2018: 90) that is the territory of '**Female Gothic**' (Ibid.) into that which is 'explicitly or graphically' (Ibid.) represented in horror and which is 'frequently regarded as characteristic of **Male Gothic**' (Ibid.).⁵⁷

Horror and Empowerment

If terror and horror can be seen as binary female/male territories, there can be feminist empowerment in claiming the territory of horror. In *Wyrd Magic* I manipulate form so that the witch-figure steps from anticipatory terror to the realisation of horror and so claims her fully monstrous self. She reveals herself: 'Here I am, June. See you my hand, these burnt-away fingers, their ends tapered suggestion of nail and skin only. Makes a good Hand of Glory, does it not!' (*Wyrd Magic*: 182). The witch-figure's revelation of her horrific self is turned more monstrous by her burning. I use the language of horror to describe her death in visceral detail: 'My hair! 'Tis caught! It fries in sizzle 'gainst my flinching ear. My skin blisters and peels from my joints; my blood froths to the boil, my fat runs' (Ibid.). I use plosives and dynamic, onomatopoeic verbs to emphasise the horror of the experience. The visceral description of her monstrous self and her burning means that I shift the witch-figure into the explicit and graphical (Hughes, 2018: 90). In this way I empower the witch-figure's voice by claiming the territory of horror and collapsing the male horror/female terror binary that Hughes identifies in the Gothic.

⁵⁷ William Hughes cites Ann Radcliffe's (1826) theoretical work which defines terror as that which 'elevates perception and the aesthetic appreciation' (Hughes, 2018: 90) and horror as that which reductively 'numbs aesthetic and sensory appreciation' (Ibid.).

Against the critical and cultural framework I have outlined, several aspects of the construction of the witch-figure narrator now become significant. Firstly, if she is to be strident enough to voice my complex model of grief, the narrator of *Wyrd Magic* will need to be constructed, in Badley's terms, as both monstrous and empowered. It is right that she steps into the territory of horror, since this avoids any sense of domestication—I think that what I find missing in the homogenised models that Badley and Botting reference is the witch's inherent savagery. Like the fox that gnaws at its own leg to free itself from entrapment, it is the sense of something more savage that is required in a voice if it is to articulate a model of grief founded on anger, and despair, and personal hurt. To be more savage, more barbaric, it will need to be a voice which is even more complex: visceral, irreverent. While I note that contemporary representations of women with supernatural powers include the monstrous, for example in the aesthetic of horror manga and notably in the work of manga artist Junji Ito,⁵⁸ I will now explore ways in which Catherine Spooner's (2019) work is influential in my development of the narrator, Hedgewicche as a barbaric witch-figure.

The properly monstrous witch

In addition to monstrosity, my search for a more savage or barbaric witch-figure narrator to articulate my complex model of grief in more irreverent, visceral terms is supported by Catherine Spooner's (2019) work. Spooner's focus is the literary Gothic heroine, characterised in earlier Gothic models as reliant upon a "good girl" (133) definition of the female subject. I interpret 'good girl' as passive female, and it is relevant here to note Marie Mulvey-Roberts' (2016) foregrounding of 'enhanced passivity' (108) in the eighteenth century Gothic heroine, where women (and their bodies) were typically controlled through marriage or domestic violence (Ibid.). Mulvey-Roberts notes the Victorian practice of authorised incarceration for women as punishment for the 'uncooperative and transgressive wife' (110), citing Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's (1847) novel, *Jane Eyre* as an example (Ibid.). She argues that 'negative stereotypes' (107) or a 'distorted view of the feminine' (108) are found in the many representations of the female as monster or 'feminine evil' (Ibid.) in Gothic literature. Notable again here is Brontë's Bertha Mason, whose

⁵⁸ A Google search reveals a range of monstrous female characters represented in graphic form in the work of Junji Ito, such as the immortal Tomie Kawakami. Her beauty would position her as a Sabrina or Hermione Grainger, however Ito negates any concept of approbation: Tomie displays unapologetic delight in her own malevolence.

'shaggy locks' and 'purple face' with 'bloated features' (Brontë, 1994: 413), Rochester's derogatory 'fearful hag' (423) and his reference to 'her familiar' (424) denote her as both monster and witch.⁵⁹

Spooner's (2019) position, however, is more positive: contending that the monster is a figure already connected with rebellion,⁶⁰ she characterises a monstrous model of the heroine as one which, like Bertha Mason's monstrous feminine, disturbs,⁶¹ is dangerous—but which is newly empowered. Spooner's monstrous witch-figure is one based on 'the story of the wild girl... 'barbaric feminism'' (138).⁶² She draws an etymological link between savagery (Ibid.) and freedom (139) to support her model of a 'more complex expression' (142) of 'Barbaric feminism' (143) she sees in, for example, Helen Oyeyemi's (2009) novel, *White is for Witching* (142). Spooner's model is one which 'does not clarify, rationalise or sanitise' (144), 'does not aim to please' (Ibid.). Spooner's 'barbaric feminist' (141) is, however, restricted to 'prior to assuming the burdens of adult femininity' (140). Her definition is thus limited to the 'savagery of girlhood' (142) and implicit in her argument is the assumption that the sense of 'wild, unconstrained, violent passions' (140) belongs to girlhood only. I contend that the position of the 'risky, difficult' (144) feminine can also be taken up in womanhood. Indeed the grown woman offers a new model of complexity where, in her state of more mature knowing, she still transgresses to articulate emotional extremes in whichever way pleases her. The result is a new sense of irreverence and a refusal to be governed. For me, this is a satisfying return to the Gothic time of barbaric other-knowing I referred to earlier: of wildness. I can engage creatively with both the Gothic and Spooner's 'barbaric feminist' in terms of the rude and ungovernable voice of the properly monstrous witch-figure I construct, rooted in the rebellious and unmanageable, the wild or savage.

In *Wyrđ Magic*, I construct the witch-figure Hedgewicche as a new model of Spooner's 'savage girl'—now savage woman—one whose complexity, proper monstrosity and empowerment means she is sufficiently extraordinary to articulate my complex model of grief. Hers is a savage voice, contemporary yet aligned with ancient foulness to emphasise her reach across time: I shift the voice

⁵⁹ Anne Williams (2016) notes the 'uncanny fusion of 'masculine' and 'feminine'' (98) in Bertha Mason, contending that Mason exhibits virile strength in her attempt to throttle Rochester (Ibid.).

⁶⁰ Spooner (2019) references Chris Baldick's (1987) work where he foregrounds Frankenstein's creature's disregard for societal discourses of power (137).

⁶¹ Spooner (2019) also notes Jeffery Jerome Cohen's (1996) work where he characterises the monster as 'disturbing hybrid[s]' (Ibid.).

⁶² Spooner (2019) foregrounds *Wuthering Heights'* Catherine Earnshaw as an example of her new 'Savage girlhood' model (142).

to a rhythm evocative of Shakespeare's witches and towards language which evokes a sense of their spell-making, 'from rats which pull at bruise-dead flesh, to woodlice working in the damp and in between, the threads of worms' (15).⁶³ I'm pleased with the way the voice contains echoes of the pre-Gothic monstrous feminine in Shakespeare's work. I am also able to creatively dig deeper into viscerality: 'watch me twist grind claw and render' (*Wyrd Magic*: 15). The witch-figure's gaze looks inwards to her tortured self, where she reveals her personal 'innards out pain' (16). I also explore the human self as the literally disintegrating, or fragmenting body.⁶⁴ As the witch-figure declares: 'the body *turns*, once switched off. It bloats, it sinks, things moulder, slip, merge' (15). This physical disintegration is the literal 'collapse of the border between inside and outside' (Kristeva, 1982: 53). The skin, 'fragile container' (Ibid.), is deformed or lost and I interpret this as appropriate for the grieving self where raw pain is exposed.

The witch-figure in contemporary literature

My creative focus so far has been the construction of a voice for my narrator empowered by feminism, turned monstrous, irreverent, more savage through my engagement with the Gothic. It feels right for the rage, unrelenting despair in my complex articulation of grief. At this stage in the PhD process, I realise that the sense of persona in the narrator I referred to earlier has continued to grow: the witch-figure is up off the page, and I therefore take the decision to construct her as a more fully-drawn character-narrator. This sits well with my creative intent for my model of grief to resonate with others, because I can build empathy in her. In fact, the savage witch-figure character I construct to narrate *Wyrd Magic* has a powerful gaze which begins to expose and confront past pain, as I will explore later in the thesis. Likewise, the witch-figure in Sarah Perry's (2019) Gothic novel *Melmoth* possesses a powerful female gaze which exposes past trauma. Perry's model is a social commentator *in extremis*, whose role in the novel is to force those who have committed wrongdoings to face the pain they have inflicted on others. The titular Melmoth is in one sense drawn as *Macbeth's* Banquo: for those who see her, she is a heavy-handed symbol of their guilt. Perry's Melmoth is oxymoronic, empowered by both her awfulness and her loveliness: 'Her face was lovely and dreadful' (133). She exists in antithesis, and in her monstrous beauty she is both a feminine ideal and a collapse of that ideal in order to create a more complex monstrous and

⁶³ Like *Macbeth's* weird sisters, here the voice speaks in trochaic tetrameter.

⁶⁴ Roger Luckhurst (2008) defines this sense of fragmentation in terms of the trauma-disrupted identity (1).

empowered figure. In Victoria Schwab's (2011) novel *The Near Witch*, Schwab situates empowerment in a male witch, a liminal figure made societal outcast by his elemental command: 'The whirlwind parts for him' (Schwab, 2011: 142). The true witch-monster in the novel, however, is the Near Witch herself, constructed from the elements as a one-dimensional figure of menace with 'stone eyes' (270) and 'mossy lips' (273), who rises from the earth, vengeful, and who must be returned to peace. In her novel *Follow Me to Ground*, Sue Rainsford (2020) also constructs a witch-figure narrator from the elements: her narrator, Ada, is made from 'The Ground... where Father and I were born' (8). Truly monstrous, she kills her father, and here the focus is the visceral: 'his insides were soft, and they came away in my hand' (171). Rainsford's Ada is a contemporary Frankenstein who works her alchemy to rebirth a man. Unlike Shelley's original protagonist, she accepts the rebirthed version, however liminal or weird: 'No matter if he's strange' (194). Like Rainsford's Ada, the witch-figure in *Wyrd Magic* is drawn in elemental terms where she commands the natural environment: 'I'm tatters in black-smoked air I rake this earth with my talons... How I split the sky!' (163). The dynamic verbs intensify the sense of active empowerment she possesses. She rejects the feminine ideal: 'I am the black, the pock-marked crone' (Ibid.) to declare herself—and other women like her—as powerfully monstrous: 'Such aberrations we are... our Medusa heads swarm and hiss: our demons crawl fawning at our heels yes such *malevolents* we are' (165).

Schwab's *Near Witch* is, in essence, a love story. While Rainsford's Ada, at the last, articulates unconditional love, in Hedgewicche's monstrosity and elemental power I construct her to articulate instead brooding despair.⁶⁵ Indeed she expresses a creature-despair brought about by loss⁶⁶ and models a complex, gendered monstrosity—Spoooner's 'barbaric feminism' as grown woman. I replace the sense of innocence that I see in Spoooner's model of the wild girl with the knowingness of Hedgewicche. I gift her a sense of power in her reach across the ages where 'myriad stars span my centuries' (*Wyrd Magic*: 169), and her ancient quality of knowing gives her awful right to express eternal anger and despair in grief where she asks: 'where is my soul... It slinks, and festers centuries long in *rage*' (54).

Hedgewicche the narrator-character

⁶⁵ 'Black, nothing but black in my northern angered sea' (164).

⁶⁶ 'I curl up under these new-black shields of trees, soak my sorrow into this tunnelled earth' (166).

As Hedgewicche evolves, I think of her as a more fully-developed character, and begin to craft her as more multi-faceted. Whereas Perry's Melmoth acts from a desire to correct past wrongs, Hedgewicche is all the more monstrous for the pleasure she derives from her spell-making. She is much more wicked and declares herself as such,⁶⁷ revelling in her savagery,⁶⁸ like Junji Ito's Tomie Kawakami, whom I referenced earlier. Hedgewicche is unapologetic, irreverent⁶⁹—but unlike Tomie, she is vulnerable and compassionate. Like Perry, I construct Hedgewicche in terms of (monstrous) antithesis: she is deadly—she kills without concern—yet she demonstrates empathy for others.⁷⁰ This empathy, together with her progression in that she comes to understand more fully the nature of grief, begins to articulate her as a more fully-drawn character with the capacity to reach out to the reader. For instance, following the death of June's son, Hedgewicche leads June through the process of grieving for a lost child. She would help June come to terms with her loss—yet Hedgewicche's own lesson is to 'try to comprehend the most particular pain' (172)—she becomes the dynamic conduit through which I can articulate my complex model of anguish-filled, despairing grief following the loss of a child: 'Your own red rope of love, come apart most brutal... now tangled in pain, and ache, and grief' (Ibid.). Hedgewicche is also able to be knowing: 'Patch up your heart, little by little. The stitches, in the end, will keep, and you'll hold your child there, sewn with love into your soul' (176).

Conclusion:

The Gothic as a platform of analysis supports my development of a voice for my witch-figure which is monstrous, savage, with immense reach through time and across place. I am satisfied the voice is now properly empowered to articulate complex grief. I am able to develop Hedgewicche as an unstable, paradoxical character-narrator who declares with extraordinary stridency, 'I *am* the black' (*Wyrd Magic*: 163), yet asserts that there is only 'blank black' in the 'beyond' (172). In this way she both negates and constructs herself as an embodiment of the uncertainty of the Gothic which I find so compelling as a writer.

⁶⁷ 'how wicked I am' (*Wyrd Magic*: 163)

⁶⁸ in the depths my tentacles wind about the wide-eyed drowning to squeeze the breath from their mouths in bubbles – d'you think they make good white horses... the dying as they come gasping to the surface?' (164)

⁶⁹ 'Next car that comes, I'll squat, bare my arse in its headlights' (19)

⁷⁰ 'You weep, and my eyes are wet with scorching tears' (166)

I can engage further with the Gothic, however, and here I consider Hedgewicche's position in the narrative. As narrator with omniscience, I have constructed her as central, pivotal. In effect, she operates within her own Hall of Mirrors: the empowered female gaze reflects the self, in all its complexities. Through her I also hold a mirror to other characters in the novel, as I will explore later. But I recognise that there is another face in the mirror: my own. There will be limitations in her characterised omniscience, because—and this feels suddenly momentous—I realise that I have constructed a Gothic witch-figure narrator but I am still with her as author: the loud and raucous voice of the witch-figure is my own woman's voice, demanding to be heard. My complex model for grief was, after all, drawn chiefly from personal experience, and by undertaking this creative journey towards the PhD I will now be compelled to confront that grief. In the next chapter I explore the potential in the Gothic to support the ways in which I reanimate my own remembered experience in *Wyrd Magic*, which becomes a narrative of Gothic self-haunting.

Chapter Five: Gothic memoir

Paradoxically perhaps, the sense of unreality or mystery that permeates the Gothic allows me to explore my reality of personal pain and grief. I like this sense of opaqueness the Gothic provides: like the half-formed ghost in a creepy tale, the Gothic insists on remaining an elusive mode for expression. Indeed, Sue Chaplin (2011) contends that 'the author of a text is never (or rarely) present before the reader' (181); in this way literary Gothic becomes 'a narrative that cannot be verified' (Ibid.). It feels, then, as if I can disguise remembered, so-called truths inside the narrative. If I consider the Gothic's obscurity to be a gauze, or veil, through which I can view the past, I can use its fictional mode to explore painful moments in these memories, but with some sense of protection. This is still dangerous territory: I might conceal myself, but I will also expose my own self as emotionally vulnerable. My engagement with the Gothic, however, gives me the freedom to take risks, and in this chapter I will draw on Gothic theory to locate and explore elements of memoir embedded in my fictional narrative. I note the influence of Donna Lee Brien's (2015) work, where she contends that 'viewing autobiographical practice through the prism of the Gothic can enrich the understanding of memoir as both a form of literature and a writing practice' (146). The Gothic form is also one which acts as a distance frame through which I can take up a critical perspective on my past, and the chapter will explore ways in which I resuscitate and re-examine family members; through their haunting of the narrative I come to a new understanding of them.

Hauntings, trauma, reanimation

Relevant to my exploration of personal grief is Roger Luckhurst's (2008) work on trauma. Luckhurst draws on the American Psychiatric Association's official diagnostic manual (ODM), which characterises trauma in terms of 'extreme 'stressor' events' (1). Luckhurst contends that 'trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways' (Ibid.). He notes the ODM's characterisation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a 'cluster of symptoms' where "the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced" in terms of, for example, flashbacks and dreams (Ibid.). He foregrounds 'the strange temporality of traumatic memory' (5) where 'an event can only be understood as traumatic *after* the fact' (Ibid.). In cases of trauma, the past will constantly be pulled into the present where the event may persist as an echo, or repetition (1) in the disturbed mind of the sufferer. In this sense, the narrative that recalls the trauma of past grief in memoir form becomes a Gothic narrative of self-haunting. Luckhurst's reference to identity constituted from

memory resonates with me; if I thread my own memories into my narrative, and in this way articulate past grief, how might that impact?

Donna Lee Brien (2015) sees in memoir the Gothic capacity to haunt: to resurrect, through what she describes as 'the eternally undead author',⁷¹ the lived experience for the reader. Indeed, a significant aspect of her reading of Alison Bechdel's (2006) graphic memoir, *Fun Home*, is her contention that characters from Bechdel's past are reanimated (148). This concept of reanimation underpins my work; I interpret it as an oblique reference to my characterisation of the Gothic, which I established earlier in the thesis and which includes a sense of duality in past and present. This duality becomes evident in memoir, where remembered, so-called truths become 'unsettled and destabilised and rendered uncanny' (Brien, 149). The Gothic, as I have indicated, is also concerned with the liminal, and in this respect Brien positions life writing as a creative mode which engages with the 'slim borderland between the truth and what is constructed' (Ibid.). In this way, the Gothic permits me to deal in verisimilitude rather than veracity. As Brien confirms, the act of writing memoir is one where the only resources for the writer's use are 'traces, impressions, and the ghosts of speculation and supposition' (153). For Brien, the blend of 'documented fact' with 'myth and storytelling' (Ibid.) that she identifies in others' work becomes, she contends, 'both life writing and Gothic' (Ibid.). Brien's perspective on memoir and the Gothic appeals to me, and I would contend that the act of writing memoir—of destabilising the so-called truth of memory and reshaping it in blurred terms of autobiographical construct—is in itself a Gothic act of transgression.

Confession

In his examination of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Mark Kelly (2013) notes that Foucault charts the over-spill of confession from the context of religion into other discourses, to a point where 'Literature now frequently takes the form of a confession' (Kelly, 2013: 49). In Victorian Gothic literature, confessional narratives are common.⁷² In contemporary Gothic, confessions

⁷¹ Barry (2017) notes that 'literary texts, once they exist, are viewed by the theorist as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always 'dead ' or 'absent' (37). Brien, however, draws on Lejeune's (1975) theory of the "'autobiographic pact'" (149) - the shared understanding between reader and author that in memoir the author and the protagonist are the same - to contend that the author is 'resurrected and resuscitated' (148) and so remains 'never completely "dead" (Ibid.).

⁷² Shelley's *Frankenstein* makes his confession to Captain Walton; Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* is compelled to confess to a stranger at a wedding. Brontë's (1847, this edition 1994) *Jane Eyre* confesses to the reader: 'how blind had been my eyes! How weak my conduct!' (417).

continue to pivot around death, and indeed the creation of life. In Shirley Jackson's (1962) novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat reveals her liking for the death-cup mushroom (1); this early reference and her statement that 'Everyone else in my family is dead' (Ibid.) is sufficient for the reader to assume her guilt as murderer. Sarah Perry's (2019) witch-figure confesses that 'it is I, Melmoth, whose voice you have heard' (270), while witch-figure Ada in Sue Rainsford's (2020) *Follow Me to Ground* confesses, as she kills her father, that 'It was a new kind of knowing in me, that I could hurt him' (170). In Andrew Hurley's (2019) Gothic novel *Starve Acre*, the protagonist Richard keeps from his wife his fascination with a reanimated hare, yet the third person subjective narrator confesses on Richard's behalf to the reader that 'the animal began to consume his thoughts entirely' (116)—a pivotal moment that propels the novel into Poe-esque horror.

Kelly also notes Foucault's perspective that confession 'is only effective when it is heard by someone else' (Kelly, 2013: 50). In this way, the act of writing memoir—unburying and sharing 'dark pasts' (Brien, 2015: 155) with the reader—becomes an act of confession, and I find it interesting to consider that in writing memoir, the present self will hear, if you like, the confession of the past self. Indeed, drawing on the work of Punter & Byron (2004), Brien reasserts that narratives where these 'dark pasts—personal or generational—haunt the present' (Ibid.) are fertile soil for the writer of memoir (Ibid.).

Brien's work supports my writing in that I can position the Gothic as a gauze or veil through which I can look, with some protection, at my own past; I can use the protection of the veil to confront pain. I resurrect painful moments such as my father's illness and death and the loss of my child in what ultimately becomes a confessional narrative, which is at the same time one of self-haunting. In so doing, I evoke the Gothic sense of obscurity by positioning my writing not only in the liminal space between past and present, but also between remembered, so-called truth and fictional construct. As I have explained, my intention however is not just to reanimate my past but also to locate a different critical framework through which to view it. I recognise that in this way, the Gothic constitutes not only a protective veil but also a frame which enables me to take a more distanced

perspective⁷³ and so begin, perhaps, to change that perspective. This is certainly true in *Wyrd Magic*, and I will now explore ways in which I write elements of Gothic memoir into my work.

Wyrd Magic: the uncanny family

The Gothic elements I write into *Wyrd Magic* such as narrative instability, uncertainty and a sense of haunting allow me to select memories from my past, thread them into the narrative and examine them critically. These moments of personal vulnerability have the potential to be written into the narrative as strange (here, I mean strange as in uncanny⁷⁴, which should not be confused with my discussion of the Weird in Chapter Four). Donna Lee Brien's critical perspective is to turn elements of the narrative uncanny. Her reading of Alison Bechdel's (2006) graphic memoir, *Fun Home* is one where Bechdel's story of her family, although still true in the sense that it is written in memoir form, is turned strange by Brien's Gothic reading.⁷⁵

While Brien takes a critical perspective, my creative approach is to manipulate time and place. In the novel, I turn June's family uncanny. As the narrator comments: 'she [June] knew the other girls thought her home was probably a bit weird' (*Wyrd Magic*: 24). The homely, or '*heimlich*' (Freud, 2003: 124), is turned unhomely ('*unheimlich*') (ibid.), or strange. Freud makes the point that not everything that is unfamiliar will be frightening (125), and thus to become uncanny, 'something must be added to the novel and unfamiliar' (ibid.). I agree, and prefer to think of the uncanny not in terms of fear *per se* but more in terms of what may disturb. To achieve this, firstly I suspend June's family temporally: as the playful, postmodern narrator of *Wyrd Magic* reminds the reader throughout the novel in sardonic tones, June's family is uncanny because it is 'stuck in the Dark Ages'. While the narrative is positioned closer to the present day, June's family is located, through cultural and social references, in the time instead of my own childhood in the 1970s: 'Homepride white bread, Chopped Ham and Pork' (42); 'maraschino cherries' (71); 'Babycham' (ibid.). In the same way, I manipulate place: the 'small room' (9) of June's family home, with its 'brown, tiled fireplace with tiled hearth'

⁷³ Erving Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* theorises that social behaviour can be analysed in terms of different 'frames'—whether the subject interprets their reality through, for instance, a religious or secular frame, and that frames can be used with the specific intention to 'create a change in attitudes' (Shaw, 2013).

⁷⁴ In his essay *Das Unheimliche*, Freud (2003) defines the uncanny as that which 'evokes fear and dread' (123), produced when 'what was once well known and had long been familiar' (124) is turned 'unknown and unfamiliar' (125).

⁷⁵ Brien's focus is the unease in the relationship between the (secretly homosexual) father and daughter.

(Ibid.); the 'magazine rack overflowing with tattered copies of *Woman's Weekly*... The sewing box pushed under the sideboard' (Ibid.). Inserted into the fictional narrative, these remembered details from my own childhood home disturb because they generate an uncomfortable sense that June's family does not belong in the moment of the novel. They also acquire a particular resonance for me: I dwell inside what I think of as the ghost-space of my past, which becomes a Gothic space of self-haunting.

Mother

Against this temporal and cultural framework, and inside the ghost-space of my own remembered home, I resurrect my mother, known in the novel only as Mother, as the other-worldly and uncanny parent of June. Relevant here is Freud's (2003) contention that the uncanny exists because 'the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns' (147): the narrative reveals 'dark pasts' (Brien, 2015: 155) in the return of the repressed. In the novel, I emphasise Mother's inability to accept her own sexuality which she sees as promiscuity and which is for her publicly emphasised by a second pregnancy soon after her first child is born.⁷⁶ Mother visits her paranoia of the body on her daughter, June.⁷⁷ I expose Mother's lack of love for her second child⁷⁸, explained to herself by her invented possibility that the child is not hers.⁷⁹ In order to tell this particular part of the story, I shift into fairy tale form: *The Tale of Husband and Wife* (*Wyrd Magic*: 24-27) is a humorously ironic telling where I interweave the rhythmic, repetitive and child-like mode of fairy tale⁸⁰ with 1970s cultural⁸¹ and adult references⁸² to reveal a much darker memoir account of sexual misunderstanding, inhibition and lack of maternal love. While the Gothic narrative acts as a veil through which I can view past familial difficulties with some sense of shielding, my use of fairy tale form here also acts as a further distance frame set within that veil of protection, through which I can view past events—and past characters—from a critical perspective. In this way I might gain

⁷⁶ 'What will the neighbours think of us, of *me*, coming to the rut so quickly after my first born!' (*Wyrd Magic*: 21)

⁷⁷ 'when June had her first bleed... her mother strapped June into a belt thing with a sanitary pad and whispered while she did it' (8).

⁷⁸ 'the new child's eyes... seemed... not to gaze with love as her first-born had' (21).

⁷⁹ 'Mother lived out many years of her life wondering, always wondering. When her son misbehaved, he wasn't her child' (Ibid.).

⁸⁰ 'Each day he [Husband] tippy-tapped home' (19).

⁸¹ 'together they'd feast on sandwiches made with... Heinz Sandwich Spread' (Ibid.).

⁸² 'Husband.. found it was much easier to slide his cock in and get going' (20).

some sense of understanding.⁸³ Certainly it is as if I can take a different perspective on my mother, as I will explain in the following chapter.

While there is insufficient space here for further discussion of fairy tale, I would like to make one point: Freud (2003) contends that there is 'nothing uncanny' (158) in fairy tale, where 'feelings of fear, and therefore of the uncanny, are totally ruled out' (Ibid.). But I contend that by writing elements of memoir in fairy tale form, I blur the boundaries between my remembered reality and what might be fantasy, and turn the narrative uncanny by including the fearsome ghosts of my parents. Framed by the larger narrative, the uncanny fairy tale means the novel at this point becomes the return of the repressed, and the revelation of 'everything that was meant to remain secret' (Schelling, cited by Freud, 2003: 132). The question remains over whether the details of my narrative might be true; I write in fairy tale form but position the narrative not as fantasy but as oblique Gothic (unreliably remembered) confessional.

Father

The Gothic acts as a distance frame which brings new understanding when I reanimate my dad in the narrative. Into the small messy room of his family home the character of Father must step each day on his return from his mundane office work. The 'tippy-tapping' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 10) of his shoes, his 'square gentleman's ring' (9) are small remembered details from my childhood, embedded in the fictional narrative. The narrator advises him to 'Take another swig [of whisky], Father, deep breath, before you... greet your wife, children, dog' (Ibid.). The witch-figure's knowing and sardonic voice opens up a critical space from which I can view him differently, as the man I never knew. My resuscitated dad haunts the ghost-space of my childhood home, and in his haunting reveals potential frustration and unhappiness, the seeds of a failing marriage.

I also use the Gothic witch-figure's voice to focus on my dad's illness and death, threading small yet traumatic moments of memoir into the fictional narrative. The narrator's unsympathetic voice reveals the ugly effect of illness when she articulates the way in which terminal cancer reduces the human to 'thinstick' (10) status with only a 'pump for his chemicals... flooding his liver' (Ibid.). The

⁸³ Anna Kérchy (2011) notes the archaic function of fairy tale as the creation of story as a means of understanding; she foregrounds *Sleeping Beauty* as a fairy tale to 'soothe the incomprehensibility of death' (115).

character of Father is made abject by the sinister poison that 'does not respect borders' (Kristeva, 1982: 4) coursing through his body. It is the abjection of the self: he is in a state where 'the impossible constitutes... [his] very *being*' (5). Indeed, Father is turned strange bordering on the grotesque from his disease when he is made 'crow-stooped, stick-bound' (*Wyrd Magic*: 10). His face is 'yellow as the buttered turkey' (Ibid.) and in this comparison there is an element of humour; using irony in the witch-figure's voice allows me to face the pain of my dad's illness. A further point is that in the use of humour, there is what I think of as a joyful letting go. Perhaps it is too much to call this joy, but certainly here, as in *The Tale of Husband and Wife*, there is satisfying creative freedom in being able to use the Gothic witch-figure's voice to confront past difficulty or grief, using her ironic, black humour to push at its boundaries.

If humour is one way to confront, increased focus on the grotesque and horror is another. I feel compelled to do this: to engage more closely with horror—indeed, the thesis articulated earlier the way I deliberately position the witch-figure's voice to claim the territory of horror. To confront my dad's illness, I use the harsh voice of the witch-figure to focus on visceral detail and the abject: 'Grolching' (17); 'his stone-hard stool... manually extracted' (23). Here, it is through the humourless brutality of the witch-figure's voice that I am able to articulate anger at my dad's early death—for me, this space between the detachment of the narrator's voice and the brutal detail of the disease and its effect upon the body and self is a significant Gothic, liminal space. I think of it as a crack or crevasse: a deep space where the chaos of grief resides and rage threatens to surface.

Child

The Gothic witch-voice, then, is effective in articulating in brutal terms the rage that can come with grief after loss. In addition to anger, earlier I also established the cyclical, unrelenting nature of grief—that it does not always lead to recovery. Grief can be deeply embedded, ingrained—old, worn, yet still insistent. Like my mother and my dad, my lost child haunts the narrative, but I can manipulate the Gothic form to address creatively the grief resulting from this loss. There is difficulty here: there is no ghost-space to work with, nowhere for her to inhabit. She came prematurely, and I am not sure at this point how my creativity can deal with an attempt to reanimate the disappeared, the too-soon-born dead—for how can I? Like the opening of a fairy tale, she was, and in that

moment she was not. Yet there are elements of her story which need to be told, and if I can craft the narrative to do so, I may potentially come closer to facing the pain of her loss.

My creative intent turns to where fresh grief may be focused when there is no life to celebrate, no history to claim, where there is only remembered, so-called reality of the experience of loss in the culturally prescribed process of mourning. I use the detached, ironic witch-figure's voice and her reach across time to emphasise the inadequacy of a cultural system which seeks to impose order on the emotional chaos of grief. The thesis has already examined the way in which I construct the witch-figure's voice to capture the intensity of anger in grief. Now I want her voice to articulate not intensity but lack, deficiency. I therefore use the witch-figure's voice to foreground the irony that exists in the funeral practice which attempts to maintain some semblance of the living figure in the pre-burial body but which in effect objectifies the body as 'too waxen... for a real boy' (*Wyrd Magic*: 172) and 'Dolled' (*Ibid.*)⁸⁴. The reductive metaphor emphasises the body's shell as lifeless puppet, the ambiguous 'Dolled' a reference to the dressing or dolling-up of the corpse. Indeed, the witch-figure's ancient knowing permits her to comment with irony: 'Death: how they dress it up in these times.' (*Ibid.*). She also points to the meaningless ceremony of funeral rites when in fact 'How *unrequired*, what empty chrysalis the body is, when soul has flown!' (*Ibid.*). In contrast to the complex, chaotic grief the witch-figure articulates elsewhere with such intensity, here I create sufficient emotional space in her voice to express a different kind of anguish: the spare style—a brief summary only—emphasises the inadequacy of the 'Small white coffin, couple of hymns, prayer or two' (173). The brevity of expression emphasises the brevity of life, the loss of promise, the resultant pain. Emphasis is increased by the ellipsis and triplet, the throwaway 'prayer or two'. Furthermore, I turn the witch-figure's voice to focus the narrative once more on the existential question that, as I indicated earlier, underpins the novel: in the alliterative 'blank black beyond' (172) that her centuries-wide gaze spans, there is 'Nought at all' (*Ibid.*).

Conclusion

As a result of my deeper engagement with the Gothic, I can now return to the question posed by my research: how can the writer use creativity to face personal pain? I can now begin to answer

⁸⁴ So far as dolls are concerned, Freud (2003) cites Jentsch's contention that the uncanny exists if 'the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living' (141). The pre-burial body would certainly fall into this category.

that question more precisely. The witch-figure is a Gothic device whose harsh gaze I turn on personal grief and who creates space to ask questions of the past. She enables me to revisit moments of past pain and, against the complex model of grief articulated by her harsh and mocking mouth, at least comprehend, if not ameliorate. Indeed, I use the witch-figure narrator as a transgressive figure whose voice opens up liminal cracks or crevasses in the narrative where I can locate and articulate unresolved anger in grief. Elsewhere, I craft the witch-figure's voice as ironic, detached: her spare summary of cultural mourning procedure emphasises the inadequacy in dealing with the expression of grief following the loss of a child especially when, in the absence of a life lived, procedure is all that remains.

In *Wyrd Magic*, I thread memoir into the fictional narrative; characters from the past are resuscitated. Through the protective veil of the Gothic, I see again the complicated character I knew as my mother. I confront my dad's illness and early death, and the residual pain of grief. As a writer I am also able to use the Gothic as a distance frame to gain new perspective: by peopling the fictional narrative with the reanimated characters of my mother and dad, I glimpse, in the ghost-spaces they haunt inside the narrative, their other-stories which may lie outside the story I have written here. As Philip Larkin said, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad'. This may be true: 'half at one another's throats' my parents may have been, but as a writer I contend that my creative manipulation of the Gothic form results in developing some understanding of why. It is worth reiterating here the major impact that the Gothic has had in the PhD process: writing in this form has enabled me to move beyond restraint to find creative freedom. Having found that freedom, it is appropriate that the next chapter will focus more closely on the writing process involved in the crafting of the novel *Wyrd Magic*.

Part III: the writing process

Intent and the novel *Wyrd Magic*

In writing *Wyrd Magic*, my intent was to find a creative form which would allow me to articulate my personal model of grief. This was not my initial aim as I began the PhD process, however, and the thesis has already outlined my creative journey away from nature writing towards writing *Wyrd Magic*, and the way in which, drawing on research and personal experience, I was able to characterise grief not as a process but as a state of extreme and uncomfortable being.⁸⁵ The PhD journey I then undertook was to explore form sufficiently so that I could express grief as nonlinear, cyclical, unrelenting, filled with anger and despair. As I explored the PhD process of writing, research, reflection and evaluation, I learnt how I could articulate creatively this complex model for grief, and this chapter will examine different aspects of the writing process related to the novel *Wyrd Magic*: crafting the narrative voice; finding and manipulating form; sequence and structure and the role of characters.

Narrative voice

To begin, I want to examine the early developmental stages of my writing towards the PhD, which focused on finding and developing an appropriate narrative voice. My decision to construct the narrator as a witch-figure character, as outlined in earlier chapters, came later, but at first I experimented with my main protagonist, Barbara, writing her in the first person. What came out was a strong voice—a sense of an identity behind the narrative perhaps—but that identity did not feel like Barbara's. However, I was locked into the idea of writing someone else's story, not mine—I did not consider (and I find this surprising now) that mine was worth sharing. So I persevered, focusing on developing what I thought would be a strong narrative voice for Barbara. The following extract is an example of an early version of her voice. When Barbara's relationship with her husband Keith finishes, she drives him to his parents' home, and leaves him there:

'The snow is coming down, tyre tracks in whited lane.

⁸⁵ Denise Riley (2019) goes further, emphasising the lack of process and contending that grief can be characterised as a 'private non-time of pure stasis' (15).

'We'll talk,' Keith says, bending at the car window. The wind carries ice.

'I'm so sorry.'

I turn the car round. In the rearview mirror: the dark mass of my husband. Alone in the blank white, he lifts a hand.

At home, I lie in our vast bed. The snow makes the night ghost-lit...

I face the blank black.'

When I look back at this early example of my writing, I can see my creative impulse to be lyrical in the occasional alliteration with assonance⁸⁶ and I like the brevity of expression⁸⁷. I was searching for intensity—I wanted my writing somehow to be direct, to reach out and grab the reader by the throat. However, I found Barbara's voice too pedestrian; there was a sense of lack, but I did not know where to take this. A catalyst for change came when I joined the Master's module on Autofiction, and found myself writing the memory of my dad's illness and early death. When I wrote, the memory came with a rush, and it was as raw as if I was still in the room. The following extract is from my response:

'Dad's last Christmas... bed-bound and yellowed. I've seen that tired look: when words are too much effort in your sickening. Let's cheer him up a bit, go on, pull him a cracker, tell him a joke. What did Santa say to the smoker? Please don't smoke, it's bad for my elf! Twirl him in twinkling lights, shove a glass of sherry in his hand. That's better, now we're festive!'

The narrative voice is prosaic: 'go on, pull him a cracker'. It is fairly brutal, the dignified self of my dad reduced to third person pronoun. The loss of dignity is emphasised by the colloquial, dynamic verb 'shove'. I'm surprised that when I wrote this, I didn't see the anger boiling beneath the ironic humour in my writing. I recognise it now, and I feel, still, the rage at having a loved family member too soon stolen from my life.

In *Wyrd Magic*, the generically named Father of June's backstory is drawn in part from memories of my dad. I wrote the short extract above into the novel, and I can locate in it the beginnings of the more complex, angry, nonlinear model for grief that this thesis articulates. It explains my need to

⁸⁶ 'Blank black'

⁸⁷ 'The wind carries ice.'

find a different pathway from those linear, healing models of grief in women's nature writing I researched. Loss is complicated, unpredictable; this is something which, through the PhD process, I have come to understand. As I have stated, I also recognise that not everybody can claim they have recovered from loss; grief is nonlinear, cyclical, sometimes everlasting. Processing loss takes time, and the PhD process is one which has helped me understand that it can, in fact, take a life's time.

To return to the issue of narrative voice: when I wrote about my dad, the narrative voice was strong; I felt almost embarrassed by its ironic humour—as if I were exposed, somehow, showing myself lacking in proper feeling. And still, the search for intensity. Yet there was a growing sense that something was trying to break out in my writing. Instead of finding freedom, however, at this stage, as I explained earlier in the thesis, I became ever more concerned with grammatical, syntactical correctness. My creative work grew tighter, more restricted, to the point where it literally ended in tears.

Around this time, I read Lisa Goldman's (2012) *No Rules Handbook for Writers*, which proved to be a turning point in the PhD process. Goldman states, 'Your imagination is unruly' (16) and 'there are no rules to writing except those you make and break as you write' (15). These two quotations are now on sticky-notes on my office wall, and each time I feel my writing tighten up they remind me: once you know the conventions of writing, you can break them. Goldman's work at this pivotal moment in the PhD process played a significant part in my having the courage to let go creatively; I began to feel more courageous, handing the narrative to an omniscient character-narrator rather than Barbara, and permitting the new narrative voice to be forthright, ironic. I found I could challenge conventions such as the need to show rather than tell—in *Wyrd Magic*, I subvert this rule.⁸⁸ I use italicised emphasis unapologetically, turning it into a feature of the narrative voice.⁸⁹ The following extracts are from the final draft of the moment where Barbara's marriage ends, now narrated by the new, omniscient narrator.

'This wind is ice—see it flick at Keith as he heads across the yard to his parents' house. You turn the car. In the rear-view mirror: the dark mass of your husband. Alone in blank white, he lifts a hand' (75).

⁸⁸ 'You feel stupid for not arranging anywhere to stay. You feel worried as the light begins to fade and here you are, in the north. Oh, you feel mad; you've taken leave of your senses!' (*Wyrd Magic*: 80).

⁸⁹ 'This is what is known as a *turning point*' (143); 'just *look* at that long nose pinked with cold. Or *red* for danger' (149).

'At home, you lie in the vast bed. Yet rise, Barbara, lift the window; feel me, in the drift of flakes, ice-melt on your skin... catch the wink of my knowing eye in the dark spread of deadleaf under white... I wrote you out, Keith. Stand there if you will; let snowflakes settle about your shoulders as you swap your little case from hand to hand and wave into the dark. The car is long gone. All that remains is my wide smile, Cheshire Cat in the black' (76).

The omniscient narrator is fully present, the narrative voice becoming strong—there is a voice developing here which is lyrical, yet ironic. I found it much more satisfying than my earlier draft. The 'little case' reveals the mocking tone in the voice. I like the sudden shift in perspective: Keith waves not in the dark—we are not looking at him—but into the dark—where there is nothing. The 'wide smile, Cheshire Cat in the black', intensified by the assonance, is still a favourite moment with me. The impulse to write a metanarrative is evident in the narrator's direct address to Keith: 'I wrote you out'. This was an impulse which, through the PhD process, I was able to follow and which resulted in my first breakthrough in finding an appropriate form.

Finding and manipulating form

A breakthrough in terms of form came when I followed the compulsion to write a metanarrative and researched postmodernism. This supported my intent, which was to find an unrestrained form that I could manipulate to articulate my complex model of grief, and so make some sense of my perspective on the pain of loss. Since my own experiences like my dad's death were increasingly intruding upon the fictional world I was creating, it seemed right to create another, writerly kind of intrusion by drawing attention to the narrative itself as a construct—I guess at some level I wanted the reader to understand that behind the fictional construct lies real, felt experience—and for that experience to potentially resonate. I could also be playful in terms of postmodernism's referencing of popular culture. To emulate this, I inserted a variety of references in the novel, from literature⁹⁰, film⁹¹ and music.⁹² Later, as the thesis has explored, the impulse to use my writing to challenge somehow would become significant as I researched feminist theory as a platform of analysis to support the development of a more strident, empowered narrative voice. My engagement with

⁹⁰ 'The clock strikes thirteen.... sparks will fly in the bright cold' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 141).

⁹¹ 'bright flash of blade as the axe smashes through frail wood panels... *here's—*' (139.)

⁹² 'D'you think the curtain hides a Stairway to Heaven, you mourners?' (173).

postfeminism and Gothic theory would result in my establishing an empowered narrator—a complex witch-figure character—and the mode I was writing in as contemporary Gothic.

One way I could expose the artifice of the narrative was by manipulating time.⁹³ By doing so, I could manipulate the form of the novel to articulate creatively the nonlinear, cyclical nature as I understand it of grief. In fact, my engagement with postmodernism gave me sanction to be free of all temporal reality: through the different timelines I used, I was able to mirror my understanding of grief by positioning experience as cyclical, elliptical in orbit; I could repeat time as grief will constantly repeat. In the novel, June and Barbara's experiences of loss are replayed several times, as I will explain later. Similarly, Barbara's exit from the narrative replays. In addition, June's childhood story is related through flashbacks which do not progress chronologically but visit her childhood world at different moments, so the reader must construct her story from a series of fragments, a mosaic, in the way that I have found grief is reconstructed in particular memory fragments.

I also played with chronology when constructing June's character. I wanted to position her as culturally marginalised, with a family which would appear unworldly. She would then operate outside societal boundaries—early evidence, I think, of my developing interest in liminal, transgressive figures which was later to take shape in the form of the witch-figure narrator. To achieve this, I suspended June's family in the 1970s, using material from the time of my own childhood.⁹⁴ I structured the novel to thread elements of personal memoir through fiction. I felt no pressure to reveal myself by characterising or exposing my writing as memoir, but worked creatively to encode what I think of as my personal truths⁹⁵—or rather remembered nontruths—into June's fictional backstory, much like, as I indicated earlier, fairy tales have in the past begun: *There was, and there was not*. The result was a satisfying disjunct between the contemporary world of the novel and June's place within it: she must necessarily operate outside society's margins because she did not belong in its time.

⁹³ 'did I say you arrived at the end of summer?... I think—it should be late October' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 86); 'Hold, time! Sink, moon—put your face back below the hill' (167).

⁹⁴ 'televised laughter: the *Morecambe and Wise Show*, because yours, June, was a family that sure as hell never made it out of the Dark Ages' (178).

⁹⁵ As Terry Eagleton (2013) asserts: 'all objectivity is at root an interpretation' (17).

As the PhD process continued, I found increasing creative freedom in manipulating form within the novel. To engage with fairy tale was to draw on a longstanding interest in the form. I had always been impressed by the way that Angela Carter, in her collection of re-imagined fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), works with both fantasy and reality in the same moment. For example in her tale from the collection, *The Werewolf*, the fantastical narrative is framed by the realities of a harsh existence where for a peasant community, superstition is a means of survival. Carter's work resonates all the more for this sense of reality that permeates a tale of the fantastical and I wanted to explore this interesting fantasy/reality dynamic in my work. In *Wyrd Magic*, I have drawn the shop, Art Mayhem, as both real and fantastical setting. It is of the current moment, yet is a place where, like fairy tale, anything can happen, so the form is fitting also for the climax of *Sister and Brother* (132) which takes place in the shop, especially since the shop evokes a sense of the Gothic elements of passion, difference, mystery. Certainly with 'So many figures' (100) that 'lurk' (Ibid.) and its *Hand of Glory* (Ibid.) the shop evokes a sense of dark, Gothic past. In their tale, I look into June and Harry's history. I see the fragments of childhood such as 'trinkets, kitchen pieces' (141); the small things left by those no longer present like 'letters, ribbon bound' (133) and recognise that I am also looking into my own past. I think here I wanted to begin to explore the idea that memory is essentially our own fantasy, where we are the unreliable narrators of our stories. In *The Tale of Husband and Wife* (19), I turn the witch-figure's gaze mercilessly on the characters of Mother and Father but I am also aware that their fairy tale is very much drawn from memoir: remembered, so-called truths of my own and I can see how using the form of fairy tale became part of the process of becoming braver, admitting to my own self within the narrative. I engage with an ancient, traditional form to find my authentic self and voice in my writing.

The abrupt switch to fairy tale form within the frame of the novel draws attention to the stitching of the narrative and so carries a risk of disengaging the reader from the world of the novel I am building. The use of playscript carries a similar risk but it was interesting to explore the creative freedom using this form offered: switching to playscript allowed me to play on the page with conventions of stage directions and script, often using the witch-figure's voice to invoke humour. More significantly, my intent in using the form of playscript was to deliberately block development, for example in the character of Keith. Freeing myself creatively from the narrative requirement of

character development means that Keith remains static and is therefore unable to follow a character arc to lift him from the stereotypical. In this way, he is revealed only as superficial, boring; life with him is tedious and will remain so because his character is denied depth and development. Further, I am able to use the witch-figure to deny him his voice and taunt him: 'Quite a performance, while your tongue was nailed to the table' (70). Keith is permitted only the lines of a play; I deny the reader access to his inner consciousness. Later, I use the witch-figure to write him out of the narrative. I permit him an end to his story, though it is one which the witch-figure comments on only as 'It'll do' (189).

Earlier in the thesis, I describe the witch-figure's voice as one which is omniscient, ironic and which observes all. I came to acknowledge of course that in reality her voice is one which I was constructing and behind which, as writer, my own presence is obscured. As in these examples above, her observations of other characters will always therefore be moderated by, and therefore also limited by, her voice and perception. In fact, while the characterised omniscience of the witch-figure I use may be a way in which I became creatively braver, using playscript as a form and adding the limitations of her narrator's perception and voice means the risk increases that the reader may have difficulty with the way that both Keith and Harry's characters remain flat, stereotypical. Indeed, the reader may lose interest and become bored and this is something that I will need to consider when reworking the novel for publication; denied access to these characters' inner thoughts and emotions, will the reader simply not care? Keith and Harry are after all the witch-figure's 'puppets' (18); the risk is that they may be too wooden.

A further issue was the witch-figure's backstory, which my use of characterised omniscience created some difficulty with. As a witch-figure, Hedgewicche is drawn from the fantastical, yet as the thesis has explained, she evolved into rounded character. She therefore required a history. I took a risk, writing her as a young woman, Bethsaby, into her own tale: a backstory where I also constructed a character who tried to prevent her burning as a witch. However, in my writing of the tale of Bethsaby inevitably I shifted from characterised omniscience, where events and characters were filtered through the voice of the witch-figure, to true, author omniscience. While I approved of the story behind the Bethsaby/Hedgewicche witch-figure, this was a major disadvantage: the tragedy of her fate was too real. What had begun as a fantastical narrative was turned to the realistic tale of a man

who tried but failed to prevent the loss of woman he loved in a horrific burning. This backstory no longer fitted a narrative related in the mocking, ironic voice I had constructed for the witch-figure. While creating her backstory was a useful exercise in character construction, and it remains part of the hidden narrative of the witch-figure, the telling of it did not belong inside the novel and I wrote it out.

Sequence and Structure

To express the sense of freedom I found in writing a postmodern narrative my intent was to manipulate further the sequence and structure of the narrative. Joseph Frank (1978) contends that the 'specific *artistic* quality, may be defined as the disjunction between "story" and "plot", that is, the manner in which the writer manipulates and distorts causal-chronological sequence' (283).⁹⁶ So far as structure is concerned, John Gardner (1991) supports the Aristotelian model, contending that the novel will fall into a pattern of 'exposition, development, and denouement' (186). Kidder and Todd (2013) argue that 'The fundamental elements of a story's structure are proportion and order (40); in terms of sequence, they assert that 'writers should not *'mess with chronology unless you have a good reason'* (not my italics) (Ibid.). Yet to 'mess'—with both sequence and structure—is exactly what I wanted to do. Clearly, I would need to justify my messing beyond being vaguely postmodern.

When I had written early drafts exploring subversion and playfulness, the results had been an uncontrolled creative outpouring. Now I wanted to exert more control; my intention was to find a structure for the novel which would, like my manipulation of time, support the complex, nonlinear model of grief I was articulating. In addition, I had a feminist agenda: perhaps I could challenge the Aristotelian narrative model with a structure of my own. The Aristotelian model is described by Jane Alison (2019) as 'the dramatic arc: a situation arises, grows tense, reaches a peak, subsides' (6).⁹⁷ Alison describes the 'plotted arc' (15) as 'masculo-sexual' (6). Aristotle was of course referring to

⁹⁶ Frank draws the distinction between story and plot, defining story as that which 'refers to the events of a narrative arranged in the strict sequence of a causal-chronological order' (282-3) and plot as 'the structure of these same events as they actually appear in any particular work' (283).

⁹⁷ Alison points out that Aristotle's dramatic arc is mirrored in Gustav Freytag's well-known triangle or pyramid which demonstrates the 'introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, and catastrophe' (10); I like the idea that from a feminist perspective, my structure might challenge both these dominants.

tragedy, but Alison contends that although the phallic model may make sense for tragedy, 'fiction can be wildly *other*' (15).⁹⁸

Lisa Goldman's (2012) work also takes up a perspective on structure, firstly in terms of sequencing. She credits Horace with inventing the five-act play (68), referencing Horace's (c. 18BCE) assertion to 'Let a play which would be inquired after, and though seen, represented anew, be neither shorter nor longer than the fifth act'. In contrast, Goldman exhorts writers to 'Use the sequences of change that best express your story' (75). In addition, she prefers to consider structure as 'Emotional shape' (76) or 'internal dynamic' (77) and contends that 'any kind of structure or process is up for grabs to achieve your desired impact' (81). Goldman characterises story as 'a kind of living creature' (77).

Like Goldman, Alison prefers an organic model, locating structure in design and pattern in the natural world such as the wave, where the 'rise and fall traces a motion we know in heartbeats, breaking surf, the sun passing overhead' (6). These feminist perspectives appealed to me; I took the decision to exert control over my rather wild narrative by structuring the novel in a way that might challenge Aristotle's causal arc by developing a more complex, nonlinear model of my own. This would be another way in which I could articulate my response to the linear model of women's nature writing my initial research had revealed and it would support my complex model for grief. Whereas Alison and Goldman use organic models, however, I define the structure of *Wyrđ Magic* using an open-ended double helix. Alison characterises a helix as 'a spiraling narrative... winding downward... deep into the past... or... upward, around and around to a future' (143-4); however in the model I have developed, two separate plotlines begin, develop, move closer together. The two stories interweave, then separate once more towards the close of the novel. The stories of Barbara and June begin in different times, different places, at the edge of two different seas. Barbara stands on a cliff top in southwest Cornwall, about to meet her future husband. She will become pregnant with her son. June's story is played differently: at the start of the novel, she sits on a Chesterfield sofa in a bric-a-brac shop in the coastal town of Whitby, North Yorkshire, and begins to remember. Like Barbara, June will have a son, and it is at the point where both women become pregnant that their plotlines begin to spiral towards each other. It is not until Barbara travels to Whitby and meets June that the two stories fully interweave. Only later in the novel does June's backstory catch up with the present; her plotline follows an elliptical orbit within the spirals of the helix. This suits my intent,

⁹⁸ Also, as Terry Eagleton (2013) notes: 'The novel is an anarchic genre, since its rule is not to have rules' (2).

because June's backstory repeatedly loops to reveal a dysfunctional family turned, as I explained earlier, in Gothic terms uncanny and suspended in time. While I recognise the dangers of a complicated structure in losing the reader,⁹⁹ the elliptical orbit June's story follows is a measure of my taking control of structure, and I like the way this echoes the Gothic intrusion of past upon present that I explored earlier in the thesis. To follow the open-ended double helix model: towards the close of the novel, Barbara and June's story strands separate. June remains in the present moment, while Barbara heads to an unknown future.

Through the witch-figure narrator I control the narrative, manipulating time to replay moments of drama and alter the outcome. The witch-figure's conjuring of the storm and its tragic result is one such moment: not satisfied with the outcome and seeing her own cruelty, she replays the moment. Her urge to go back in time and make things right is one which we find in grief; as Denise Riley (2019) points out: the "what ifs"... torment those in the aftermath of a sudden death. They position you imaginatively before it happened, so that now you're in a position to have prevented it' (48-9). Both the fragmented, looping time lines of June's backstory and the witch-figure's constant referencing of and meddling with temporality articulate the way in which we replay past trauma. We are robbed of our own story when events don't play out as they should—or at any rate, when our own forward narrative is rewritten often in the cruelest of ways.

In addition to the creative freedom that I found in writing a postmodern narrative, my decision to write in the Gothic mode was a pivotal moment in the PhD process. The Gothic was a form I could explore more fully to truly break free from my earlier, restrained style and find proper expression for my complex model of grief. As I explained earlier, it was as a result of my research into Gothic theory that I took the decision to gift the narrative voice to a character: the overt, controlling witch-figure narrator, Hedgewicche, and I will now explore the role of the Gothic witch-figure character in relation to the other characters of the novel and in relation to myself as writer.

The witch, the women and the writer

⁹⁹ Kidder & Todd (2013) pose the question: 'Do you want to tell parts of your story out of sequence in order to be arty, just to show off? (41). I don't mean to 'show off' but from a feminist perspective I want the narrative structure to challenge the patriarchal model.

In the novel, I construct the witch-figure's role as one which holds a mirror up to the other characters, Barbara/Claudra and June. It is worth noting here that, in a sense, the Gothic reincarnation both women experience—Barbara's reinvention in the novel as Claudra (a tongue-in-cheek reworking of the name Dracula), and June's remaking as mystic fortune teller, Juno—reflect my feminist urge to break out from the interiority to which in the past institutionalised patriarchy has confined women, into something that is, to evoke the language of female empowerment I identified earlier in Margaret Atwood's work, larger than, greater than, empowered by. The fierce glare of the witch-figure is therefore a feminist one which illuminates Barbara's reluctance to take hold of the reins of her own life. Barbara's demand to Keith that she has a child in exchange for his self-build project is a mistake. It is a compromise in which she loses out: although she will have the child she desires, she in fact forfeits her own wish for self-fulfilment in exchange for maintaining the patriarchy and her position within it. As the novel progresses, the devil-making witch-figure narrator prods and pokes Barbara to the point where she is forced to take control; it is entirely right that her future, which lies outside the perimeter of the novel, is one where she will be able to define her own role.¹⁰⁰

June is the fictional product of my engagement with Gothic theory and my love of fairy tale. I position her as member of a dysfunctional family and use the playful narrator to cast June as wicked witch, stepmother, wolf and Grandma all in one. Treated later with a degree of sympathy by Hedgewicche, June operates, as I have indicated, in liminal spaces on the periphery of what are considered societal norms. Her character progression is to come to understand the nature of unconditional love, with its potential to bring pain. June's pathway beyond the novel's end is in direct opposition to Barbara's: she demonstrates a model of self-fulfilment in the choice to give and receive love, even if that love exists outside the norms imprinted on us culturally. She is also the vehicle through which I am able to explore the existential question that postmodernist theory asks: where is the point in life? Grief makes us cry out: where is the reason in all this? In the witch-figure's involvement with June; in the arbitrary choice the witch-figure then makes between the fate of the two young boys in the novel and in the unreasonable death of June's son, *Wyrđ Magic* demonstrates the random nature of life and death. Indeed, the witch-figure's bald statement is the summation of the existential concerns that underpin the narrative: '*There is no logic*' (185).

¹⁰⁰ '*Very independent very on your way, if you don't mind me saying*' (189).

In order to demonstrate my complex model of grief, I craft the witch-figure as a central figure in the novel who turns a mirror to Barbara and June. In effect, however, she holds up a mirror to herself: it is Hedgewicche who grieves, who is angered across centuries, who demonstrates most effectively the unrelenting nature of grief. While she advises June to 'Patch up your heart, little by little' (*Wyrd Magic*: 176), in fact she already knows better: 'it will not ease. Not yet. Not ever' (174). To imbue the narrative with the sense of instability or inscrutability I am so drawn to in the Gothic, I construct her as oblique, never fully depicted beyond her Gothic self with 'socket eyes... teeth-chopped hairless skull' (182); she acknowledges that she is 'in grey-smoked air... half-drawn, of a ghost' (181). I hint at the witch-figure's original physical appearance in the first line of a tale which early in the novel opens with 'There was once a maid with golden curls' (6). The opening line is a motif, alluded to throughout the novel—but the tale goes no further; Hedgewicche's own backstory remains her secret.

As I wrote her into the novel, I was forced to ask: who is the witch-figure, really? Whose is the strident, empowered voice? Whose is the anger? I can see now that the construction of the witch-figure narrator constituted the beginning of my gradual admission that I existed inside the narrative I was writing. I think this is a significant thing I have learnt through the PhD process: the witch-figure's harsh glare is not just focused on Barbara and June: the mirror Hedgewicche holds also reflects myself in my characters. I recognise in Barbara aspects of my own unhappy life before I broke away to strive for self-fulfilment—in her I see my younger, more passive self. Through her, I acknowledge that to have a child is not, in the end, enough; there are other factors that may compel: the drive to use creativity to express a particular worldview. Does personal fulfilment lie in giving voice to the inner feminist? Is it in the unconditional love that June demonstrates? I am not sure I have the answer right now but the mirror Hedgewicche holds forces me to look at and question these elements in my reflected self.

I began my PhD journey with the intent to articulate through fiction a mother's loss—but the novel articulates my own grief after all. I recognise June's grief for her lost child as mine—Hedgewicche sits on my shoulder as we lead June through the cultural ritual of funeral and first grief. Yet in a Janus moment, Hedgewicche turns to face me, to lead me through the process; through her voice I find perspective, make some sense of personal pain. Of course I still wrote about my dad; of course I

could see June through the process of grieving over a lost child.¹⁰¹ These were my own ghosts, the dead from my past newly resurrected through my engagement with Gothic theory in a narrative of self-haunting. As Jane Alison (2019) contends: the writer can 'create powerful forward motion... inside your head as you construct sense' (17). My aim has been to create this sense of inner forward motion for the reader, as I engage them not only with my small family of characters but with my wish to reach out from personal experience towards the social and political spheres of others, where I hope my complex model of grief will resonate.

A similar sense of this inner forward motion is created by the resurrection of aspects of my mother inside the constructed Mother-character. The Gothic witch-figure's unflinching gaze acts as a frame through which I see my mother, and here again I have been able to gain some adult perspective—in fact I find it fascinating that my perspective on my parents has been that of a child but now that I see them again as an adult, new understanding comes. The witch-figure states: 'Let me conjure her for you' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 23). The woman that I bring to the page is in 'buttoned cardigan. Beneath, tights pulled up to her armpits' (*Ibid.*). The tightly buttoned cardigan, the tights, are part of the fictional construct of the character of Mother—but these features allow me to gain some understanding of the inhibitions that might have existed behind the face my own mother presented and which do not escape the witch-figure's gimlet eye: as I have already noted, Mother is—my mother was—shamed by her second pregnancy. This resurrection of the emotional difficulties my mother may have experienced is a different kind of haunting; the insight I gain into her neuroses has taken me by surprise and to open up these complex issues risks damage. Here, however, I can use the witch-figure's voice not to intensify the emotion of grief but to reduce the intensity of emotion when addressing the mother/daughter relationship. I note here that in the thesis, I use the formal term *Mother*—yet I feel able to use the more informal *Dad*. I see the warmth in the way I address my dad and I recognise more complexity here—there are difficulties in these relationships.

Conclusion

To close, I return to the matter of the witch-figure's identity. Earlier in the PhD process, I was too afraid to ask of myself: who is this monster, the witch-figure who speaks in such visceral terms of her 'arterial throb vein network revealed' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 16)? She says to Barbara: 'I *narrate* you'

¹⁰¹ 'This is the truth of it: living, running child, cremulated to fine dust. How do we bear it?' (*Wyrđ Magic*: 174).

(6)—yet I am the writer who narrates the witch-figure; the monstrous woman who sits inside me is my own self. I acknowledge the novel *Wyrđ Magic* as a product of the combined voices of the witch-figure and/in myself: I know now that Hedgewicche's 'innards out pain' (16) is my pain; the PhD process is one which has allowed me to recognise that loss remains; it is permanent; it will always articulate itself in some way in my writing, and I think I am still processing this.

Epilogue

The origins for this thesis lie in the question I had begun to ask myself: how can I use creative writing to deal with the pain of loss? The PhD process then, as it began, was the beginning of a critical and evaluative journey to explore the form of the novel as a satisfactory mode through which I could articulate my understanding of grief. Since that understanding is predominantly based on my own experience, it was therefore also my own creative journey to try and make some sense of my past; I had a personal model of grief to explore that I did not find mirrored in the examples of women's writing I was immersed in during the early stages of my research.

Looking back over the PhD process, I can see that I was, after all, hiding: my fear of personal exposure was a barrier to true creative freedom. When I eventually admitted to myself within the narrative, this was a learning point: from here, my priority became to find a way to utilise my creative freedom to articulate my model of grief effectively. I also needed to turn my personal experience outwards—or else why write? This PhD journey has not been about personal therapy—if I wanted to write only for myself I could fill the pages of a diary. There is something more here: a desire to find my authentic writer's voice to share the raw emotion of grief exposed by my personal journey. I want my writing to engage with others, both in their private sphere and also within the social contexts of discussion, debate. I am therefore using creative writing to express my specific model of grief, and to ask: is this model like yours—do you understand me?

I established my model of grief as nonlinear, cyclical, unrelenting, a chaotic emotional mix involving anger, sadness, despair. The construction of a strident, extraordinary narrative voice with the freedom to articulate this complex model of grief became the driving force of the creative project. While I recognise that there is a much more widely developed field of critical research in both postmodernist and feminist theory, for my purposes these were part of my journey into memory. In fact they became stepping stones which enabled me to move on and find true creative freedom when exploring Gothic theory and contemporary Gothic novels as a new field of research. The Gothic underpinned my development of the narrative voice into the fully established, wild and rebellious witch-figure narrator, Hedgewicche. Further, study of the Gothic became a significant focus of my PhD journey where I finally found the confidence to let go of creative repression and articulate my complex model of grief effectively and with freedom. It became the vehicle through which I could take emotional risks—become braver in exposing my vulnerability within the

narrative—and so reach some understanding of my own unhealed pain. Through the protective veil of the Gothic, I have been able to look again at my past losses. Jacques Derrida (2001) contends that when we remember those we have lost, 'What is only *in us* seems to be reducible to images... *visible* scenes that are no longer anything but *images*' (159) (his italics)—yet I'm not so sure, since the rush of feeling that comes with those remembered images is an intrinsic part of the state of mourning. Otherwise, what is grief? It is the sudden rush of emotion I experienced when I wrote about my dad dying; it is the tug of pain that always comes with the remembered image of my dead child; it is the more difficult feeling state that comes with remembering my mother. My complex model for grief holds true: the pain of grief does not disperse; time does not heal all. Personal grief becomes a lifelong secret, held close. But I've learnt that I can reveal it without personal damage: the world shakes but remains.

Through my engagement with the Gothic, I have been able to channel the energy from the anger that is present in grief into creative freedom and risk-taking. I have also been able to share other secrets, past difficulties; as I have explained, *Wyrd Magic* is a narrative of self-haunting where my vulnerable self is exposed. In the novel, my past is turned uncanny, and from these uncanny moments of memoir difficult family relationships resurface. Allison Williams (2018) contends that in writing memoir, 'blowing up our own privacy by sharing the thing we swore we'd never share reaches an audience more viscerally than carefully dispensing the truth'. Yet at the same time she asks, 'How do you get past the shame of sharing dark secrets?' These 'dark secrets' of familial difficulties surface from memory—yet memory is fluid, unreliable. The creative process thus becomes one of blurring the boundaries between authenticity and invention. In *Wyrd Magic* I resuscitate the dead figures of my mother and father, threading their remembered selves into a fictional narrative. I construct semi-fictional places for the ghosts of my parents to haunt: houses, rooms which once were—still are—mine in memory only. In this way I turn the threshold between remembered, so-called truth and fiction to transgressive space where the Gothic acts as, if you like, a distancing mechanism which enables the writer to step away, gain perspective. The result is a different kind of haunting: a renegotiation with the already dead.

The past—and characters from it—can only be constructed from memory, and in this way interiorized (Derrida, 2001: 159). The relationship between myself and my remembered parents is therefore private: since they are no longer here, they exist only within me. I am left with the pain of

their loss to deal with, but I am the gatekeeper; I decide which elements to share. It is only through sharing, however, that I am able to begin to reassess my relationship in particular with my mother, and this comes as a result of my creative engagement with the Gothic as distance frame. I repeat my earlier point, however: this journey has not been about therapy but is an attempt to demonstrate how creativity can be used to make some sense of past pain. It is also about my creative desire to reach out to others—indeed, as Wolfgang Iser (1974) asserts: 'in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also... the actions involved in responding to that text' (274). The experience of reading is one where the narrative may resonate, and my hope is that, as I have stated, the relationship between the reader and *Wyrd Magic* could similarly become one of personal connection.

This thesis is, of course, but one moment captured: a snapshot of where I am in terms of my development as a writer. Even so, I see how my PhD journey moves forward in that it has enabled me to explore personal grief using the Gothic in a unique way: through the frame it provides, I have reconnected with and examined the complex nature of my grief, acknowledging my pain both as mother and child, where there is one kind of grief, and another, both caught up in the same self. I have re-engaged with characters constituted from memory. Further, the Gothic has become a frame through which I have begun to reassess personal relationships. This is a powerful moment. While I am conscious that the creative dynamic between remembered past and fictional construct the thesis explores is tentative, going forward I now have the courage to explore personal relationships further as a writer. In particular, the relationship between myself and my mother deserves further creative exploration. In *Wyrd Magic*, I depict her as one step away from the monstrous and I could push this boundary further. I think here about the witch-figure in the novel, *Hedgewicche*, in whose voice I discovered my own. If I construct a fully monstrous mother-figure what will I find? Where am I in my mother—where is she in me? Right now I cannot answer this, but I am able to say that there is now no fear of personal exposure, and this comes as a result of the PhD journey. As a writer, for this reason more than any other, I am glad to have completed that journey.

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