



MONASH University

Ecdysis: Rewriting the Victorian Madwoman

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BA (Hons)

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Abstract

My thesis is a response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (1892), and the streams of feminist criticism and literature incited by their representations of madness and Otherness. The first section, my creative component, is a novella that draws from the narratives and thematic concerns of these two texts, while also queering them into a lesbian narrative set in 1950s high country Victoria, Australia. My narrative follows Grace, a nurse recently discharged from a Melbourne hospital, who comes to a farm in southern alpine Victoria to care for Vera, a drover's wife recently released from Mayday Hills Lunatic Asylum following a suicide attempt. The two women live and work together, forming a close friendship that develops into a romantic relationship. However, Grace quickly grows conflicted over the nature of their relationship, questioning her own identity and sanity, while the threat of the drover's inevitable return is ever present.

The second section is an exegesis of my novella, which also explores two twentieth century novels which, for very different reasons, have been read as reworkings of the Victorian texts upon which my novella is also based: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Kate Jennings' *Snake* (1996). Drawing from feminist social constructionist readings of madness and feminist disability studies of mental illness, I observe how Rhys and Jennings expose the oppressive structures that dictate what is 'mad' or Other, while demonstrating how such systematic oppression can also generate real mental illness through trauma. Drawing from Rhys and Jennings, I demonstrate how I create my own queer revision of the Madwoman figure, in my own exploration of madness and mental illness through internalised homophobia.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Date:7/8/2020.....

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Ecdysis

A novella by Chloe Beatrice Riley

Ecdysis

/ˈɛkdɪsɪs/ /ɛkˈdʌɪsɪs/ **noun**

The process of shedding the old skin (in reptiles) or casting off the outer cuticle (in insects and other arthropods).¹

¹ Lexico online, s.v. ‘Ecdysis,’ accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/ecdysis>.

It was still hot. My uniform clung stiffly to my body and I could feel sweat building beneath my arms and across my brow. The sun was long gone, but the heat remained trapped, unbeaten by the ceiling fans at Mansfield station. I had taken my cap off on the train, but my curls had now dropped, and my hair fell unevenly across my face. I wished I had come up earlier; spent the night in town then made my way this morning. I had telephoned at Spencer Street Station, explaining through the crackling line my delay. But now, as I looked out at the darkening town, I felt a prickling unease as I tried to hold myself together.

It will be fine, I lied to myself. It had all happened so fast. I had never lived with a patient before. The property was far too remote for a day nurse, so I was required to stay the full month. A farm, hidden deep in the bush, somewhere east of Merrijig. My patient, a Mrs Vera Mason, thirty-two, discharged on trial leave two months ago from Mayday Hills Lunatic Asylum. Attempted suicide one year ago, one month following the birth of her first child. Puerperal Insanity was the official diagnosis. I had worked with postpartum patients. Many of them. But Mrs Vera Mason sounded nothing like the women I worked with in Melbourne. Considering my lack of experience with psychiatric patients, I wondered why, of all placements, I had been given this one? But I suspected very few people would be willing to travel so far and stay a full month. And right now, I wanted nothing more than to be as far away from Melbourne as possible.

My driver gave a muted grunt as he shifted gears, the ute clunking and groaning as we tumbled further into the dark. I remembered my time in Katherine, up north during the war. But the red dirt and thick boabs of the outback were not the high country. I stared through the windscreen at the ghostly white trunks that lit up in the headlights before vanishing into the black as we passed them. I suddenly recalled all the stories I had heard of Purgatory as a

child. Sister Michael used to describe it a lot, the place where sinners go to repent before they may go to heaven. I hadn't set foot in a church in years, but I still thought of Sister Michael, especially when I was overcome with bitterness. As a child, she warned me about my bitterness and made me go to confession for it. 'Happiness is a choice, Grace,' she would say. I tried hard to remind myself of that. But after fifteen years since leaving her care, I suspected I wasn't capable of the kind of happiness she described.

The scent of burning firewood caught my nostrils. I looked through the windscreen as the silhouette of a farmhouse emerged, its porch lights glowing in the dark. As the headlights moved closer, I could make out the structure of the front veranda, the figure of a tall woman standing on the front step, and a small cat moving about at her ankles. Its brilliant ginger fur glowed under the ute's headlights as we turned in the driveway, the gravel crackling beneath the tires. I wiped my eyes, turning my face to the passenger window, praying my driver hadn't heard me crying. I pressed my forehead to the glass, feeling it cool against my burning face. Here I was. Purgatory. Or, as I would tell future employers, my 'working holiday'.

The driver killed the engine and got out, his boots crunching against the gravel as he approached the woman on the step. He gave her a few words, before heading around the side of the house, presumably in the direction of the dunny. I pulled the handle of my door and slipped out, dust kicking up onto my shoes. The air was cool. We were much higher up than I realised.

The woman came forward, pulling a dressing gown around herself, the cat following closely at her heels.

'Trains alright in the end?'

She spoke with a broad accent, like most country women. I nodded silently. She jerked her head towards where my driver had gone.

'Dunny's that way.'

Her name was Ruth. She was a housekeeper of sorts, had known Mason since he was a boy, knew his parents too, all drovers. 'Gives the pastures a break,' she explained, as she described the droving process, 'prepares them for the winter.' She said that the drove had begun earlier this year and how Mason had been gone since his wife's release. 'The Snowy Scheme up north's bugged everything. Everyone's moving their livestock south. We haven't changed the routes in years, not since the war.' She told me how Mason had served, like many of the men in town. Enlisted in '42 and shipped off for New Guinea. Those that made it home all brought women with them. City girls, mostly. According to Ruth, Mrs Mason was from 'such lot'. A wealthy Melbourne family. She had grown up in Camberwell, gone to school in Kew. Her parents financed much of her treatment, but they seldom saw their daughter.

Ruth told me all of this in her raspy voice as she prepared tea in a fragile china set. She brought it over to the table with an old shortbread tin containing a dry lemon cake. Of every room in the house, that kitchen still sticks out in my mind even now. The whole house was odd and felt somewhat out of time. There were many relics of its long history, different periods all layered on top of each other. The floor plan was original, I suspected from colonial days. The rendering looked original as well, although it bore deep cracks running up the walls up into the ceiling. The kitchen had been fitted with a linoleum floor and cream wallpaper with printed flowers that looked twenties. An old wash copper sat in the corner, beside an electric iron and there was a large wooden icebox that had been transformed into a cupboard for crockery. It had been replaced by an actual refrigerator, that stuck out with its round edges and crisp handles.

The cat crawled under the table, brushing our legs with his curling tail. I lowered my hand beneath the table, reaching to stroke his ears as he purred against my palm. When I

asked his name Ruth shook her head, saying he was a stray they found. They first spotted him a couple of years ago by the shed and guessed he had been wandering the bush for some time. He was catching mice, that often snuck into the grain sacks for the horses, and it was Mrs Mason — Vera, as Ruth called her — who began leaving a saucer of milk on the back doorstep.

Referring to Mrs Mason as ‘Vera’ stuck out for me. I had been taught to refer to patients only by surname. Ruth told me how she was practically running the whole household since ‘Vera’s accident’ as she called it. We went through the patient’s meal plan, sleeping patterns. I asked about more specific instructions, what activities? Light domestic work had been recommended, ‘but she spends all her time drawing.’ She said it in a tone of annoyance that implied there were far more useful things for a country wife to be doing.

Walks on the property were allowed. Gentle exercise to stimulate the nerves, but not over excite them. ‘Provided she’s supervised,’ Ruth insisted. ‘Constantly supervised.’ She said those words a lot ‘constantly supervised’. It seemed odd, a patient on trial leave requiring so much surveillance. But then, it was peculiar her needing a live-in nurse now, two months after her initial release. I asked if she thought Mrs Mason... *Vera* at risk. Ruth didn’t think so.

‘I haven’t mentioned the baby, yet,’ she said, her voice lowering. ‘I still don’t think she’s ready.’

‘Has she not seen her child since she was released?’

When I said this, her nose scrunched in confusion. But then, her eyes widened.

‘Oh goodness!’ she cried. ‘Oh no, the poor thing didn’t survive. No, he was born dead. That’s what set her off I reckon.’

I sat in silence, wondering how on earth I had not been informed of something this vital. Before I could push the matter further, Ruth began to speak again about the annual

drove. My thoughts began to drift, undisturbed except for the occasional touch of the cat, rubbing its chin against the tip of my shoe.

I remember the first time I saw a stillborn baby. I am very acquainted with death. After the war, death became something rather commonplace, ordinary. It is birth, life, that has always sat more strangely with me. Perhaps because I know almost nothing about the circumstances of my own birth. Even the *way* life is made has always seemed rather queer to me. But when I saw the corpse of that baby, it felt different. It wasn't even like the other child deaths I'd seen. Normally, for death to occur, there must first be life. But somehow, this child got it backwards. It died before it was born.

The mother was also different. She wasn't my first female patient, but she was the first woman I helped with a specifically women's condition. I wasn't there for the birth — I didn't train as a midwife. But I was instructed to go and check on her, while the midwives were occupied with other patients. When I found her, she was so still, her skin so pale, I was frightened for a moment that she too had died. But then I saw the rise and fall of her chest and I realised, in her distress, she had finally grown tired and fallen asleep. When she woke up, she refused to speak, even her husband. And as I watched her leave the hospital, without that child in her arms, it was almost as if a part of herself had died.

I thought of that woman as Ruth led me through the house to my bedroom, where I would live for the next month. It was positioned right next to my patient's, whom I would meet in the morning. The room was very narrow. I suspected it was a sewing room, or a nursery. I quickly prepared myself to sleep, slipping out of my uniform and throwing it over the chair besides the wardrobe. I pulled on my nightie before climbing beneath the stiff sheets.

But it was too quiet. I couldn't clear my thoughts the way I usually did by listening to the familiar white noise of the hospital break room, or the rattle of a tram outside my room in Carlton. And so, quite soon, my own voice began to run through my head, as that same bitterness I had brought with me from Melbourne overcame me. What would become of this? Where would I go once my time was up? How much longer could I keep my uniform?

I sat up in frustration, rubbing my face. I couldn't sleep. I needed the lav. I slipped out of bed, pulling on my dressing gown, before reaching into my purse for my lighter and pouch. The dunny was right at the edge of the bush, down behind the shed, and I tiptoed through the house and out the back door.

That was a sensation I had not felt for a long time. That crisp scent that struck my face as I stepped outside, of wet eucalyptus. I closed my eyes as a light wind stung my cheek. I had forgotten what fresh air, *really* fresh air, felt like. The sky was not so dark anymore. In fact, it had turned a deep purple, and the stars were starting to disappear behind the first breaks of the morning sun. While the front of the house appeared to be nestled deep within the bush, behind it I could now make out a whole hillside of grass, divided into uneven rectangles by worn, wooden fences. The bottom of the hillside met a towering line of trees. Monstrously tall trees, that I couldn't see beyond. It was like a small oasis, hidden deep within the heart of the bush.

The dunny was concealed behind the shed. The wooden door creaked as I entered, my lighter open in hand, hovering over the cigarette between my teeth. It was a trick I learnt during the war. In Katherine, all the girls took cigarettes to the WCs, even those who weren't inclined to smoke. The conditions were revolting to say the least; the humidity didn't help. Burning tobacco never quite got rid of the stench, but it did enough to distract you from it. It also helped keep at bay the spiders that would flee from the smoke. I only ever smoked in the

dark. The burning tip of the cigarette was never bright enough to illuminate anything around you, but its glow was oddly comforting, like a dull candle.

The orphanage where I grew up barely had any light. We had electricity, but it was sparse. Every year, during Lent, the nuns would shut off the generator and we were forced to survive those long Autumn nights without light. It was toughest for the younger girls who were still afraid of the dark. I was no different, and when I was about six, I was so cold and frightened, my crying woke the girl in the bed next to me. I expected her to tell me off, but instead she let me climb into bed with her. I remembered the way she drew the blanket around us, the way she rubbed my arms to soothe me back to sleep. I felt a lightness, a quickening through my heart. It was, I think, the first act of kindness someone ever showed me. Her name was Mary Crawford, and I still think of her often.

I felt the prickle of my bitterness again, but I bit my tongue. I stood outside the dunny, finishing my cigarette, looking up at the house. The sky had grown even lighter and I could see it more clearly now. I followed it with my eye, tracing the length of its single storey to the far end, where a window was shadowed beneath the low-hanging branches of a towering gum. The window that I knew belonged to my patient's room. One month, I told myself. You must keep a hold of yourself.

A kookaburra laughed, its voice jiggling between the trees. Suddenly, the window lit up, and I watched as a faint silhouette began to move in the room. She was awake. My patient, whom I would meet in a matter of hours. I watched the figure in the window, her shadow flickering against the white curtains. It was then that I was struck with a wicked fantasy as I hoped, for a moment, that she would be *properly* mad. Like a foul creature from a romantic novel, a genuine lunatic. Perhaps then, I could return to Melbourne a different person. Maybe then I would remember what it was that had made me want to be a nurse. The figure leant over, and the light went out again, the house falling back into darkness. Or

perhaps, I thought suddenly, she might even be a cure for my own bitterness. Maybe her madness might remind me what it meant to be sane.

She was, of course, none of these things. She looked younger than I expected, although she was my senior by a couple of years. She was mildly untidy. Her thick blonde hair, which I could tell once sported a fashionable do, had now outgrown past her shoulders. Her clothes also gaped on her thinning figure. I recalled Ruth mentioning she had problems with appetite. But it was her face that captured me, almost immediately, as it was furthest from the image conjured by my cruel imagination. Her features were striking. Her eyes, which were a piercing blue, bore a sharp, critical air, that was both captivating and unsettling.

She was very pretty. It came as quite a shock to me, as I had not expected it. But she was undeniably a very attractive woman. I stood before her awkwardly holding her tray of breakfast as Ruth introduced me. She didn't stand when I came in and, when I politely greeted her, she made no answer. Shooting me an awkward glance, Ruth gave us a few words before taking her leave.

I began to take in the room and was quickly struck by the strangeness of it. Like mine, it was clearly trying to be a great many things at once. It *was* a bedroom, for it was fitted with a bed, bedside table, and a tall dresser (with no mirror, I noticed). But there was also a round wooden table in the middle of the room, mounted high with pages of drawings, held down by old jam jars filled with pencils. The weatherboard walls were painted white, I guessed to allow the sun to illuminate the room, and they were lined with several frames displaying pressed flowers. But it was the mantelpiece, above an old fireplace, that caught my eye. Its timber surface displayed a curious collection of bush relics. Flat sheets of stringy bark, a crusty shell that looked like a moth cocoon, and a cluster of flowers of various species, none

of which I recognised. The whole space bore a conflicted, uncertain identity as a bedroom, an artist's studio, and a gallery for an amateur botanist's private collection.

I looked back at my patient, who had not moved from the edge of her bed. Her eyes, I noticed, were fixed on my uniform.

'You're not from Mayday Hills.'

Her voice was higher, more youthful than I expected. It seemed to echo in the small space. I replied that I was not. When she made no further comment, I felt the familiar prickle of an uncomfortable silence.

'My name is Grace,' I tried.

'Ruth said.'

I thought for a moment, then tried again.

'What may I call you? I've always called my patients by surname, but Ruth said I might call you Vera.'

'Call me what you like, it makes little difference.'

She said it with an air of tiredness. I got the impression that she wasn't trying to be rude, but that she also didn't care if she came across as such. I realised I was still holding her breakfast tray and moved towards the table. Piling her drawings to one side, I set her a place, removing the plate and teacup, lining them up carefully. As I turned again to her, I noticed her watching me. To my surprise, the corner of her lips twitched into a curious smile.

'You're left-handed.'

The remark was unprompted, and I was startled by it.

'I write with my right hand,' I said, a little defensively.

'But you do almost everything else with your left.'

I looked down at my hands, only just realising that I was still holding the knife with my left hand. I placed it beside the fork on the table, feeling strangely exposed.

‘You were punished for it, weren’t you?’ she asked, her voice lighter.

‘I was corrected,’ I told her. ‘That’s what they called it.’

It was a truth I had long forgotten, or perhaps I had chosen to bury it deep inside me. But the endless injuries, the cuts and bruises, came back to me in a flash, and I felt the nerves in my hand begin to tingle, as though waking from a deep sleep. I remembered how Mary Crawford used to sit with me. How she wrapped my hand with the hem of her skirt and kissed it better, as mothers do to their children. When it happened one too many times, she reached into her drawer and pulled out one of her socks. She told me to wear it over my hand in class, to discourage me from using it. The nuns wouldn’t object, she said. Not once they saw me writing properly.

My patient was still watching me. She lifted her eyes and said, quite seriously. ‘Why don’t you write with your left hand?’

To my surprise, it angered me, and before I could stop myself, I asked her a little harshly, what on earth would be the point of that? I looked at her, just as she tilted her head, raising one of her slender eyebrows. She shrugged indifferently, saying that I might find it more natural.

I masked my annoyance as I quickly tried to reassert my professionalism. I glanced at the pressed flowers on the wall and asked her about them. But her voice grew cold again as she said they simply interested her. I glanced at the drawings on the table and, feeling the lapse in our interaction, I asked her more politely, if I might look at them. She shrugged as I reached across the table, lifting one of the jam jars, and drawing the pages towards myself.

Her style was strangely familiar. It looked an awful lot like the anatomical illustrations I found in my medical books. She had even labelled each drawing like a scientific illustration, not a portrait. But the way she captured each subject was nothing like the images I usually studied. Her drawings of flowers stuck out for me. They looked like

plants, but they felt animated, like the insects and animals she drew. At a glance, I'm not sure I could have noted the difference between plant and insect, insect and animal.

I reached the bottom of the pile, taking the last drawing in my hands. I concluded that it was a bush, although its leaves were so small, it bore a resemblance with the soft fur of a mammal. But then I saw the round bulbs that crawled through blanket of leaves like pearls. They were berries, little berries peeking from beneath the cluster of leaves. Their half-hiddenness gave them a secretive, dangerous air.

I read the description in the bottom corner. *Carpet Heath*.

'Are they poisonous?'

It was a blind assumption, but I said it hoping to spark her interest again. Instead she merely glanced at the drawing and replied, with a stiff air, 'Actually, they taste a little like apples.'

Feeling her coldness again, I placed the drawing back on the table.

'If I've offended you, I'm sorry,' I began.

'It's not you,' she said, her tone softening. 'I've had doctors prodding me like a rag doll. I'm sick of it all.'

'Well you're not in hospital anymore,' I reminded her quickly. 'You're home now. And frankly, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to either. You can press flowers, draw, go for a walk, do what you like. I'm mostly here to tell you what you're not allowed to do.'

'I know full well what I'm not allowed to do.' Her voice had changed. It was lower, and more pronounced. She gave me a cold look. 'I'm not going to do it again, if that's what they're thinking.'

'You wouldn't have been released if they thought you would.'

There was something about her manner that struck me. I was not offended, or shocked by what she said, rather there was a strange familiarity to it. Moving closer, I knelt beside her, lowering my voice. It was usually a performance I reserved for difficult patients. But as I spoke, the kindness I normally forced came with no struggle. I told her that I understood the past two months had been difficult for her. I told her that convalescence was the hardest part of treatment. And the longer I spoke, the more I felt the weight of my words, as the last remains of the cruel caricature I had conjured of her vanished. Her coldness didn't leave her, but her features softened, as though she had decided that I was not someone she needed to fight with.

Then, and I'm not sure what made me do it, I rose and, moving towards the table, sat down.

'I'll make you a deal,' I told her, pulling a blank sheet of paper towards me, and purposefully taking up one of her graphite pencils in my left hand. 'If you come eat something, I'll write for you, with my left hand.'

She looked at me, her brow raised.

'Why should that convince me?'

Her words were blunt, but there was a lightness in her voice. I smiled. 'I'm not sure.'

As I expected, she rose and moved towards the table, sitting down beside me. She looked glumly towards her plate.

'If you take one sip of that tea, I'll write my name.'

The corner of her lips twitched. 'You are peculiar.'

'I'm not from Mayday Hills.'

She stared down at the teacup, but then her eye turned to the blank page in front of us, the pencil trembling in my left hand. She placed her hand on the table, clenching her fingers into a fist. Very slowly, she pushed it along the wooden tabletop, her fingers slowly

extending, reaching for the teacup's little handle. I noticed the cuff of her blouse, how loosely it hung around her arm. With the pressure of the movement, her sleeve pulled back along her arm, exposing the inside of her forearm.

I saw it. The thin, white scar across her wrist. She was so pale, it seemed to sit on top of her skin, like a line of thread. I pushed aside my stirring thoughts as I watched her raise her fingers, tracing the ornate shape of the teacup's little handle. She clasped it firmly in her hand and, without missing a heartbeat, brought the cup to her lips, downing the whole thing. The teacup clapped against its saucer as she lowered it, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

'Your turn.'

It was like a twisted game of dare. As I looked down at the page, I felt my hand quiver and my fingers clench, as though they were still buried inside that old sock. But, as I forced my hand to move, guiding the pencil slowly across the page, I felt a warmth, an arousal, spreading from my fingers through my whole arm. As though my hand had been hibernating for all those years and had now finally awakened.

I lifted the pencil from the page, looking at my shaky, but familiar handwriting.

Grace Dunn.

'It's a nice name,' she said. 'Grace.'

I told her I wasn't even sure it was my name and explained how I grew up in an orphanage until I was fifteen. I watched her, expecting to be met with the usual look of sympathy that generally masked embarrassment. But instead, she spoke with an air of intrigue.

'You still go by Grace though?'

'It's the only name I know,' I explained. 'So, it's the name I give myself.'

She looked down at the page, then regarded me with a gentle smile.

'You may call me Vera,' she said. 'I didn't properly answer your question before.'

Her voice was soft, with a sincere kindness behind it. I looked at her, noticing a growing warmth in her eyes. It made me smile.

‘Thank you, Vera.’

I settled into my role far more quickly than I anticipated. I had been fearful that the sudden change of pace would upset me. But within just a few days, the high country air affected me, and I felt an unexpected ease. It was almost enough to make me forget my own bitterness. Vera's manner also quickly changed. That coldness she had initially greeted me with evaporated, as we slipped into a routine that came so effortlessly, it was strangely enjoyable. I performed my role of supervising her, studying her behaviour, but I quickly found myself noticing far more than I did in most of my patients. I had been taken aback by the way she had studied me that first morning. But I soon developed a kind of pleasure in watching her. I watched her draw, studying those curious plants in her room with her keen, critical eye. I had never taken pleasure from my job. The only thing I ever took was the professional kind of affirmation that came from hard work. But Vera was so different from any patient I'd had, from any woman I'd met for that matter, I was completely enthralled by her. Even the way she spoke was compelling, fascinating. The way her eyes lit up, the way her voice carried. Wistful and clever, but also at times curious and endearing, like a child.

I admit, at times, I almost forgot she was sick.

Vera was permitted walks on the property but, for two months, she had been practically house bound as Ruth was unable to accompany her. Knowing she had a keen interest in all kinds of wildlife, I offered to take her into the bushland that stood on the edge of the property. Ruth warned me to be wary of snakes — there were always plenty in the summer months — and when I told Vera, her face lit up.

I found Vera some old slacks in her drawer, and a leather belt to secure them when they wouldn't sit properly on her slender waist. Her old riding boots were lying untouched by the back door, and I watched her sit on the back step, pulling them over her woollen

stockings. As we crossed the lawn, heading down the gravel track, I soon felt my leather nursing shoes fill with stones. I wished I had kept my old boots from Katherine.

The track ran alongside the paddocks, and we followed the rotting wooden fence, heading for the tree line. The livestock, horses, were all gone. Not even the dogs had stayed behind, they were equally important on a drove. The only animals that remained were the chickens and the cat. It was eerie, passing each pasture filled with mounds of lush grass, blowing silently in the wind, but not a creature in sight.

We reached the edge of the paddocks, where the fence stopped, and the track disappeared between the thick ghostly trunks. I let Vera pass in front of me and I followed her hesitantly as I looked up at the high canopy. A vast green ceiling stretched above us, droplets of sunlight filtering between the rustling leaves. The house, the paddocks, all quickly disappeared behind the trees as we moved further inwards, the landscape crowding in, embracing us from all sides.

Vera was different here. She seemed to grow lighter, stepping easily over the thick roots and prickling ferns. I had a hard time navigating my way past the overgrown bushes and encroaching thorns. But Vera moved so quickly, so effortlessly, if she were allowed, I'm sure she would have broken into a run.

But suddenly, her pace began to slow, and I managed to catch up, coming closer behind her. She was staring at the ground just off the track, her eyes fixed on something under a large fern. I followed her gaze, looking beneath the broad, fanning leaves, when I saw it; lying in the soil, tangled into a large coil: the silvery remains of an old snakeskin.

I have always held a strong dislike for snakes. In Katherine, I was taught to treat snake bites long before any combat injury. Even when Darwin was bombed and the Japanese came, the outback itself remained an immediate threat, and snakes were at the forefront of

that. As I looked down at the crisp, dead skin lying in the soil, I felt a familiar wave of unease.

Vera however, showed no discomfort. In fact, as I watched her, she grew very still and calm. That lightness that had propelled her along the track returned, as she knelt down, the front of her slacks spoiling against the dirt. Leaning forward, she put her weight onto her knuckles, her thick blonde hair falling forward over her shoulders. Very carefully, she held out her palm, pushing her fingertips beneath the coil, cupping it in her hand.

I forced myself to watch, to look at the brittle skin resting on her dirtied palm as she stood up, her eyes wide with wonder.

‘It was a young one,’ she smiled, turning it over carefully in her hands. ‘You can tell; its body was quite thin.’

She held out her palm to show me, tracing the length of the skin with a delicate fingertip. I looked down at it, biting my lip to hide my discomfort. She asked if we might bring it back with us, so she might draw it. She didn’t need my permission, but I allowed her anyway.

We continued along the path, moving further upwards. The terrain grew rougher, the large ferns and thick bushes dwindling into thin grass and rocky soil. Vera walked more slowly now, cradling her newly found treasure to her breast. We were higher up now, and I could feel the air growing cooler.

The track opened onto a clearing as we reached the edge of the property, marked not by a fence, but a steep drop to a small stream. You could see the mountains from here, rising behind the great eucalypts on the other side of the creek. I had never seen real mountains before. Their peaks, naked of snow, were overgrown with thorny forests of white snow gums. Vera pointed to each one, identifying them. Mount Stirling, Mount Bulla.

The wind picked up, the grass rippling at our ankles. I folded my arms, suddenly chilled. Vera didn't seem to mind, despite the goose bumps appearing on her arms. She sat down on one of the rocks, resting the snakeskin on the grass at her feet. Reaching forward, she pulled up a couple of long stems, and began twisting them in her hands. I was reminded of my early years at the orphanage, of the crosses we made from straw for St Brigid.

A rustle sounded from the stream below. I looked down the rocky slope as a large figure emerged from the trees on the other side. A horse. Not a great, majestic thing, but a fuzzy creature. Its mane was matted, its coat overgrown, but its body, a muddy bay colour, was stocky with muscle. It approached the stream, lowering its head to the water. It had no halter, which made it look naked.

'Is it wild?' I whispered. Vera glanced down at the horse, before explaining how brumbies were not wild. They were an introduced species, and feral.

Her voice carried down the slope to the brumby's ears which pricked. It lifted its head, looking straight at us, before snorting indifferently and trotting off into the trees.

'He's always hated them,' Vera said.

'Your husband?' It was the first time she had mentioned him.

'They do a lot of damage. If he sees one, he'll shoot it on sight.'

Seeing my face change, she quickly explained. 'Worth more that way. They're no pure breed and not easily broken. Can't be worked properly.'

I looked back down at the bank of the creek where the horse had, moments earlier, been drinking peacefully.

'He's very good with horses,' she went on. 'I remember the first time he brought me up here to see the property. I met the boys who worked the cattle and he walked me through the paddocks, showing off the livestock. But I knew it was really the horses he wanted to

show me. He made me wait all day before he showed her to me. Three years old, a gorgeous filly. Part Arabian, you could see it in her face, like a crescent moon.'

She made a motion with her hand, tracing the shape lightly through the air.

'She wasn't quite broken when I saw her. He always said she was the most difficult animal he'd ever worked with. I watched him doing some groundwork with her. She had a feisty energy that he liked. He didn't want to kill that. He got her to respond, but only just. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.'

'Him or the horse?'

She laughed. 'That's just it, I think it *was* the horse I fell in love with.'

She fell silent, her eyes lowering to her hands.

'He promised to give her to me. But honestly, I didn't want to see her broken. Not all horses are meant to be ridden, but of course he doesn't understand that. The first time we rode out, we came up this way. We weren't long married; it was supposed to be our first ride together. He talked about eventually taking me on the drove.'

'Drove?'

She nodded. 'It's much more common now. And, when he saw how well I rode, I'm sure he felt he'd found a proper country wife.'

Her fingers moved more quickly, the stems coiling together into an elaborate knot.

'But the terrain was too rough for her. I thought it would be fine. I thought, she would be fine. After all, she was mountain bred. But she had spent most her life in the arena. I tried to be careful, to move her the right way, but—'

Her hands stilled, and she stared vacantly at her reddened palms.

'Broken leg. She couldn't stand, let alone walk back. There was no point going for a vet. He put a bullet in her head, then and there.'

Her lip quivered as she said that last part, but her eyes stayed dry. Without thinking, I moved closer, placing a hand on her shoulder. She didn't object, but after a moment, she stood up, tossing the stems onto the ground, saying we should head back before Ruth started to worry.

The snakeskin found a home on the mantelpiece of Vera's room, nestled between the stringy bark and the moth cocoon. Ruth shook her head harshly whenever she saw it, saying snakes were bad news and it was unlucky to have it in the house. Privately, I agreed with her. But Vera occupied herself very closely with it, studying carefully the intricate bumps marked by the creature's unique set of scales. Occasionally, she would sketch it, but most of the time she would stand at the mantelpiece, running her eye from the hollow end that belonged to the tail, to the bottled opening that once held the snake's head.

Ruth didn't approve of Vera's hobbies, but I noticed that drawing gave her a clear way of expressing herself without having to speak. I took her outside as much as I could. Even just sitting on the veranda, just being near the bush, I noticed her behaviour change. There was an old rocking chair that I was told once belonged to Mason's mother. I helped Vera down into it, draping a blanket around her legs. Eventually the cat found a home on her lap, his scrawny face tucked behind his orange tail. Vera rested her sketchbook against him, and I lit myself a cigarette, which was unusual for me in broad daylight.

'That's a scent I've missed.'

She held out her hand, holding her pencil between two fingers, mirroring my cigarette.

I smiled, letting out a light drag of smoke, 'Would you like one?'

She didn't respond, but she regarded the cigarette between my fingers. I got out my pouch and papers and rolled for her, feeling her gaze on my fingers as I worked the tobacco

tightly between the paper. When I handed it to her, she took it in two fingers, placing it between her lips. I opened my lighter, holding it out to her, feeling her breath against my hand as she leant over it. A light wind picked up and I shielded the flame with my palm. The white tip started to glow, and she sat back, letting out a breath of smoke.

‘What do you think?’ she asked, turning her sketchbook to me.

I leant closer to see what she had produced. I expected a landscape, given our position on the veranda. Or at the very least, some tree or cobweb had caught her eye, given the endless botanical drawings in her room. Vera didn’t draw people. At least, as far as I was aware. But the figure in the drawing could not be mistaken for anything else. It was a woman, her body not quite finished; the ends of her arms disappeared onto the remaining blank canvas. But it was the face that struck me, its features strangely familiar.

It was, but not quite, me. There was a likeness that I recognised. That nose, which was, really, just a thinly scratched line on paper, and yet perfectly resembled the familiar ridge that I could trace down my face with my finger. But it was the eyes that startled me. They were perhaps the most unfamiliar part of the likeness. They were creased at the edges in a manner I had not seen in my own reflection. A quizzical, distressed look.

‘Do I really look like that?’

She tilted her head, regarding her work. ‘I don’t think I quite captured your hair, but the rest of it.’

I took in the creases on the forehead. The dark lines curved between the eyebrows.

‘You have this look,’ she went on, ‘when you’re thinking. I often wonder what could possibly be plaguing you. It’s not me. I don’t think it is. I don’t unsettle you, do I Grace?’

The question was a strange one. It hung between us, looming like the smoke curling from her lips.

‘No,’ I said flatly.

‘Then there’s something else. I have half a mind to say you left it behind when you came here.’

I felt a sharp thud in my throat.

‘Was it a man?’

I stood up, throwing my cigarette on the ground, crushing it with my toe. ‘It wasn’t a man.’

I felt relieved to finally be alone. The long hours I was spending with Vera were starting to affect me. As much as I enjoyed her company, it was difficult not to feel uneasy around her, not when she noticed so much. And as I came to my room, I embraced my moment of solitude, suddenly grateful not to be seen by anyone.

Eventually, I found the energy to take off my uniform. As I undid my belt and unbuttoned the front, I recalled the number of times I had taken it off at the end of a long shift. I remembered the late nights in Melbourne, my skirt stiffened with dried blood and bile. You could always tell who the new staff were by how clean their uniform was. I always thought if I came home clean, I hadn’t done my job.

I suppose it wasn’t clean, but it was so lightly marked, I was sure that if I slipped into the same dress tomorrow, no one would notice. The most prominent stains were from Vera’s tea, which would often spill as the cup never sat properly on the saucer. The sorts of stains a housewife might acquire. None of the foul odours I used to carry home with me.

I traced the crest of my collar, where its once crisp, white edge was yellowed from perspiration, courtesy of hours of labour. My thumb caught a bump just below the seam, right where it met the worn blue fabric. I had three uniform sets, but I recognised this one. I remembered stitching it exactly a year ago. A tiny heart concealed behind my neck, that I wore with me on the wards.

I remembered pulling the thick red cotton from my sewing box and trying to thread the needle. A pair of hands prying the needle from my fingers and threading it for me. I remembered the cool wick of saliva on the tail end of the thread, flicking against my hand as I worked it in and out of the fabric. It was very silly, but we had been nothing short of silly.

I traced my finger over it, feeling the gentle crest of the thread beneath my fingertips. I hated that I still had it. I clutched it between my fingers, like I had many times before, determined to pick it out, like a scab. But once again, I felt my hands grow weak, and the thin scarlet thread remained intact, unspoiled.

The master bedroom stood directly across from my room. Its door had been locked, I guessed, shortly after Mason's departure. I was surprised that, of every room in the house, this space had to be locked. The kitchen had sharp utensils and dangerous substances like rat poison and bleach, but Vera was still allowed in there provided she was supervised. I wondered what could possibly be more harmful that it needed to be kept behind a locked door.

Ruth produced her keys from her pocket and began to fumble with the lock. I had been in the house a week and had seen some improvement in Vera's spirits. However, I was not completely confident of her development. I was still reluctant to bring up her pregnancy.

'She refused to set foot in here when she came home,' Ruth said, as the key finally turned with a firm clunk. 'Figured we'd wait until she was ready, but—' she trailed off, clutching the handle, and pushing the door open.

The smell hit me first. The musky scent of stale clothes and dust. Ruth maintained the rest of the house, but this room, it seemed, she had left to fend for itself while Mason was away. It was, perhaps, the only room in the house that most closely resembled the thing for which it was intended. It looked like a proper bedroom, despite only a few items that stuck

out. Miscellaneous objects shoved awkwardly beside the dresser, atop the wardrobe. They had an invasive presence as they brought nothing to the space while performing the singular role of staying away from the rest of the house.

Despite being the master bedroom, it clearly belonged to Mason, not Vera. His everyday possessions were absent, but I noticed other things that retained his essence, despite lacking his more immediate presence. A pair of slippers at the foot of the bed, a dressing gown hung on the wardrobe door, a small row of medals on the bedside table. My eye doubled back on them, recognising the different colours, their ranks and meanings, from my own service in Katherine.

I had not met the master of the house and it felt very strange wandering into his locked bedroom. Despite Ruth's invitation, I felt the creeping sense that I was unwelcome. She moved into the room, round the foot of the bed towards the dresser. Its surface was slashed by a beam of sunlight that pierced between the thick curtains, which were not quite drawn across the far window. Kneeling down, she clasped the handles of the bottom drawer, shifting it against the frame. I heard the muted clack of its contents moving, disturbed from their long hibernation. Ruth pressed her hands against the wood, then pulled again with more ease as the drawer came free, its front landing with a thud against the floorboards.

It contained no less than twenty photographs. The glass on some of the frames was cracked finely, making cobweb-like scars. Ruth began to go through them, her hands working quickly with a degree of familiarity. One by one, she began to pull them from the drawer, handing them to me. The first was a wedding photograph. Two figures, one in a white dress, the other in the private's uniform of the Australian Army. I recognised Vera immediately, but the clean-shaven face of her husband took me somewhat by surprise. I'm not sure what I had expected a drover to look like. Perhaps rougher in the face, like a bushranger. He was also not quite as old as I'd imagined.

Vera was smiling. I had never seen her smile widely like that. Her eyes were slightly squinted and showed the kind of discomfort that comes from holding an expression for just a moment too long. The photographs that followed all maintained the same narrative. Snapshots carefully curated to depict nothing short of a happy marriage. I noticed one image featuring a black horse with thin, agile legs. I recognised the dish shape of its face as that of the Arabian Vera spoke of.

Ruth bent over the drawer, pulling the remaining frames towards her as she reached for something lodged right at the back. Straightening up, she handed me a loose card folded unevenly in half. I saw a date scrawled on the back from just over a year ago. I pried it open, immediately recognising the figure in the fading grey image. It was Vera, and she was pregnant. Her belly was swollen beneath the loose skirt of a slim floral dress. Her hands were at her chest and she looked as though she was avoiding touching the great mound where her child was growing. It was the only picture in which she wasn't smiling. In fact, her face lacked all animation, her eyes still and void.

'She delivered on the bed right here,' Ruth explained. 'Laboured thirty hours. It was horrible. I reckon the baby was gone for half of it.'

Her voice was softer. I detected a hint of sadness.

'It was a boy,' Ruth went on. 'They cremated him and scattered his ashes among the trees along the driveway. She said he could live among the birds forever. Wasn't very Christian, but we went along with it.'

I looked down at the photograph again, the vacant look on Vera's face, her fingers placed squarely over her heart. Silently, I handed it back to Ruth who folded it again, tucking it discreetly away in the back of the drawer.

'I've seen improvement,' I said determinedly. 'Since I've been here, I've seen it.'

But Ruth didn't answer as she collected the cracked frames, placing them carefully back in the drawer.

The power went out that afternoon. The wind was strong and swept through the bush, wrestling forcefully through the thick canopy. The house quickly dropped into shadow as the sun began to dip behind the trees. Ruth tried to get the generator going, but as she re-emerged in the darkening kitchen, we knew someone would have to go into town.

Ruth dug blindly through the cupboard under the sink, producing two oil lamps that looked like old relics from one of the house's former generations. She unscrewed the funnelled globe on one of them and showed me how to fill it with oil. As the flame ignited, she replaced the globe, smoke climbing from its glass spout.

'Will you be alright?' she asked as she put on her coat, glancing towards Vera with a look of concern. I reassured her as she made her way out the back door, disappearing down the path towards the shed. Within five minutes, I heard the car making its way round the side of the house and down the long driveway.

I prepared dinner under the yellow glow of the lamp, and the electric blue flame of the gas stove. I stirred the pot, the broth bubbling to the surface. I could feel Vera watching me in the darkened room. There had been an uncomfortable rift between us since the day she drew that portrait of me. It lingered as we ate in silence and prepared for bed, as the house slipped further and further into darkness.

I placed a lamp on her bedside table, turning down the flame. Her room sat dimly in the half light, the flowers on the wall reduced to blackened silhouettes, the snakeskin on the mantelpiece a lurking shadow. Carefully, I moved back through the darkened house to my room, setting my own lamp down. As I climbed into bed, I lay on my side, watching the orange flame leap and swell inside the glass globe.

The photograph Ruth had shown me remerged in my mind. That image of Vera, the blank, empty expression on her face. Her hands, refusing to touch her swollen belly. A sinister thought suddenly came to me. What must it feel like, I wondered, to *try* to die? Death does not alarm me, but somehow, the idea of making yourself die felt strangely different. I brought a hand across my own body, to my pelvis, my fingers glowing orange under the wavering light. What must *that* feel like? To have something, *someone*, inside you.

A loud crash came through my wall, making me jump. I froze, staring at the thin weatherboards that separated my room from Vera's. I called out into the dark but heard no response. Quickly, I leapt from my bed, pulling my dressing gown around myself. Gripping the base of the lamp, I guided myself back into the darkened hallway.

A scratching sounded at my feet, and I realised the cat had crept up to Vera's door. He looked up at me, his green eyes glowing under the flickering light, and quietly moved back, resting his chin on his front paws. As I opened Vera's door, I felt a whip on the hem of my dressing gown as he dashed past me into the room.

Vera was up. She was standing beside her bed, her lamp smashed at her feet. The moon had risen outside, its bright, grey light seeping through the lace curtains. It leapt across the walls, catching the framed flowers, their flattened petals glowing silver. There was a flash of orange as the cat darted towards Vera, rubbing himself against her bare legs. Vera's eyes were open, but she wasn't awake. She was staring at something on the wall in the dark.

I tried to move, but something kept me rooted to the spot. My own lamp was beginning to die, its little flame puffing and smoking. I held it higher, trying to see. I noticed her mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear a word she was saying. She reached out a hand as she began to cross the room, her feet stepping dangerously close to the shattered glass.

'Vera.'

My voice seemed to echo in the small space. Vera looked up at me, her eyes wide.

‘Is that you, Grace?’

Movement returned to my legs and I crossed the room, stepping carefully around the shattered glass.

‘What’s wrong?’ Vera asked.

‘You’ve been dreaming.’

She appeared to only half hear me as she looked down at the glass at her feet.

‘What’s happened?’

‘It’s fine, don’t worry about it.’ I placed my hands around her shoulders. Her arms were cold.

‘Where is my husband?’ she asked.

‘He’s not here.’

‘What?’ Her eyes scrunched, but then her features softened. ‘The drove, of course.’

‘You need to come back to bed,’ I told her.

She nodded quietly and I helped her across the floor, taking care to steer her away from the glass. As I pulled back her quilt, fixing her sheets, she looked back into the dark corner of the room.

‘I thought I... he was... the crib—’

‘Crib?’ I asked.

She stopped again, shaking her head.

‘I’m so sorry Grace, I’ve been very silly.’

‘You’re alright now.’

‘Did I wake you?’

‘No.’

I sat her down, drawing the quilt over her frozen body. She took it in her hands, clutching it like a child.

‘You won’t tell Ruth?’ she asked desperately.

‘No.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s fine.’

The lamp in my hands began to smoke again, and I turned it down, letting its weak light drain from the room. I looked back at the shards of glass on the floor. I told myself to sweep them up, but I felt a sudden wave of fatigue and desperately wished I could return to my own bed. But as I turned to leave, I felt Vera’s hand catch my wrist.

Her lips quivered, ‘Please.’

I looked down at my wrist. She loosened her grip slightly, but just enough to let her thumb tenderly brush the back of my hand. The gesture was unsettling, and I felt a strong urge to tear my hand away. But then I felt the gentle tug of her grip and found myself moving closer to her. I thought about pulling up the chair, to sit by her until she fell asleep. But then, I felt the bed creak as I climbed onto it, crawling across the covers and lying down, my back against the windowsill.

I could hear a familiar voice in my head. That rational, sensible voice, telling me I should not be doing this. But after just a moment of lying beside her, I noticed her trembling begin to subside. She shivered now and then, but only from the cold I thought. Without thinking, I gently rubbed my hand over her bare arm, feeling her pimpled skin beneath my palm. Quite soon, she fell back to sleep, and still I didn’t move, for fear of waking her. But soon enough, my own fatigue overcame me, and I rested my head on her shoulder, feeling the brush of her hair against my cheek. A soft creak came from the floor and I felt the weight of the cat, as he jumped onto the bed and curled up at our feet.

Vera's window didn't close properly. A cool breeze crept beneath the pane, brushing my hair and tickling my neck. I awoke confused and startled by the unfamiliar position of my body, the cold of my unblanketed legs, the warmth of another person beside me. I sat up quickly, noticing the tangle of fabric at my hips. I realised that my dressing gown and nightie had ridden up. I looked down at Vera who didn't stir, her shoulder rising and falling steadily beneath the quilt. Awkwardly, I fixed the hem of my nightie, pulling it over my thighs, my face hot. My foot touched something soft and I jumped as the cat leapt from the bed, scampering across the floor towards the door.

The room was full of light, the white walls glittered like the reflection of a mirror ball. The sun had risen fully and reached down to the floorboards, catching the shattered remains of the smashed lamp. My nurse's instincts gave a kick as I identified the hazard, my face growing hotter at my own carelessness. Carefully, I climbed off the bed and made for the kitchen. I cursed myself, knowing I should have cleaned it last night. I should have returned to my own bedroom.

My growing lack of professionalism was becoming more and more concerning. I had been right to go to her, to help her back to bed, but I knew I had crossed a serious line. As I entered the kitchen, I tried the switch on the wall. The power was back. I dug the dustpan out from under the sink, before heading back to Vera's room. There was no sign of Ruth. I was glad she wasn't back yet.

I looked at Vera who was still sleeping. She looked much calmer, peaceful almost. But I noticed the thin creases between her eyebrows. The shards of glass clinked as I crouched on the floor, trying my best to sweep them quietly. I sat back on my heels, my hand clutching the dustpan.

I remembered reading Vera's patient file on the train from Melbourne. I must have read through it at least three times. I could still see the words in my mind, printed unevenly on the page in soggy black ink. *Insulin-Coma Treatment*. Night terrors, sleep walking; both were listed beneath the subheading *Common Side Effects*. I remembered the sound of her voice, wavering in the dark, the look on her face, pale beneath the smoggy glow of the lamp. I recalled the weight of her body against mine, the warmth of her as we drifted off to sleep in the dark. I shook my head, pushing the thought aside. Bitterly, I wished I had returned to my own bed.

When I came in again to dress her, Vera was awake. Sitting up in bed, her knees were raised under the quilt and her arms wrapped tightly around them. She didn't speak as I crossed to the dresser and chose her clothes. I didn't speak either, as I helped her out of bed, fumbling with the buttons of her nightie. The sound of a car came from outside, followed by the crackle of tires on the gravel driveway. Ruth was back. As I reached to fix her collar, I could see her breath rising in her throat, the heightened colour of her skin. She was embarrassed. I was as well. But seeing her face now, her eyes purposefully avoiding me, I felt heat rising in my cheeks.

Her nails were long, or longer than she was allowed, so I took a little pair of scissors from the box on top of her dresser. I had done this before, but normally her hands were stained from the hours she spent labouring over her sketchbook. Today, her fingers were much softer, her skin quite unblemished. My own hands were coarse and rough from years of scrubbing away blood and grime, and I was suddenly afraid they might hurt hers; that they would poison her perfect flesh. I trembled as I clutched her thumb, bringing the tiny silver blades around the thin, white tip of her nail.

'I must apologise for last night.'

Her voice was stern, sober; nothing like the helpless cry that had come through the dark.

‘You have nothing to be sorry for,’ I replied, not looking up. ‘It’s a normal part of your recovery.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t speak to me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like a doctor.’

My hands froze, the little pair of scissors clasped blindly around one of her thin nails. I released her hand, resting the scissors in my lap.

‘I couldn’t stand them,’ she went on.

‘At Mayday Hills?’

She nodded. ‘They were all so condescending and heartless. I know they don’t have to be like that. That’s not how it is at normal hospitals.’

I heard her emphasis on the word ‘normal’.

‘Every morning they would bring me to this room with great white walls and question me, no—’

She froze, her eyes narrowing.

‘*Interrogate* me. I always felt like a naughty child being sent to the headmaster. They made me feel like it was my fault, that I had done something very wicked. They’d write it all down, every word I said, but they never said anything. I didn’t like that. Endless one-sided conversations. Talking to myself would have been easier.’

She turned back, looking towards the window. Her face fell when she saw the sky outside, grey and miserable. I told her we could still go out, but if it rained, we would have to come straight back.

‘I don’t care,’ she said irritably. ‘I can’t stand being in this house.’

I kept glancing anxiously at the sky as we walked along the fence. I hoped the weather would hold off, but the thick grey clouds suggested otherwise. Vera paid it no mind. She walked quickly ahead of me, venturing straight for the tree line. She seemed anxious to get away from the house.

We entered the bush from a different point than usual, or so I thought. It was difficult to keep track of the number of times we had walked the property. I had never paid much attention to where we were going and had just blindly followed her every time. All the different paths had become tangled together in my memory. The endless collages of twisting bark, the sameness of it all. I could never tell any of it apart. I recalled Vera's drawings, the ways she had captured the different types of eucalyptus. But they all looked strikingly similar to me, like sisters.

The track grew narrower, the thick ferns sweeping at our ankles as we walked passed. I had to look closely with every step, so I didn't trip over a hidden tree root, or plant my foot in the presence of a snake. Vera moved easily among the thick fanning leaves and rotting bark on the forest floor. She looked very different now. Her body, which I vividly remembered trembling in her nightie, was now agile as she pushed through the invasive bush that parted easily at the brush of her legs.

A fog loomed up ahead. It lay idly between the weeping branches, the dim sunlight creeping faintly through, casting a yellowish flicker on the peeling bark. I watched Vera move closer to it, her cotton blouse blurring with the smoky grey trunks. I stopped suddenly, feeling a wave of unease. Vera turned silently around, her hand just catching the edge of the mist.

'You alright, Grace?'

Her voice was soft, but it still echoed between the thick trunks. I glanced back to the fog thickening behind her. 'I don't like this place. It makes me feel funny.'

It sounded silly when I said it, but Vera didn't laugh. My throat caught and I began to tremble, though I couldn't explain why. Slowly, she moved away from the fog, her legs brushing the clinging shrubs. She came quite close to me, taking my hands which were pink with cold.

'There are things I need to tell you Grace. Things I couldn't tell you back at the house.' Her voice was low and strange. It echoed through the trees, looming like the encroaching fog. Her hands tugged at mine, as she led me, stepping lightly, towards a fallen trunk lying in a bed of moss. The earth sponged beneath my shoes as we tiptoed towards it, sitting down on its peeling bark. She sat in silence, her hands churning restlessly in her lap.

'A couple of years ago, a woman from Mansfield got lost out here. Ruth, my husband, and I all joined the search, a big search party. There were cops from Melbourne, dogs, trackers, but they never found her. They never even found a body.'

She paused, looking into the hanging mist.

'Eventually it died down, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. I began to dream about disappearing out here, walking straight into that mist and vanishing into thin air. My marriage has never been easy. My husband is a good man, he looks after me well. But things happen that aren't anyone's fault, they just happen.'

'What happens?'

She paused, her eyes lowering.

'The loss of fire, after that first year or so. You might ask if perhaps I made the wrong choice, but—' her voice halted, her hands clenching in her lap. 'I never really had eyes for other men. It sounds strange, but it's true. In any case it wasn't my husband but the marriage itself. I wanted to be a good wife for him. I tried, I really tried.'

She closed her eyes, her brow creasing.

‘It changed me,’ she said at last. ‘I became a completely different person, and not someone I liked. Marriage made me into someone else. In those first few months I could feel myself changing. Every time he kissed me, every time we—’ She stopped, and I felt a tremor at what was left unsaid. ‘Until I no longer recognised who I was before.’

A breath of wind swept between the hanging branches. I clutched at my arms which felt suddenly bare. Vera didn’t stir.

‘Then I got pregnant, and I became something else entirely. Before that, at least my body was still the same. I could look in the mirror and recognise who I used to be, behind all that glass. But then, I couldn’t see her past my puffy flesh and the big mound in front of me. Not even my body belonged to me anymore.’

Her hands began to tremble. I resisted the urge to reach for them, to soothe them.

‘It made me angry,’ she went on. ‘That I should lose myself in order to create something else. My husband never had to make that sacrifice, but I couldn’t be angry at him for that.’

She looked down, placing one of her quivering hands against her stomach. ‘So, I grew angry at my son instead.’

It was the first time she mentioned her baby of her own accord. Her voice was clear, grounded. The woman from the previous night was well and truly gone.

‘It wasn’t his fault either, but I blamed him anyway. The whole time I carried him, I cursed him. Then, when he was born, when I saw how cold he was—’ She stopped, her voice catching. ‘But his face was perfect. The face of an angel. He *was* an angel, and I knew it wasn’t his fault, none of it.’

She froze, her breath coming sharper.

‘Even after we gave his body to the bush, my body still belonged to him.’ She brought her hands to her chest, placing them squarely over her breasts. ‘No, it *needed* him, to serve its new purpose; but he wasn’t here.’

Her hands moved across her chest, reaching to clutch her bare arms. ‘I couldn’t bear being in this body,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t stand being this thing I had become. I just kept wanting it all to stop, just wishing I could disappear.’

I watched her fingers dig into her skin and I was suddenly frightened she might hurt herself. But then, her hands slackened, and her eyes lowered to the thick moss at her feet.

‘That’s why I did it.’

She said it very softly, so I could barely hear her over the sound of the bush around us.

‘Did what?’

She didn’t look up but whispered again, very quietly, so I might only just catch it.

‘Why I tried to kill myself.’

For weeks, this unspoken truth had taken up a kind of presence between us, deepening and thickening. But now, in the depth of the bush, she had given it a voice. I recalled our conversation that morning, the things she said about Mayday Hills, about the doctors. I doubt she ever uttered a word of any of this to them. And yet here, concealed among the thick bark and fog, she had shared with me this intimate secret.

At length she looked up to me, her lips spreading into a small smile.

‘Please don’t be sad for me, Grace,’ she said, as I could feel my eyes filling with tears. ‘It’s not like that anymore, I promise.’

I nodded quietly, rubbing my eyes with one of my frozen knuckles. She turned from me and looked back towards the track, and I too noticed how the fog had lifted, the sky now clear, just visible beyond the tangled web of branches.

‘We can go a bit further if you like,’ I said.

She nodded silently, before turning back to me, her face now changed, an air of awkwardness about it.

‘I want to thank you for staying with me last night,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t have made you, but I’m glad you did, so thank you.’

I remembered waking up beside her that morning, how peculiar I had felt. The brush of the wind from beneath the windowpane, the warmth of her body beside me.

I swallowed, trying find my voice. ‘You’re welcome.’

The track grew steeper as we began to move downhill. We could see beyond the immediate line of trees as the mountain ranges came into view. Vera pushed on, moving faster than she should. I knew I should tell her to slow down, but I noticed that lightness return to her, having told me her secret, and it gave me a strange warmth.

We reached the end of the track that fell onto a rocky stream. I didn’t recognise it immediately, but it was the same creek we had seen from the top of the hill the first time she brought me into the bush. I glanced towards the other side, where the brumby had stopped to drink. Vera moved towards the bank, looking down at the rushing water, which I recalled marked the boundary of the property, as far as she was permitted to go.

The creek looked different now. Its banks were spilling, water seeping onto the clay and grass. Vera knelt beside the water, placing her palm to its foaming surface.

‘You could swim here once,’ she said. ‘But there’s barely been any water last couple of years. Just a small ripple between the rocks.’

I watched the water rush over her hand, her skin rising and falling beneath its wavering surface. A few droplets leapt at the impact, freckling her collar and cheeks. And then, quite unexpectedly, I felt a flutter through my heart, a sudden desire to let go.

‘I wanted to disappear too.’

I said it so quietly, I wasn’t sure if she heard me. But then I watched her eyes lower as she slowly drew her hand out of the water.

‘You asked me once, why I left Melbourne.’

‘I asked you if there was a man,’ she recalled, not looking up.

My heart thudded. I looked down at my feet. ‘It was a girl, actually,’ I told her. ‘A woman I had a falling out with. She was the reason I left.’

Vera rose, wiping the creek water on her trousers. ‘Sounds like you were close.’

‘We were.’

‘Was she like a sister to you?’ It was an innocent enough question, but her voice sounded strange as she said it.

My throat grew dry, ‘Something like that.’

There was silence then, except for the gentle rush of the creek. Something cold and wet touched my hand and I jumped, realising that Vera had reached for it. She stared as I looked down at my hand, as though she had stung me.

‘It’s okay,’ she assured me. Her voice was low and still, as quiet as it had been before. She was very close to me, uncomfortably close. I don’t think I had seen her face this clearly in daylight before. She had a couple of freckles on her nose that I hadn’t noticed. The lobes of her ears, I only just realised, were pierced, though she never wore earrings. Her lip quivered slightly. She had a look in her eye, a look that I knew. She lifted her hand again, very slowly, and I felt the light touch of her fingertip against my cheek.

I felt a sudden impulse, a violent urge to push her away. But her hand seemed to put me in a trance and, so long as she was touching me, I could not move. Her finger was still damp from the creek and felt cool on my skin. I felt her breath against my lips, warm in the chilly wind, and I let her press her face to mine.

Her lips were smooth, gentle against mine. I had never known anything so soft and I shuddered at the lightness of their touch. She drew me closer, her damp fingers sliding into my hair. She gasped lightly against my mouth and, instinctively, I tore my lips away.

‘I can’t,’ I stammered, backing away from her, but she caught my hands and drew me in again.

‘Please,’ she whispered desperately. I felt her breath, damp against my chin, and I let her kiss me again. Her hands wandered on my skin, no longer cool but hot, so hot I thought I might melt at her touch. My knees buckled against hers and they met awkwardly as the wind picked up, brushing the hem of my skirt.

I started and pulled away again, moving as far back as I could, so she couldn’t catch me in her arms again. Vera said nothing but stood there, staring blankly at me. I sniffed, feeling my eyes water and rubbed my face with the back of my hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ I breathed, before turning away, rushing blindly back into the bush.

We didn’t say a word to each other as we walked back to the house. I followed her, unable to decipher any possible route, and she walked ahead of me, not turning once to check whether I was behind her. We found Ruth on the back step, a basket of laundry on her hip. She greeted us so casually, so ordinarily, it felt peculiar, and I wondered for a moment if perhaps none of it had happened. But then I saw Vera’s face as she turned her head, saw the flush of colour in her cheeks.

We settled back into our familiar routine, sitting on the veranda as we usually did on sunny afternoons. She had her sketchbook, but she didn’t so much as reach for her pencils all that afternoon. After a while I lit a cigarette and offered her one, but she turned her head away coldly and I soon hid my face behind my cloud of smoke. When Ruth went to bed that night, I sat at the kitchen table, finishing off the mug of tea that had grown cold.

It wasn't late, but I couldn't see myself sleeping at all that night. Not after everything that had happened deep in the bush, silenced by the sound of the rushing stream. I still felt the sting of her coldness. I did not blame her for that, after sharing so much of herself. But I recalled the touch of her lips, their warmth, and I shook with the firm knowledge that it could not happen.

My mind wandered through the house. It drifted down the length of the hallway towards Vera's room at the very end. I remembered her asleep in my arms that morning. How warm she was then. Suddenly, something had taken over my legs, as though I were no longer controlling them. It carried me through the house, past Ruth's bedroom, past the master bedroom, all the way to Vera's door. I paused for a moment, pressing an ear against the wood and listening closely. There were no strange sounds like on the previous night, no crashes of glass or peculiar voices. My hands traced over the handle, over the slit of the keyhole below. I told myself to turn around, to walk into my bedroom and close the door, but my hands were in a trance and they turned the handle, pushing the door open.

The room was almost black, but for the silver light from the moon slipping through the curtains. I could just see her, sitting on the bed, her figure a silhouette. The figure moved, appearing to flicker, like the curtains behind her. That little breath of wind was still sneaking beneath her windowpane. Neither of us reached for the light as we moved closer in the dark. I held out my hands, unable to see anymore, but soon my eyes adjusted and I could just make her out, the shape of her body, the slope of her shoulders, her hair, how it kicked up at the ends.

She found my hands with hers, our fingertips just meeting. I felt her move closer, as she reached for my face, her fingers brushing my lips, tracing the way for her own. She kissed me again, her mouth now hot and fierce. Her hands slipped towards my chin, my neck, their touch warm and damp. My body began to shake again. I fought to still myself, afraid she

might laugh at me, but she only whispered to me, assuring me in so tender a voice that made me shake even more.

We moved towards her bed, the light from the moon freckled through her lace curtains onto her pillow, her quilt. A chill ran through my body as she reached for the buttons of my dress. I felt her hesitate, her hands pausing over the worn fabric at my breast, but I didn't tell her to stop.

I tilted my head, looking through the gaps in the curtains. The moon was lit up and the full milky-way visible in the alpine sky. I felt her hands move lower, reaching beneath the hem of my skirt. I started, but she clutched me in her arms and pressed her face to mine, whispering so sweetly that I wanted nothing more but to kiss her again and again.

Ruth was asleep on the other side of the house, but we stifled our cries. As though the walls had ears, or the bush outside might whisper through the wind what we had done. I touched her face through the dark, tracing out her features. I felt something wet upon my fingertip and I knew she was crying. Then I realised that I was crying as well, and kissed her again, more desperately. I felt out of myself, as though we were no longer in her room, not in the bush either, but somewhere else entirely. A place carved by our bodies. I felt giddy and strange. I felt dizzy, like I had spun around like a child and was now lying on the ground, watching the sky spin around me. I felt drunk, but I was not drunk.

She lay beside me, her head nestled against my shoulder, her soft hair tickling my skin. I could still feel my heart beating in my chest as my breath refused to still. The curtains above me began to move and I felt the familiar breeze creep beneath the window that didn't close properly. After a time, she fell asleep, but I could not. I couldn't still my body as it was still fluttering from her touch, nor the thoughts that stirred in my mind.

Everything about me was changed. I thought I am changed now; she has changed me. I remembered her standing before me out in the bush, the way she touched me, with her hand

wet from the creek. The cold crisp touch of the water on my skin. How brave she was, to be so much.

I knew it should never have happened. I should not have permitted it to happen. But while my mind burned with the knowledge of what we had done, my heart felt a warmth, a fullness so big I thought my chest might burst. I was different now, another person. I could feel her lips, resting against my neck where she had kissed me before. I felt her hands, still tangled in mine. I began to make note of how soft they were, how smooth to the touch. I began to trace them in the dark, each hand individually, mapping them in my mind. I noted the crest of each knuckle, the smooth tip of each nail. I clasped one hand, the left, taking in the softness of each of her delicate fingers.

But the smoothness was broken by something else, something cold and hard. I felt it beneath the brush of my fingertips: the firm ridge of her wedding band.

I saw myself, as though I were looking from across the room, lying there with her against me, and I felt the cold sting of sobriety. I began to untangle myself from her grasp; carefully, so as not to wake her, but hastily, as though I might harm her if I touched her any longer. I moved off the bed and was immediately conscious of the slipperiness between my legs that lingered with every step I took towards the door. A chill rushed over my breast as I realised my dress was still undone: my uniform. I reached to button it and felt the familiar brush of fabric behind my neck; the little heart tucked away, hidden beneath my collar.

I lay awake for hours. The thick dark in my room smothered me as my thoughts crept around my head. The insides of my thighs were wet, sticky. I didn't sleep, at least I couldn't recall sleeping. But then, I hoped I *had* been asleep, the whole time, and it could all be nothing more than some extraordinary dream. But I could still feel the space between my legs, the point where flesh met flesh, and I knew I could never have dreamt anything so vivid, so physical.

The dark lessened, a purplish hue inching between the curtains as the sun dragged itself up from behind the trees. I began to see my room. Just outlines at first, like those that Vera did in her sketch book. My uniform flung over the chair, my shoes still spoiled with dirt from our walk, my stockings lying limp on the floorboards.

I sat up quickly when I saw them, my eyes catching the shimmer of their silk. They looked strikingly like the snakeskin on Vera's mantelpiece. I slipped out of bed, feeling the cold floorboards against my shins as I knelt to pick them up. They were still damp from my sweat and slid from my hands, coiling into a heap on the floor. I could feel my embarrassment rising in my cheeks as I stood up. But it was when I came to the mirror that I saw the true extent of our intimacy.

She had left a mark on me, dark red on the edge of my jaw. I remembered her kissing me there quite roughly. A part of me, I admit, was grateful she had not kissed me any lower, where it would have been far more telling. I leant into the glass, tracing the mark with my fingertip. It would clear in a couple of days, but somehow, I knew I would still feel it there. Like a pebble lying at the bottom of a pond, long after each ripple had cleared the water's surface.

A kookaburra laughed somewhere in the bush. I felt its cry as though it came from inside me, as though *I* was laughing. The feeling horrified me, and I watched my horror leap onto my face in the glass.

It's okay.

I felt Vera's voice in my head. That gentle whisper that had reached out to me in the dark. My breath quickened. The mark on my jaw seemed to grow darker.

'Good God what's happened to you?'

I didn't hear Ruth knock, nor did I hear the creak of the door opening. But as I turned to her, her eyes locked onto my jaw.

'I'm quite alright,' I said, trying to force a laugh.

'Was it Vera?'

My heart leapt before I registered the concern in her voice, and I realised what she meant.

'No,' I insisted. 'I fell in the dark on the way to the dunny.'

It wasn't an impossible story, but it sounded ridiculous. After all, I had just used the textbook excuse. The one that young lovers threw around as a mischievous euphemism that was never intended to be taken sincerely. Surprisingly, Ruth didn't seem suspicious, just more concerned as she moved closer to me, reaching for my face.

'I'm fine,' I insisted, raising my hand. 'I am a nurse, Ruth.'

And it seemed, over the past few weeks, the whole household, myself included, had forgotten that fact. I am a nurse. *That* was my reason for coming here. The woman down the hallway was my patient — a mentally unstable woman. A woman I was supposed to be treating.

As I dressed, I felt my skin against the thinning cotton of my uniform. I felt like a stranger in it, like a crab trying to crawl back inside an old shell. I bit my tongue as I bitterly

recalled my first night in the high country; my innocent hope that somehow, I would again feel the youthful pride I had felt during the war. But my dress felt like nothing more than a theatrical costume. Even as I said the words ‘I am a nurse’, it felt like a lie.

It was difficult seeing Vera. A part of me wished she would evaporate into thin air and remain a figment of my wicked dreaming. But as I saw her, sitting on the bed, her delicate fingers pressing against a detail of an old sketch, I blushed at the memory of their touch on my naked skin. She rose and greeted us both, which was unusual for her. Then, quite unexpectedly, she moved towards me, taking my hands and placing a tender kiss on my cheek. I froze as I felt the brush of her wedding band against my fingers. Ruth remarked how well she was looking. I didn’t listen as I took in Vera’s face, her skin, her lips, remembering how I had felt them all in the dark just hours ago. It was only the muted bump of the door closing that caught my ears, that meant we were alone.

‘You didn’t stay last night.’

Her voice was thick like honey. Her words sounded like a line from a pulp novel, something the woman might say to her male lover. A shiver ran up my spine. I had already decided what to say to her. But as I opened my mouth, I found myself saying something very different.

‘How did you know?’

Struck by the question, Vera smiled. ‘I didn’t.’

Her response surprised me. More so did her voice, which was so soft and calm, it felt quite unnatural.

‘Have you—’ I asked her. ‘Before?’

‘Not with a woman, no.’

‘But you’ve heard of it.’

‘Yes,’ she said, stifling a laugh. ‘I spent a year at Mayday Hills, Grace.’

The name of that institution rang in my ears. I had entirely forgotten its existence.

‘Then you know,’ I said seriously. ‘You know what they do to them.’

She laughed properly then, but it sounded different. It was low, peculiar. ‘*What they do to them?* Really, Grace? It wasn’t much different than what they did to me.’

She said this to reassure me, but it only frightened me more.

‘Is that what’s bothering you?’ she asked, her voice softening. ‘Well, they’re all married, wealthy women. You’ve nothing to worry about.’

‘Don’t I? Don’t *you*?’

It was then that I realised that she really *wasn’t* worried. She wasn’t anxious or afraid at all. The knot in my stomach tightened as I watched her, her calm, unbroken smile still spread across her fine lips. But then, her expression changed. Her eyes creased as she squinted at my face, reaching for my jaw. I turned away quickly, just as her fingertip brushed my chin. I winced as she traced over the spot left by her passion. Her eyes widening, her lips twitching into a guilty smirk.

‘Did I do that?’ she asked lowly. When I didn’t answer, she began to giggle.

‘Stop laughing.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry, I’ve embarrassed you.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘Did Ruth see?’

She was still smiling, her mouth spread into a broad grin. It angered me how ridiculous she was being.

‘She did actually,’ I said bluntly. ‘I told her I fell—’

She laughed harder.

‘Stop it!’

The words escaped far louder than I expected. Vera stopped laughing, her smile vanishing. She spoke, her voice sober. ‘What happened to you in Melbourne?’

The question shocked me. I stood silently, unable to answer. Vera moved closer and I froze as she took my hands and raised them to her lips. ‘It’s okay,’ she whispered against my knuckles. I shuddered to hear her say those words again. ‘It’s okay, Grace. You can tell me.’

It was difficult thinking about what happened in Melbourne. I couldn’t begin to describe what exactly happened. I couldn’t even describe who she was. Even her face was now disjointed in my memory. I vividly recalled each part of it: her eyes, her nose, her perfect lips, but never altogether. They were scattered in my mind like pieces of a jigsaw.

Vera asked me her name, but I couldn’t say it. Was she my patient? No, a nurse.

‘Were you in love with her?’

Strangely, it was something I had never considered. At the time, I did think it was love. It seemed perfectly innocent, at first. Something childish, girlish. But there had been a knowledge, an intimate knowledge, that was *not* innocent. We did not fool around, as some people say. I remember the first time I kissed her. It was, I think, the first proper kiss I ever shared. Even as I felt the faintest brush of her lips, I felt different. I felt charged, animated, alive.

It was validation, I suppose. The knowledge that we were not alone. It was never a relationship, nothing happened between us. But we did consummate something else. That what we felt, this desire we had, was a real thing. We proved that we were not alone. If I had been in love, it was with something she represented, or rather the possibility of that something.

I told Vera all of this. As I spoke, she sat unmoving, my hands still clasped between her palms. When I fell silent, she didn't meet my eyes. Her brow creased as her thoughts fell on something else, something behind what I had said.

‘Had you... *never*... before last night?’

It took me a moment to understand what she was asking. When I realised, I blushed furiously, looking away.

‘Not even with a man?’

The thought of a man doing that made me start. Silently, I shook my head.

‘What happened with her?’

What had happened? It was difficult to say. It ended because it *had* to end. It was the only logical conclusion. Our desire for each other evaporated once we realised what we had done, once others started to suspect. It lost its meaning; it was spoiled. She told me she was going home to her parents. She didn't give me an address; she wasn't allowed to see me. She told me that she was tired, that she didn't want to work anymore. I assumed she was planning to get married. She liked men, she said, even if she sometimes liked women. She promised me one day I would like men too.

The hospital gave me a reference. I was very lucky. They didn't take drastic action and I left with most of my reputation intact. There were plenty of rumours linked to my departure, but that's all they were, rumours. They even let me keep my uniform as a formality for my new position. I could not be a nurse without a uniform.

I felt Vera's grip on my palms gradually slacken. Eventually, she drew back her hands, holding them in her lap. She refused to look at me.

‘Do you understand?’ I asked softly. ‘Why we can't do this?’

She didn't respond.

‘Coming here was a second chance, a rare one. That’s why they gave me this uniform, to remind me who I am.’

‘But you’re not that person anymore, Grace,’ she said. ‘We’re both different people now.’

‘That doesn’t mean we should be.’

‘Do you regret what we did?’

Her tone was colder. I don’t think I had ever heard her speak in such a way, not even that first morning, when I arrived in the high country. She was upset. It pained me to realise it, that *I* had upset her; because the awful truth was, I *didn’t* regret it. Every sensible bone in my body told me I should. But there was something, deep inside me, that only made me glad that *finally*, something of this nature had happened to me.

‘We both know nothing good can come from this.’

It physically hurt me to make myself say it. I looked at Vera, afraid that she would grow angry at me. She didn’t grow angry. Instead, she went quiet and still. She drew her sketchbook towards her, reaching for the graphite pencil lying on the quilt.

‘It never happened.’

She didn’t speak as she sat, running her finger again along the stem of a half-finished flower. *It never happened*, I thought hard. I repeated those words to myself as I sat by her, trying not to look at her darkened fingertip pressing firmly against the page.

Our silence persisted in the days that followed. Even exchanging so much as a glance felt bolder, louder, than anything we might have said to each other. I had been right to put an end to it before anything more could happen. I did hope that my desire would be stifled, just as it had been back in Melbourne. But as I woke each morning and entered her room, I found myself taking in every surface, every object, as though they bore her mark. I looked at the

furniture, thinking of how she had touched it. I looked at each flower, the stringy bark, the moth cocoon, the snakeskin; how she had cast her eyes over them, possessing them with her keen gaze. I almost felt I was walking *inside* her. As though each object was a piece broken from her body, like fingernails, or locks of hair.

I too felt different. As though when she touched me with her wet fingertip, when she kissed me too harshly, she had marked me with a hex. And when I came to the glass that morning, I had already passed through and was now trapped, lingering on the other side. Even my body felt different, back to front. It was the same sensation that I had felt that first morning with her, when I had written my name with my left hand. I clenched my fist, burying my fingers into my palm. I wished I could plunge it back into that sock, let my fingers bind to a stump, like a foot in a Chinese slipper.

I began to dream as well. I never used to dream before. But the high country air swept into my lungs, my bloodstream, filling my mind with the most twisted images. They were so vivid at times I couldn't be sure they *weren't* real. I would wake bewildered, confused. Even as I began to see my room, to feel my sheets, it all felt somehow *unreal*. Even as I touched my body, finding each of my limbs in the dark, it didn't feel like mine.

I wished I had never told her about Melbourne. I wished she had never kissed me. I wished that I had not gone back to her room that night.

I wished her husband would come home.

The geyser was still lit, its little blue flame flickering under the weight of the rising steam. I could just see it, glowing in the mirror's misted surface. I could hear the drip of water sliding off skin into the bathwater behind me; its shrill plop echoed off the concrete walls. My fingers clutched at the rim of the basin, as I peered through the clouding fog. It was the last week of February.

I heard a rush of water behind me as Vera stood up in the bath. At length, I forced myself to turn around, to look at her. Her skin was red and flushed, her lips full. Her wet hair bunched in thick ringlets, clinging to her cheeks and neck. I looked down at her legs, the bathwater lapping idly against her calves, her pelvis, the silvery marks from her pregnancy. I noticed her other scars, those ghostly white lines across her wrists. Droplets of water ran down her arms, crossing over the scars, sliding into the palms of her hands. They crept down to her fingers, dripping into the murky water below.

Instinctively, I tore my eyes away. I grabbed the towel from the rack and handed it to her. ‘Dry off.’

Her room was cool after the heat of the bathroom. I could feel my face burning as I drew her clothes from the dresser. My hands fumbled as I helped her dress. The buttons of her blouse slipped awkwardly between my fingers.

‘I’ll be gone soon,’ I said at last. ‘When your husband comes home. The doctors will also be here to assess you.’

My fingers slowed over the smooth crest of one of her buttons. I felt the touch of her hands as she placed them over mine, her pruned skin still warm from the water.

‘It doesn’t matter, Grace.’

Her voice was stern, serious. I was startled by it. She moved back, turning towards the table, her hand lowering onto its surface.

‘I feel like — I can’t explain it — but it’s like I’ve had my eyes shut for so long. As though they were sewn shut when I got married, and I couldn’t see anything properly. But now, it’s like I’m seeing myself for the first time. And I don’t know why I couldn’t see it before.’

She drew her hand, turning back to me. ‘And I think you feel the same.’

Her manner was strange. It unsettled me.

‘Vera, we can’t do this.’

‘Don’t you understand? Don’t you see what’s happened? It didn’t matter what I did before, nothing ever made a difference. I was still that person, that person I became when I got married. But I don’t belong to them anymore, Grace. Not my son, my husband, not anyone.’

Her words sounded darker, stranger, and it took me a moment to fully comprehend them. But as their meaning dawned on me, I was horrified to know, exactly, what she was telling me.

‘You’re not seriously thinking of leaving your husband?’

I thought, or rather hoped, that I had misread it. But when she spoke, her voice was calm and blunt. ‘Women leave their husbands every day.’

Her words hovered between us, as though they had a life, a mind of their own. They were not her words.

‘I can never be happy here, in this house,’ she continued. ‘It’s taken me so long to realise it. I have been sick for so long, I forgot what real happiness felt like. I thought it wasn’t possible for me, that I would be sick forever. But I don’t feel like that anymore, Grace.’

Her hair was still wet and wild, dripping onto her shoulders. I tried to hide my fear as I spoke.

‘You couldn’t leave your husband, even if you wanted to,’ I said quietly. ‘You are still a patient of Mayday Hills.’

For the first time, she fell silent.

‘You are on trial leave, Vera. You haven’t officially been released.’

‘What have I told you about speaking to me like a doctor?’

She looked at me sharply, her eyes growing darker.

‘Everyone I speak to sees me as an invalid. They think I am stupid, like a child, but not you Grace. You are better than that!’

Her voice was strong. I worried Ruth might hear her.

‘For so long I have wanted nothing more than to disappear. I nearly managed it as well. I was supposed to die that day Grace, but I didn’t. And there has not been one day since I woke up in hospital that I have stopped wondering why. Even at Mayday Hills, when they put me to sleep, I thought, each time, now it shall happen. I let them do it, because I thought it would kill me. But they refused to let me die. They pulled me back again, and again, until I thought, in fact, I *was* dead. That I’d been dead the whole time and this was my punishment. But I’m not dead, Grace. You’ve made me realise that I *am* alive. I am more alive now than I have ever been.’

Colour was mounting in her face. She raised her hands as she spoke, and I was afraid she meant to strike me.

‘I was given a second chance, Grace. That’s why I didn’t die. And that’s what brought you here as well. You said it yourself: a second chance. We don’t have to be those people anymore. Ask yourself, Grace, who do you really want to be? Do you even want to be a nurse? The war’s over; has been for years. You just don’t want to get married.’

Her words struck me, cold and hard like a slap. They made me start, but Vera moved closer to me, taking my hands again. Her voice softened, her anger diminishing, but her lips quivered as she spoke.

‘You are not a bitter person, Grace. Aren’t you tired of being unhappy? And don’t think for a moment that you deserve to be.’

Her eyes were wide like an animal in headlights, right before it is hit. I could feel the sweat building up between our palms, slippery and hot, as she clutched my hands. I did my best to hold back the swarm of tears.

‘I can’t do this,’ I breathed. ‘This is my fault. I came here to help you.’

Her face, though furious moments ago, was suddenly distraught. ‘Grace, please.’

‘I don’t want you to go back to Mayday Hills because of me. I’ll tell them to send someone else from Melbourne. Your husband will be home soon anyway.’

Instantly her eyes filled with tears. Her voice choked as she began to protest. I felt the grip of her fingers, still clinging desperately to mine. I tore my hands from hers, stumbling backwards. Blindly, I reached to steady myself, my hand grasping for the table. But it caught something else that gave way, and I felt the slide of papers beneath my palm. Her drawings, her love letters to the bush, tumbled to the floor in a burst of graphite and ink. Another breath of wind carried into the room and I choked on its biting, eucalyptus scent. I fled, burying my face in my hands, my fingers soiled with lead and dust.

My legs gave way and I slid down the back of my bedroom door. I clutched my arms, digging my dirtied fingertips into my skin. They smelt of graphite, of eucalyptus. It was a powerful smell. It seemed to consume me, to cling to me. I could feel it in my clothes, my hair. I felt something rise inside me. Not bitterness, something louder. It leapt in my chest, like a laugh. A cold, sickly laugh.

I thought of Vera lying in that bathtub, her face underwater. I thought of her at Mayday Hills, lying strapped to a bed, insulin pouring into her veins. I wanted to feel like that. I wanted to feel the life leaving my body like a breath, a sigh. I wanted to be gone, to vanish from existence. I wanted to be nothing.

I saw myself, slumped against my bedroom door. I felt the firm press of the floorboards against my legs. Like a slap, reason returned to me, chasing away all other thoughts. *Get up.*

I did as it said, gathering my limbs. *Get up*, it said again. *Pack.*

I drew out my case and threw it onto my bed. I flung open my wardrobe, pulling my clothes at random from their hangers. I found my one good dress which I almost decided to put on. I was no longer a nurse; I couldn't stay in my uniform. But it was too handsome, too feminine, too gay. I didn't want to be beautiful. I tossed it into my case, working my way through the rest of my clothes. Finally, my hands latched onto a collar, *that* collar. I pulled the dress from its hanger, staring at the little heart inside.

It looked different now, as though I was staring at it with new eyes. I clutched the stitching, my fingers picking at the worn fabric. It rubbed at my skin, my nails. I stuffed it between my teeth, ripping, pulling at the cotton, until the thin line of thread came free. I tossed my head wildly, flinging it onto the floor.

Almost immediately I regretted it, as though it were my own heart that I'd torn out. How long had it taken me to work up the courage, the willpower, to remove it? But it no longer had the same meaning as when I had sewn it in.

I heard Ruth's voice before I heard the door. I could see her face in her voice, the shock in her eyes without having to look round. I didn't pay attention to what she was saying, something about the bottom paddock. Was Vera dressed? Yes. Get her ready. *Ready?* Yes, right this minute. Then she said two words that, in a flash, pulled me out of my thoughts. I felt their weight, grounding me right there in the present moment.

They're here.

I looked to my window, moving towards the glass, and pushing aside the curtain with a shaking hand. I could just see the bottom paddock, right on the edge of the bush, where the tree line stopped. There was a man on foot, reaching over the fence and unlatching the gate. He raised his arm, signalling into the trees, as a herd of cattle slowly emerged from behind the thick trunks.

I left my case on my bed and almost ran to Vera's room. When I came in, she was kneeling on her bed, her face pressed to the window. She didn't look up as I joined her. The cattle made their way up the hill, the lush grass burying beneath the stampede of hooves. It was then that I saw, just behind the herd, four horses. A black, a bay, a chestnut, and a grey; three of them with a rider astride. Their faces were concealed by the shadows of dusty Akubras, except for one, astride the black, who removed his hat, rubbing his brow. I recognised the face almost instantly. Every detail, down to the thick, square chin, as though he had climbed out of the photograph and onto that horse.

I had thought it would be easy. That I would see him, and everything would evaporate like mist. But now I saw him, I saw his hand striking the glistening shoulder of his mount. It was a *real* hand, flesh and bone. I could only just see his eyes from such a distance. But I could see, well and truly, that he *had* eyes, *real* eyes, with a *real* person behind them. I looked at Vera, who had not moved her face from the glass. Her nose was almost touching it. And suddenly, it was like I was seeing her naked for the first time. Like I was drawing her, tracing her features as she had traced mine. I saw the dreaded look in her eyes as she watched that man ride up towards us from the bottom of the hill.

It was like seeing a ghost rise from the dead. After listening to Ruth and Vera the whole month, I still found it impossible to fathom that this man was real. Even as I felt the coarse touch of his palm as I shook his hand. Even as I heard him speak, heard his voice as he gave me his name, his full name.

This man had lived with Vera for nearly three years. He had slept with her, fathered her child. And yet, he was not at all like either Ruth or Vera had described. There were things I immediately noticed that neither of them had mentioned. Beneath the cuffs of his dusty moleskin, I noticed the slight tremor in his hands, not unlike in the hands of the men I saw in Katherine. I recalled the small row of medals on his bedside table, the wedding photograph in which he stood in uniform beside Vera. I also saw his eyes, which had that haunted look I knew too well. The look of a man who had seen death.

His presence occupied the whole house. I saw him everywhere, in everything. The seat of the dunny being left up, his razor on the bathroom sink, which was always littered with the short black hairs scraped from his square jaw. The house, which for weeks had been idle and still, suddenly came alive. I woke every morning to the sound of lowing cattle and dogs barking as Mason went at the crack of dawn to feed the livestock. I remembered Vera telling me about his dogs. Three kelpies. They followed him everywhere and were obedient to a fault, performing his every command without hesitation. Unlike the feral barn cat, they all had names. I would hear him shouting at them, one after the other, as they surrounded the cattle in the lower paddocks. There was also a different sound. A sharp, piercing sound, like a gunshot but higher.

I had never heard a whip crack before. Not even in the westerns I saw at the cinemas in Melbourne. It turned out that Mason was very good at whip cracking. Ruth told me he had won competitions as a boy, at the annual fair in town. He would compete every year, before

the war. After working the horses in the afternoon, I often saw him, swinging his stock whip in the yard. It was impossible not to watch him as he drew it over his head, the fierce look in his eyes as he flung his right arm around and down.

‘Makes you wonder,’ Ruth said, as we stood watching at the kitchen window. ‘Just what they did to him.’

‘Who?’ I asked, not taking my eyes off the man’s face as he brought the whip over his shoulder again.

‘Japs,’ she said. ‘Imprisoned for two years. It’s a miracle he made it home.’

That was the first time I heard about that. Given everything Vera and Ruth had told me, I was astounded it had never come up before. I never spoke to him, but the few instances I passed him in the hallway, met him on the step of the back door, I felt a prickling under my skin. Once or twice, I noticed him eyeing my uniform and I realised he was perhaps thinking about my own involvement in the war. Occasionally I caught his eye and, while I masked how frightened he made me, an unspoken acknowledgement passed between us. It unsettled me to think we might have something in common.

But it was Vera who frightened me more. After our heated argument, she retreated into a hard, unbroken silence. She wasn’t angry with me. In fact, all her passion that drove her before completely evaporated as she grew cold and distant. She didn’t mention leaving her husband again, and she made no further pass at me. I also didn’t leave like I said I would.

Her bedroom, which had somehow taken on a part of her, seemed to suffer as her attention dwindled. The fresh flowers, lying untouched on the table, began to wither. Waiting too long to be pressed and sealed behind glass frames, their petals began to break from their stems, shrivelled and brown. She sat unmoving on the worn quilt, her chin resting firmly on her knees. She engaged with no one except the cat, who would curl up at her side as she stroked his fur with an unenchanted hand. I could feel her spirit draining from her eyes as I

watched her. Occasionally I caught her looking at her arms, staring a little too attentively at the white scars on her wrists.

And then, the inevitable happened, when a young boy from Mansfield rode up the uneven gravel track on his motorcycle, carrying a wire from Mayday Hills. There would be two doctors coming down from Beechworth next Tuesday.

That night, I sat up in bed, smoking until my quilt was littered with ash. Somehow, the wire had made it all too real. Tuesday. It was so sudden. I watched the next week unfold in my mind, as though it had already happened. The doctors would come, she would be returned to Mayday Hills, and I would never see her again.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest and began to cough violently, bringing my hand to my mouth. I touched my jaw, remembering the thick mark she had left when she kissed me there. I slowly moved my hand lower to my breast, the quickening beat of my frightened heart behind it. My eyes began to water, even as my breath began to still. Without hesitating, I climbed out of bed, my bare feet hitting the frozen floorboards, and reached for the curtains of my window.

I could just see the bush lying idly in the dark. The shadow of the tree line stared back at me across the paddocks glowing purple under the starry sky. If only, I thought desperately, we could just disappear. If it could be just as she had said that day, hidden beneath the thick bush and looming fog. If we could just slip between the trees and vanish into the wind.

‘One of the boys will drive you to the station Wednesday morning, but it’ll have to be very early.’

Ruth spoke without looking at me, sorting through the growing pile of laundry.

‘There’s nothing we can do for her now.’

She said it dully, as though she were talking about an old pair of stockings that had sprung a hole. I stood by her, harbouring my resentment. I regarded the coldness of her face, her harsh, thin lips.

‘Why didn’t you tell me Mason was a prisoner of war?’

I said it before I could stop myself. When I saw her start, I was glad to have touched a nerve.

‘He doesn’t talk about it, and I respect that.’

I wasn’t convinced.

‘We all have our things, Grace,’ she said flatly. ‘But all we can do is move on. Keep going.’

When Tuesday morning came, I dressed Vera with trembling hands. I took a long time choosing her nicest clothes that still fit her and did my best to make her look presentable. I combed her hair and attempted to fashion it into a modest do, but she had slept on it strangely, and her curls sat awkwardly on her cheeks. There was no colour left in her face.

At ten, a black car, resembling a hearse pulled up the driveway. Two men emerged, wearing the same white coats that I recognised from my years of work on the wards. One had a handlebar moustache like you might see in a barber’s advertisement. I had met psychiatric doctors before, and they were nothing like the surgeons I once worked with. I watched them come into the kitchen and, when I saw them look at Vera, I felt a wave of unease.

They first consulted Vera in her room. They had to assess her, they said, without anyone present. I sat at the kitchen table, trying my best not to show how afraid I was for her. I closed my eyes, not wanting to look at Mason or Ruth, and strained to catch the voices in the other room. But all I could hear was the groan of the floorboards as one of the doctors paced up and down the room.

I opened my eyes, glancing towards Mason. I looked at his hands, which I noticed were still trembling. He had been home nearly a week and I still couldn't bring myself to talk to him. Even knowing full well, after what Ruth had told me, after watching him eye my uniform, it was possible that I understood him far better than both Ruth and Vera. But then, it came to me, and I wondered how I could have forgotten. Even if the doctors insisted Vera return, as her husband, Mason could still sign her out. No matter what they said, Mason would still have the final say.

Suddenly, his eyes shot up and looked directly into mine. I felt my plea burning inside me as we held each other's gaze. But then, my fear overcame me, and I bitterly looked away.

When Vera emerged with the doctors, my heart sank. Her eyes and cheeks were blotchy and red, and I knew she had been crying. She glanced at me quickly, a look of warning.

'Nurse?'

I cleared my mind, as one might when heading to the witness stand in a courtroom, as I followed them into Vera's bedroom. I felt their eyes bear onto me as I took my seat and they began their questions about 'the patient'. At what point had Vera stopped being my patient and become something different? But then, at what point had she ever been my patient? For even on that first day I met her, when she had looked at me with her critical, observant eye, the nurse in me had slipped away. I spoke to them, doing my best to use words that they would want to hear. She was calm. Respectful. Obedient. I heard my words as though they were coming out of someone else's mouth. It was clear what I was trying to do. I sounded forced, obvious. They asked about her appetite. Improving, I replied. It was a slow process. She was trying very hard. When they asked about exercise, I told them about our walks.

'Has Mrs Mason exhibited any other behaviour out of the ordinary?'

I thought for a moment.

‘Not that I have observed.’

‘Nothing at all?’ he asked more sternly. ‘Nothing small that you might have considered queer?’

He emphasised the word ‘queer’. It sounded peculiar, sinister, in his fine accent. I tried to hide the quake in my voice as I asked him to clarify what he meant by ‘queer’.

‘Strange, unusual.’

Abnormal.

I told them about her night terrors, ‘on account of the coma treatment,’ I reminded them firmly. I watched their faces as I spoke, the dull look of indifference in their eyes. I leaned forward, speaking clearly.

‘Having observed her the past month, it is my opinion that Mrs Mason need not be readmitted. However, I confess I do believe she still requires some assistance in convalescing.’

This caught their attention.

‘It has only been a few months since she was released, considering she was in hospital for a year. I leave it up to your discretion, but I believe another month of trial leave under medical supervision will be beneficial for her.’

It was obvious what I was trying to do. As I said the words ‘medical supervision’, it was clear I meant under my own. One of them wrote something and exchanged a glance with his colleague.

‘Thank you, Nurse,’ he said, closing his book. ‘We will give the matter some thought.’

As I emerged from the room, my false air of confidence evaporated. I tried to hide my disappointment as I re-entered the kitchen as, at last, Mason was brought into the room. I

could feel Vera looking at me, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her. *I'm sorry*, I thought. *I'm so sorry*. I didn't hear the verdict when they said it; I didn't need to. I wondered about the offer I made to stay another month, but I knew it had been a long shot.

The remaining hours that day passed slowly. I came to my room and tried to pack but found I couldn't bring myself to begin. A car would come for me at dawn to take me into town. It was done. I had done my job. The hospital would give me a reference, and I would go to some other town, some other city, as a nurse. The thought made my stomach turn and I clutched the rim of my empty suitcase. I could still see the faces of the Mayday Hills doctors and I bit my tongue in anger. I looked down at my skirt, the faded cotton of my uniform in disgust. The last thing I wanted to do was work in a hospital again.

I left my room, slipping quietly through the house and out the back door. Evening had settled over the bush. I could faintly see the cattle down the bottom of the hill, congregated round the last remains of the evening feed. I came to the fence, lighting a cigarette, and slid down against the rotting wooden post. The air felt cool against my burning face, and I could hear the low hum of cicadas just waking up.

I felt a shadow over me, recognising Vera's figure in the dim light. She held out her hand, extending two fingers. I gave her my cigarette and watched her bring it to her lips. Her breath came in a wavering line of smoke.

'It's probably for the best.'

I didn't know what I expected her to say, but it wasn't that. I looked up at her, about to protest. But I saw her eyes lower and I was overcome with such sorrow, such tenderness for her.

'I told them I could stay on if they extended your leave,' I said, pulling myself up and standing before her. 'I said you just needed more time to convalesce.'

She smiled sadly. 'In what world would that have worked?'

The cigarette shook between her fingers. She quickly brought it to her lips again, smoke wafting from her nostrils and disappearing into the wind.

‘This is my fault,’ I said finally. ‘This wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for me.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she said. ‘But you know Grace? I think it would have actually been a great deal worse.’

The cicadas hummed louder through the rippling grass. Vera came closer, placing her hand atop the wooden post, the cigarette hanging between two fingers.

‘It was wrong of me to ask so much of you,’ she said. ‘I realise that now. I was just so happy I was only thinking about myself.’

It was strange to hear her describe what she had felt at that time as ‘happy’. I had spent so long being frightened I hadn’t stopped to think about it.

‘The thing is,’ she went on, ‘even if I am eventually released, I’m not sure I’ll ever be truly happy. I might feel better for a time, but what’s to stop it all from happening again? And even if that doesn’t happen, people will always *think* I’m a lunatic.’

‘You’re not a lunatic.’

She shook her head. ‘I will be forever mad because I once tried to kill myself. As far as people are concerned, Vera Mason did in fact die that day.’

A soft rustle came from behind us, on the other side of the fence. We turned to see one of the horses, Mason’s black Australian Stock Horse, walking up the paddock towards us. Without its heavy tack, I almost didn’t recognise it. It shook its mane, revealing its beetle black eyes that glowed in the dark. It was a mare; I hadn’t noticed before. The mare moved closer to the fence, seeming to recognise Vera, who turned towards her, her fingers curling around the cigarette. Vera leaned forward, pressing her body against the wooden panel, lifting her free hand. She opened her palm, extending her fingers slowly as the mare raised her nose

to meet her. I stood, watching the exchange as Vera stroked the tip of her muzzle, looking warmly into her eyes. The mare flared her nostrils, breathing gently against her fingertips.

‘I’m really glad you didn’t die that day,’ I said finally. ‘And you were right, I didn’t want to get married.’

Vera’s hand stilled, and slowly she lowered it, placing it back on the rotting wooden fence. The mare stepped back, flicking her ears, and moved off back down the paddock.

‘I’m just so confused,’ I cried. ‘I don’t know what’s right anymore. I always thought I knew. I thought that the way I understood things was the right way. But now I don’t know if what I learnt was right to begin with at all. That I haven’t always had things the wrong way round.’

Still she didn’t speak, and I closed my eyes as the hard truth leapt from my mouth.

‘I *am* tired of being unhappy. I just didn’t realise I was unhappy because I didn’t know any different.’

Her silence persisted and I looked away, embarrassed at having spoken so plainly. But then, I felt the light touch of her hand against my cheek. My cigarette was still between her fingers and the crisp smell of tobacco tickled my nostrils. The sky had grown darker, and her features were blurred, like charcoal lines on a canvas. Everything seemed to still, just as it had that night in her bedroom. Tears rose in my eyes. Her lips brushed my cheek as she kissed them away, and I didn’t stop her as her mouth moved lower, pressing firmly against mine.

But then, all too suddenly, she pulled away and left my lips cold and bare. I opened my eyes as she stepped back, purposefully. It was an odd gesture, and for a moment I thought this was what she was telling me, that she had decided enough. But then I heard a voice behind me.

‘Grace?’

I turned horrified to see Ruth standing against the dim light from the kitchen. I hoped for a moment that Vera had disguised our moment, but the look on Ruth's face showed that she had indeed seen everything.

She beckoned Vera inside, telling her to pack for tomorrow, and asked me to help her in the kitchen. Vera moved quickly towards the house, her head hanging like a scared child. I stood, rooted to the spot, staring at Ruth who regarded me with a forbidding look. The wind picked up, the grass prickling at my ankles, the cicadas crowing deafeningly.

My heart hammered as I followed Ruth into the kitchen. I watched her cross to the sink, piling dishes into the trough and turning on the tap. I told her that I could explain, trying my best to keep my voice low, clear.

'It was me,' I said. 'Vera didn't do anything. You can ask my old hospital. They'll tell you what I am.'

In my whole life, I had never said anything remotely resembling those words. There had never been a time when I would not have died before admitting what I was. But as I stood before Ruth, watching the last of my career, my dignity, fall away, I could only think of Vera.

Ruth shut off the tap. As she turned, I saw the colour had drained from her face. I waited, expecting the worst.

'How long?'

There wasn't any point in lying. I told her about the night after the power outage. 'It was all me,' I insisted. 'As her nurse, I have overstepped the mark repeatedly, preventing her recovery.'

Still she was silent.

'She shouldn't go back to Mayday Hills because of me.'

‘Going back to Mayday Hills isn’t going to help that girl.’

Her voice came suddenly. It was sharp, but quiet. She moved away from the sink, placing her hands firmly on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

‘I’ve been doing this for too long,’ she said, not looking at me. ‘Going back won’t help that girl, but neither will staying here. And I’m tired of making it all work.’

‘I don’t understand.’

She looked up at me, her eyes cold. ‘Get her out of here,’ she said. ‘Just go. Take her somewhere, I’ll get Mason to sign the release.’

I thought that I misheard her, but she was deadly serious.

‘You surely don’t mean that.’

‘But I do, Grace. I’ve had enough looking out for that girl. You didn’t see her before you got here. Another year in hospital won’t help her. And I can’t keep doing this Grace, I—’

Her voice broke, and she hastily covered her face with her hands. I was startled by the gesture. I had never seen Ruth show such emotion. But I heard her breath choke behind her fingers as she tried to stifle a sob. And when she pulled her hands away, her eyes were red and wet.

‘I pulled her out of that bathtub. I wrapped her bloodied wrists and I sped her down that driveway, through the bush in the dark, to get her to hospital in time. Then I sat by her until she woke up. And I did it out of nothing but kindness, and it was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.’

Her tears were pouring down. I stood silently, watching her as she awkwardly rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palm.

‘Mason’s a wreck. The marriage was a mistake from the start, a mistake we all made. And I’m tired, Grace. I’m fed up with all of it.’

I realised, only then, that in the whole time I had spent in that house, I had never given a thought to how Vera's condition might have affected Ruth. When Vera led me into the bush, told me why she tried to end her life, she spared me any details of what happened, and I never thought about it after. And now, as I listened to Ruth, I felt ashamed for not once considering that while everything was happening to Vera, it was also happening to her.

Ruth turned back to the sink and filled a glass of water. I watched her down it like a shot and then place it in the trough with the remaining dishes. She rubbed her eyes again and spoke more soberly. 'I can't say I understand it. I don't... *approve*.'

She raised a hand, and I saw her lips purse with revulsion.

'But I don't see the point in pretending, Grace. You don't know how long I've tried to salvage their marriage. And for too long I've known it's not worth it.'

I refused to believe what I was hearing.

'I still don't understand,' I whispered.

'Take her and go!' Ruth commanded. 'I never want to see that girl again!'

And in that second, that moment, I felt a charge rush through me. I felt my body take control of me as I tore away from the kitchen. I stormed down the hall and pushed open Vera's door.

She looked up, startled, as I stood in the doorway. She had been packing and appeared flustered, but not over which clothes to take to hospital. My body tingled, as though it were as fragile as glass, and at any moment, she might easily knock me over.

'You're leaving.'

She spoke with a degree of finality.

'Yes,' I replied.

She nodded quietly.

'I shouldn't have done that,' she began. 'I didn't think—'

‘Please.’

I needed her to stop talking, but my choice of word made us pause. I sounded just as she had, when she had whispered that same word to me that day by the creek.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, firmly and clearly. ‘I’m sorry for everything.’

She stilled, looking at me expectantly.

‘You’re not going to Mayday Hills.’

Her brow creased. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Mason will sign your release. Ruth will make sure of it.’

She was still confused, but after a moment her features softened.

‘I’m leaving in the morning,’ I told her, ‘and I was hoping, you might like to come with me.’

Vera didn’t move. Only her eyes shifted and then narrowed. ‘Are you sure?’ she asked cautiously. ‘Are you sure that’s what you want?’

‘I have never been surer of anything in my life.’

Her eyes widened and she raised a hand to her face. I felt frightened for her, as though I had said something to cause her harm, but she closed her fingers lowering them to her chin.

‘I know what I said before,’ she said. ‘I know what I implied but—’ She stopped, reaching for the table as her voice began to waver. ‘I’m no good to be around, Grace,’ she said finally.

‘I’m frightened I’ll only make you miserable.’

‘You could never make me miserable.’

‘I’m still not well, Grace,’ she insisted. ‘There is something wrong with me, I just don’t feel it as badly when I’m with you. But it could get worse, it always does, and I don’t want to put that on you.’

‘But I’d do that for you,’ I said desperately. ‘I’d do it because I—’

I stopped myself. It was too much, too soon. But her eyes widened again, as though she had been longing for me to say such a thing.

‘You said you couldn’t be happy in this house,’ I said instead. ‘And, you’re right. I see that now. But I don’t think you felt much better in hospital.’ I came towards her, reaching across the table, taking her hand. ‘Perhaps this could be something else.’

I felt her hand tremble beneath mine as I moved closer to her. ‘Is this real?’ she whispered, her breath sighing against my shoulder. ‘Because if it’s not, I’ll—’

‘It is real,’ I said, lifting her hand. I held her fingers against my palm, tracing the creases of my skin. ‘I’m real,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever been real, until now.’

It was a strange thing to say, but it was the most honest thing I had ever said. I had never been real before I met her. How often had I thought that she changed me but really, what had I ever been before? We were not changed, as I thought for so long. We were made real.

I felt her fingers, tracing the line down the centre of my palm. She tilted her head against my shoulder, her hair brushing my chin lightly. She lifted her head and I looked at her directly, taking in the fine features of her face, the soft tips of her eyelashes.

The kiss brought me to life. It seemed to linger on my lips even after we pulled apart and began to prepare ourselves. There was a charge between us, an energy that felt powerful, electric, as we moved between our rooms, quickly and quietly. I clutched the door of my wardrobe as I felt her breath warm on my cheek. I felt the slide of her fingers at the base of my throat, as she unhooked the button of my collar. I watched her hands trail down my front, in a warm reversal of our roles, as her hands slid easily over each button and the belt at my waist.

My uniform slipped from my shoulders, falling to the floor, pooling around my feet. I looked at Vera, watching as her eyes began to wander over my figure. Vera had caressed my body, but she had never seen it. I stood before her, feeling her gaze trailing across my shoulder, down my arm, and turning in the palm of my left hand. It was as though I were coming alive beneath her eyes. My other dress was creased, unkept. I had not worn it since I had been in Melbourne and I recalled even then, it had sat imperfectly on my body. But since being in the high country, I had eaten, I had rested, and my figure had changed. And as Vera fastened it, I felt my body filling it evenly, the fabric embracing my figure like a second skin.

We didn't sleep. The dark outside quickly began to lessen. Mason would be up soon to feed the livestock. Eventually, we slipped into the hallway, closing both our bedroom doors. Vera's room looked virtually unchanged, the stringybark, moth cocoon, and snakeskin still lying untouched on the mantelpiece. Vera had taken some of her drawings, her pencils and some blank sheets, but even the pressed flowers were left hung on the walls. She insisted she didn't need to look at them again. She knew this place as well as she ever would. It wouldn't let her know any more.

I glanced quietly at the door to the master bedroom. I had not been back inside since that day with Ruth, but I could still recall its interior so vividly. I thought of Ruth, opening the drawer and revealing each of the old photographs hidden inside. I hadn't thought much of it that day, but now, as I replayed it in my mind, I finally saw it: the look on her face of genuine sadness. And as we moved through the hallway, the original weatherboards turning to wallpapered plaster, I realised that the house itself was only just holding itself together.

We emerged quietly onto the veranda as the ute pulled up in the driveway. The curtain of the kitchen window moved, and I saw the cat emerge, regarding us with his large green eyes. The bush had grown quite still. There were none of the frightening sounds that had

greeted me when I first arrived. Just the familiar yodel of an early morning magpie, the same ones I grew up with in Melbourne.

The driver's door opened and the same man who drove me from the station climbed out. When he glanced at Vera with her suitcase, I told him, in a steady voice, that I was accompanying her to Beechworth. I looked at the ute, its headlights shining, its rear half concealed in the lingering dark. I reached for Vera's hand and held it tightly.

But, as I stepped forward, I felt her hesitate. I thought, perhaps, after everything, she had changed her mind. But then, she raised her arm, pointing towards the ground, and I saw it. During the month of my stay, I had not once seen a live snake. Just the snakeskin that Vera and I had found the first time we entered the bush. I watched the creature — a long, brown thing, like a garden hose — sliding over the loose stones by the ute's rear tire. I felt a familiar unease, just as I used to in Katherine. But then, very gently, Vera squeezed my hand, and I felt a strange charge through my whole body; a determination to not be afraid. Under the glow of the taillights, the snake's scales lit up, flickering brown and silver. We stood in silence, waiting as it moved carefully behind the truck, slithering away into the grass, continuing its journey.

Rewriting the Victorian Madwoman in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Snake*,
and *Ecdysis*

Introduction and Literature Review

My novella *Ecdysis*, draws from the traditions surrounding two canonical Victorian works: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (1892).² They share two similarities that inspired me. Firstly, both are narratives about women who uphold the Victorian norm and are confronted with the prospect of becoming Other through madness. In *Jane Eyre*, this is quite a literal encounter, in the novel's central confrontation with the Madwoman Bertha Rochester. In 'The Drover's Wife' however, this is more subtly executed, with the intrusion of a snake, signifying the 'maddening' threat of the Other bush landscape, to the normative domestic sphere.³ Secondly, both texts have incited streams of feminist responses that use the legendary status of their narratives to expose and critique the oppressive social structures they uphold and continue to manifest today.

Ecdysis interrogates the struggle of queer women finding self-acceptance amidst external and internalised oppression. Its narrative depicts the journey towards accepting what I describe as the authentic Self, amidst the oppressive social construction of an established norm that marks this authentic Self as Other. In the creation of this narrative, of my own plain Grace's 'progress' towards embracing her authentic Self, I have drawn from two feminist novels which, for very different reasons, are regarded as reworkings of the two Victorian texts upon which my novella is also based. I have drawn from Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Kate Jennings' *Snake* (1996) for the ways they challenge the patriarchal, imperialist, and heteronormative constructions of madness in the Victorian texts with which they are associated.⁴ Additionally, I have drawn from the ways that these texts also depict the real experience of living with mental illness, as a critique of the Victorian Madwoman's

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 4th ed., ed. Deborah Lutz, Norton Critical Editions (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016); Henry Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife,' in Moorhouse, *The Drover's Wife*, 3—13.

³ Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife,' 10.

⁴ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ed. Judith L. Raitskin, Norton Critical Editions (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Kate Jennings, *Snake* (Collingwood VIC: Black Inc., 2011).

associations with rebellion and rage. In this exegesis, I will analyse these two feminist texts, observing the ways in which they challenge the representations of madness and mental illness in the Victorian works with which they are associated. I will unpack the thematic and aesthetic devices they apply to revise and transform such representations from these Victorian narratives. Finally, in a study of my creative process in *Ecdysis*, I will explore the ways in which I have drawn from the literary approaches of these feminist writers, to create my own queer narrative that transforms the traditions established by both *Jane Eyre* and ‘The Drover’s Wife.’

Madness and Mental Illness: A history of feminist approaches, and an intersection between Social Constructionism and Feminist Disability Theory

Madness has an extensive history as a tool for social control. It is distinctly characterised as Otherness, as dictated by multiple systems of oppression, and has long been used ‘to regulate and control those deemed deficient, dangerous, or merely different from the norm.’⁵ The gendered implications of madness have been the focus of considerable feminist scholarship. Elaine Showalter has noted how madness has historically been characterised as ‘one of the wrongs of woman,’ and as ‘the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality.’⁶ In literary theory, it was Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s reading of Brontë’s Bertha as ‘the *author’s* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage’ that landmarked the reading of women’s madness in fiction as ‘signif[ying] anger and therefore, by extension, protest.’⁷ This perception of madness, as anger at one’s oppression, also

⁵ Jane Ussher, *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830—1980* (London: Virago, 1985), 3.

⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), 78; Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1.

dominates feminist psychology of the later twentieth-century, particularly the social constructionist theories that emerged in response to the anti-psychiatry movement. Most notable is Phyllis Chesler's 1972 study *Women and Madness*, which was updated and republished in 2005 with twenty-first century examples.⁸ Chesler maintains that 'women have already been bitterly and totally repressed sexually; many may be reaching to or trying to escape from just such repression, and the powerlessness that it signifies, by "going mad."'⁹ Drawing on Chesler, Jane Ussher's *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (1992) furthers the social constructionist argument, stating that 'misogyny makes women mad either through naming us as the "Other"... or through depriving women of power, privilege and independence.'¹⁰ Ussher further notes how the term 'madness' itself 'is an emotive term' that 'serves to categorize, to separate, to designate as different.'¹¹ To use it 'is to recognize... the stigma attached' as it 'acts as a signifier, clearly positioning the woman as the Other.'¹²

While the oppressive history of madness continues to be acknowledged, the perception of psychological distress as a form of rage and rebellion, and the broader claim that it is solely socially constructed, have come into question. In *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998), Marta Caminero-Santangelo criticises feminist literature's continued use of madness as a metaphor for rebellion, arguing it 'does little to dismantle the dichotomous thinking' that has long defined depictions of femininity, and instead 'duplicat[es] the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place.'¹³ Moving into the twenty-first century, feminist disability studies have taken up this discussion by critiquing the continued use of madness as literary metaphor, and its depiction as solely socially constructed, for undermining the very real experience of living

⁸ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2018).

⁹ Chesler, 98.

¹⁰ Jane Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 10.

¹¹ Ussher, 10.

¹² Ussher, 10—11.

¹³ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, 1—2.

with mental illness. Andrea Nicki, in ‘The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma’ (2001), critiques Chesler’s social constructionist argument, stating that ‘the view that mental illness in women is a self-contradictory protest against and conformity to “the devalued female role” may be used to undermine mental illness as a legitimate illness and disability.’¹⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Donaldson, in ‘Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman’ (2008) explores how ‘the madness/rebellion configuration subtly reinforces what has become an almost monolithic way of reading mental illness within feminist literary criticism and perhaps in the larger culture of women’s studies scholarship.’¹⁵ Donaldson further argues that ‘this configuration of madness, if it remains widely accepted and uncontested, may limit our inquiry into madness/mental illness.’¹⁶

It is uncommon that social constructionism and feminist disability theory are applied simultaneously, since feminist disability theories of mental illness have developed through criticising social constructionism. However, as my engagement with disability theory centres around the psychological effects of systematic oppression, I will demonstrate that there exists an overlapping relationship between the social reinforcement of oppression and its psychological impacts. Nicki explores how oppression ‘promotes toxic social environments where mental illness thrives.’¹⁷ However, it has been theorised more recently in Christine Caldwell and Lucia Bennett Leighton’s *Oppression and the Body: Roots, Resistance, and Resolutions* (2018), that ‘oppression’ — enforced through ‘blatant violence’ as well as more ‘subtle and nonverbal behaviours’ — ‘not only increases one’s risk of experiencing trauma, but is also traumatic in and of itself.’¹⁸ It is in this way that social oppression does not merely

¹⁴ Andrea Nicki, ‘The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma,’ *Hypatia* 16, no. 4, Part 1 (Autumn 2001): 84.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Donaldson, ‘Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman: Further Notes toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Mental Illness,’ in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 94.

¹⁶ Donaldson, 94.

¹⁷ Nicki, ‘The Abused Mind,’ 81.

¹⁸ Christine Caldwell and Lucia Bennett Leighton, ed., *Oppression and the Body: Roots, Resistance, and Resolutions* (Berkley: North Atlantic Books, 2018), 19—20.

‘promote’ mental illness as Nicki argues, but is ‘a form of trauma’ that ‘results in symptoms of trauma.’¹⁹ By exploring trauma-related mental illness resulting from social oppression — the experience of being marked as socially Other or ‘mad’ — my study will attempt a bridging point between social constructionism and disability theory.

Even the terms themselves, ‘madness’ and ‘mental illness,’ are associated with separate streams of theory (‘madness’ preferred by social constructionism, ‘mental illness’ by disability theory). While both streams use ‘madness’ and ‘mental illness’ as umbrella terms, in this exegesis, I use them to refer to different concepts. I use ‘madness’ to describe in social constructionist terms behaviour that is socially considered abnormal or Other, as well as the social stigmas and *perceptions* of mental illness and psychological distress. ‘Mental illness’ in my study refers to, in feminist disability terms, real psychological distress as a biological manifestation, that may be initiated by and/or exacerbated through oppression-related trauma. As my study engages with social constructionism and feminist disability studies, these terms will be used to distinguish between these different concepts.

Madness and Performativity: Reinforcing the norm and generating trauma through the performance of ‘inauthentic Selves’

By engaging with both social constructionist and disability readings of madness and mental illness, my novella explores both the psychological effects of systematic oppression, as well as the socially constructed nature of the established norm that enforces such oppression. The generation of this norm, particularly with regards to gender, sexuality, and even race, has long been identified as performative in nature. Judith Butler demonstrates that through performativity ‘we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced *and* altered in the course of that

¹⁹ Nicki, ‘The Abused Mind,’ 81; Caldwell and Leighton, *Oppression and the Body*, 18.

reproduction.²⁰ As the social norm is established through its repeated performance, it therefore follows that what is socially constructed as madness/saneness (as opposed to mental illness/wellness) is also performative. As Ussher demonstrates, ‘a diagnosis of madness is determined by social norms’ and, as the performative nature of this norm deems it a fleeting, fragile concept, so in turn is the social construction of madness.²¹

In the uses of performative theory, there are some variations in the subjectivity of performative acts. For Butler, performativity ‘contests the very notion of a subject’ and, as there is no ‘sovereign subject’ *behind* the acts themselves, Butler demonstrates how what constitutes the norm is as fragile a concept as what is deemed Other.²² However, other theorists, for instance Charlotte Chadderton, ‘assume there is a sovereign subject behind the doing’ and that performances can be conscious, and at times even forced or insincere.²³ Chadderton observes how forced or insincere performances ‘create “inauthentic selves”, in the sense that individuals are forced to internalise values which they are not comfortable with, and are alienating.’²⁴ My reading of performativity assumes there *is* a ‘sovereign subject’ or an authentic Self and will explore how acts that project an inauthentic Self, if performed to uphold the established norm, are oppressive. It is through the performance of an inauthentic Self, for the purpose of conforming to an established norm, that social oppression manifests both systematically, and in the body as trauma. It is in this way that I intersect social constructionism and feminist disability theory, by exploring the relationship between social oppression and trauma-related mental illness. Repeated inauthentic acts that uphold an established norm are manifestations of systematic oppression that generates trauma in the body. Furthermore, the performance of an authentic Self that does not uphold the norm: is

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 218.

²¹ Ussher, *The Madness of Women*, 47.

²² Judith Butler, Lynne Segal, and Peter Osborne, ‘Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,’ *Radical Philosophy*, no. 67 (1994): 33.

²³ Charlotte Chadderton, *Judith Butler, Race and Education* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 111—112.

²⁴ Chadderton, 112.

socially perceived as ‘mad’ or Other, may also be met with external oppressive forces that generate trauma.

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The academic and creative responses to *Jane Eyre* have become central to the discourses in literature surrounding women’s madness, mental illness, patriarchy, and imperialism. Writing back to Brontë’s text has long been undertaken by critics and creatives as a means of exposing the ongoing presence of oppressive structures. In the late Victorian era, Brontë’s image of the Madwoman in the Attic was already being adopted by succeeding women writers to expose patriarchal power structures. Most notable is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s iconic short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892), which was among the first to expose the social construction of madness under patriarchy, while unpacking the experience of real mental illness derived from both biological conditions that promote mental illness (postpartum depression) and from the trauma of ongoing patriarchal oppression.²⁵

Written as a direct prequel to Brontë’s novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* holds great significance to the feminist discourse spawned in response to *Jane Eyre*, while itself becoming an iconic text in academic discourses on feminism, postcolonialism, and revisionary writing. It was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ground breaking essay ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’ (1985) that famously observed how Rhys’ revision of Brontë’s novel destabilises and challenges the patriarchal and imperialist framework for Brontë’s Madwoman.²⁶ According to Spivak, it is in Rhys’ revision of

²⁵ Laura E. Colmenero-Chilberg observes how ‘Gilman’s story gives us both a view of how women were controlled by the male application of the label ‘mad’ and how the imposition of that stigmatizing label may intensify the harmful effects of the mental disorder.’ Laura E. Colmenero-Chilberg, ‘Women’s Agency as Madness: “The Yellow Wallpaper” to Penny Dreadful,’ in *Mental Illness in Popular Culture*, ed. Sharon Packer (California: Praeger, 2017), 95.

²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,’ *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 243—261.

Brontë's text that 'feminism and a critique of imperialism become complicit' as Rhys 'keeps Bertha's humanity, indeed her sanity... intact.'²⁷ Since Spivak's reading, *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s reconfiguration of Brontë's text, particularly its representations of madness and mental illness, have been discussed as critiques of the imperialist and patriarchal assumptions of the 'mother-text' *Jane Eyre*.²⁸ Caroline Rody's revisionary study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* observes how Rhys 'recasts Bertha's madness' from *Jane Eyre* 'as the effect rather than the cause of her rejection by her husband, Rochester.'²⁹ Caminero-Santangelo notes how 'Rhys' re-vision of Brontë's text reveals that Rochester's ability to label his wife mad is supported by discourses that construct a binary between Subject and Other, while it underscores this binary's colonialist nature.'³⁰ Even Donaldson, from a feminist disability standpoint, recognises how Rhys' novel 'departs in important ways from *Jane Eyre*'s configuration of madness.'³¹

Despite *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s critique of the patriarchal and imperialist construction of Victorian madness, the text has also been subject to much criticism for actively reinforcing imperialist structures through its representations of non-white characters. In 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse' (1987), Benita Parry contests Spivak's reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial narrative, arguing that Spivak's reading 'does not pursue the text's representations of a Creole culture that is dependent on both' the English imperialist and the black Jamaican, or 'its enunciation of a specific settler discourse, distinct from the texts of imperialism.'³² According to Parry, 'just as Brontë's book invites the reader

²⁷ Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts,' 249.

²⁸ Ellen G. Friedman, 'Breaking the Master Narrative: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 119.

²⁹ Caroline Rody, 'Burning Down the House: The Revisionary Paradigm of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 303.

³⁰ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, 13.

³¹ Donaldson, 'Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman,' 91.

³² Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,' *Oxford Literary Review* 9, no. 1 (1987): 37.

via Rochester to see Bertha Mason as situated on the human/animal frontier... so does Rhys' novel via Antoinette admit her audience to the regulation settler view of the rebellious blacks.'³³ Victoria Burrows in *Whiteness and Trauma* (2004) furthers this argument, stating that 'in her attempt to construct Antoinette Cosway as driven mad by trauma... Rhys gets caught up in the thematics that such a reading implies.'³⁴ According to Burrows, the 'narrative of historical trauma reconfigured as individualised trauma actually participates in side-stepping the history of the more traumatised [O]ther, or examining the ways in which white and black histories of the West Indies overlap and interconnect.'³⁵

It is evident that Rhys does not completely destabilise the imperialist structures she writes against and, through her representation of non-white characters, actively enforces it. However, despite such representations, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does succeed in critiquing the Victorian imperialism and patriarchy underpinning the representation of madness in its 'mother-text,' *Jane Eyre*. It is *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s representations of both socially constructed madness and real mental illness, that I have drawn from in *Ecdysis* as I have also written back to the Victorian literary tradition of women's madness. Despite *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s questionable representation of race politics, it is Rhys' representation of gender conflicts and patriarchal oppression that makes her novel still widely regarded in feminist criticism, particularly the way that it highlights the relationship between patriarchal oppression and the social construction of women's madness.

Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' and Kate Jennings' *Snake*

As mentioned earlier, my decision to draw from both *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife' in

³³ Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories,' 37.

³⁴ Victoria Burrows, *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 30.

³⁵ Burrows, 30.

Ecdysis derived from the many untapped parallels between their narrative constructions and thematic concerns. Aside from the fact that Henry Lawson's life draws many parallels to that of Brontë's Edward Rochester — Lawson abused his wife, coincidentally also called Bertha, who was later placed in a mental asylum in England³⁶ — the way that his literature likens madness to racial, sexual, and gendered Otherness derives from the same Victorian ideals that influenced Brontë's creation of her famous Madwoman Bertha Rochester. Kay Schaffer has long discussed Lawson's misogyny, observing how he employs 'metaphors of [O]therness... to signify femininity' in his writing, and how madness functions as a 'phallogentric' device 'to protect and preserve the identity of the [S]elf.'³⁷ Annalisa Pes further observes how Lawson uses madness as a 'metaphor for a problematic, and often non-conforming, struggling identity that does not accept to be stereotyped in an anonymous "Other."'³⁸ Alternatively, Frank Moorhouse has argued that Lawson was likely a closeted homosexual, and consequently reads the drover's wife's encounters with Otherness as representative of Lawson's own struggle to conform to heteronormativity.³⁹ While it is not likely that Lawson was in any way influenced by Brontë, these readings show how the Victorian trope of madness as Otherness has been employed in both *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife.' I argue that it is this trope that has incited feminists to continue to reimagine and write back to both these narratives.

Unlike the 'paradigmatic status' acquired by *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the most well-known *Jane Eyre* rewrite, 'The Drover's Wife' has seen so many revisions and

³⁶ Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*, (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 113; Frank Moorhouse, 'Effeminacy, mateship, love: Lawson as the drover's wife,' *Griffith Review*, no. 58 (2017): 238—239.

³⁷ Kay Schaffer, 'Henry Lawson, the drover's wife and the critics,' in *Debutante nation: Feminism contests the 1890s*, ed. Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley, and Susan Sheridan (St Leonard's NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 201; Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, 124.

³⁸ Annalisa Pes, 'Damnation or Salvation: Journeys into Madness in Henry Lawson and Patrick White's Short Stories,' in *Ex-centric Writing: Essays in Madness in Postcolonial Fiction*, ed. Annalisa Pes and Susanna Zinato (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013), 157—158.

³⁹ Moorhouse, 'Effeminacy, mateship, love,' 239.

reinterpretations, that writing back to Lawson's story has become, as Kay Schaffer concludes, 'a national joke.'⁴⁰ This is certainly true of many of the responses by male creatives, from Murray Bail's 1975 response to Russell Drysdale's 1945 painting, to renditions by Frank Moorhouse (1980) and Craig Cormick (1998), to more comical reimaginings, such as Damien Broderick's 'The Drover's Wife's Dog' (1986). Even Ryan O'Neill's most recent work 99 *Reinterpretations of The Drover's Wives: Henry Lawson's Australian Classic* (2018), maintains and satirises this tradition.

By contrast, women writers have taken quite a different stance in responding to Lawson's story and the questions of gender relationships that it raises.⁴¹ Lawson's contemporary women writers, including his own mother Louisa with her essay 'The Australian Bush-woman' (1889), demonstrates how the real dangers facing Australian bush-women were not the 'prowling "swaggies", deceitful Aborigines and dangerous snakes' from the bush outside, but rather from 'within the domestic space of the hut itself, in the form of violent and abusive bush-husbands.'⁴² This is maintained in Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* (1902), a collection of 'horror bush tales' that demonstrate 'the victimisation of women' in the bush as 'a product of society than a battle against nature.'⁴³ For twentieth century feminists such as Barbara Jefferis and Anne Gambling, writing back to 'The Drover's Wife' came as a response to the various male-authored reworkings that continue to silence the woman, as she is silenced in Lawson's story.⁴⁴ Paradoxically however, though exposing the silence to which the woman is subject, such revisions often reinforce said silence, rather than break it, aligning them 'more closely to a reconstructive defence rather than a deconstruction

⁴⁰ Rody, 'Burning Down the House,' 300; Schaffer, 'Henry Lawson,' 205.

⁴¹ Sue Kossew, 'The violence of representation: Rewriting "The Drover's Wife,"' in *Writing Woman, Writing Place* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 34.

⁴² Kossew, 26.

⁴³ Déborah Scheidt, 'Mateship and The Female Body in Barbara Baynton's "Squeaker's Mate,"' *Ilha do Desterro* 68 no. 2 (May-August 2015): 71.

⁴⁴ Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 35.

of the bush legend' in male authored variations.⁴⁵ Twenty-first century feminist writing has seen a more intersectional approach to Lawson's tale, with Leah Purcell's 2016 play, adapted into a novel in 2019, presenting the first indigenous and postcolonial revisions of 'The Drover's Wife.' For Australian women writers, there exists a more politically driven tradition of writing back to 'The Drover's Wife' that seeks to engage with its discourse on gender, sexuality, and race, deconstructing the ways it challenges and reinforces oppressive structures.

Snake differs from other versions of 'The Drover's Wife' because it was never intended to be a version of Lawson's story. Having been frequently read as a 'descendant' of Lawson's story, *Snake* continues to be featured in anthologies on 'The Drover's Wife' as one of its many variations, and read against it in scholarship.⁴⁶ Sue Kossew in 'The violence of representation: Rewriting "The Drover's Wife"' (2003) argues that although *Snake* 'never announc[es] itself as a rewriting of "The Drover's Wife"', nevertheless contains enough implied references to the original Lawson story to justify its being read as a contemporary reworking of some of its underlying assumptions about gender politics and bush life.⁴⁷ More recently, Susan Pyke in 'Citizen Snake: Uncoiling Human Bindings for Life' (2017) describes *Snake* as challenging 'the colonial mastery' against the landscape 'in Lawson's crushing and mangling tale.'⁴⁸ However, it is Erik Jensen's 2017 essay on Kate Jennings that moves away from reading *Snake* as another version of Lawson's story. Through interviews with Jennings, Jensen attempts to establish the autobiographical roots of *Snake*, as a creative reflection of Jennings' childhood in rural New South Wales.⁴⁹ According to Jensen, 'the book

⁴⁵ Schaffer, 'Henry Lawson,' 207.

⁴⁶ Erik Jensen, *On Kate Jennings* (Carlton: Black Inc. in association with the University of Melbourne and State Library of Victoria, 2017), 89; Susan Pyke, 'Citizen Snake: Uncoiling Human-Bindings for Life,' in *The Materiality of Love: Essays on Affection and Cultural Practice*, eds. Anna Malinowska and Michael Gratzke (Milton: Routledge: 2017), 223—236; Frank Moorhouse, *The Drover's Wife*, 77—80; Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 24—42.

⁴⁷ Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 25.

⁴⁸ Pyke, 'Citizen Snake,' 231.

⁴⁹ Jensen, *On Kate Jennings*.

wasn't always called *Snake*. For a time it was *Goodbye to the Farm*.⁵⁰ Jensen's alternative analysis of *Snake* provides a detailed account of Jennings' relationship with her mother, which he confirms was the primary inspiration for writing Irene's character. Jensen states that 'Kate believes her mother was mentally ill' though she was never formally diagnosed.⁵¹ Jennings did not have a positive relationship with her mother but, the way she characterises Irene in *Snake* poses a direct critique of Lawson's representation of the Madwoman, by exploring both the patriarchal social construction of madness, and real mental illness triggered in response to the pressures of conforming to the established patriarchal norm.

Ecdysis draws from *Snake*'s representations of madness and mental illness which Jennings uses to expose and critique patriarchal oppression. Through her characterisations of Irene and Rex, modelled after her own parents, Jennings provides an alternative commentary on oppression by characterising it as subtle, manifesting internally through the thoughts and behaviours of those subject to it. I argue that Jennings' representation of gender politics, madness, and mental illness is what has allowed her novel to be read in relation to Lawson's story. As a narrative about a woman's struggle to conform to the established patriarchal norm, *Snake* contributes to the feminist tradition that engages with Lawson's story as commentary on Australian gender politics. When *Snake* is read as a version of 'The Drover's Wife,' there is a powerful shift in the representation of Lawson's traditions of Otherness. It is in *Snake* that Lawson's representation of madness as gendered and sexual Otherness comes to be critiqued. As Roland Barthes argues in 'The Death of the Author,' 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.'⁵² As such, it is despite Jennings' authorial intentions that her novel functions as a strong addition to the feminist tradition spawned in response to Lawson's story.

⁵⁰ Jensen, *On Kate Jennings*, 40.

⁵¹ Jensen, 37.

⁵² Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148.

In this exegesis I will trace the roots of *Ecdysis*' representations of madness and mental illness, to the literary and scholarly traditions surrounding two iconic Victorian texts: *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife.' Through my readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Snake*, my study will explore their representations of madness and mental illness, unpacking the ways that they challenge such representations in the Victorian narratives with which they are associated. I turn now to *Wide Sargasso Sea* to explore how I have drawn from Rhys' narrative and aesthetic representations of madness and mental illness.

Rewriting the Victorian Madwoman in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

It is known that Jean Rhys' motivation for writing her famous revision of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was to critique the way the normative heroine is empowered at the expense of the Other female antagonist: '[I] was vexed at [Brontë's] portrait of the "paper tiger" lunatic, the all wrong [C]reole scenes, and above all by the real cruelty of Mr Rochester.'⁵³ It was the representation of Bertha, as a silent racial, gendered, and sexual Other, that motivated Rhys to write her very direct response to *Jane Eyre*, by 'writ[ing] a life' for the silenced Madwoman.⁵⁴ In my process of writing back to *Jane Eyre* in *Ecdysis*, I first explored the ways Rhys critiques and transforms Brontë's configuration of madness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys uses the narratives of both Brontë's Bertha, and her mother, who is the perceived root of Bertha's madness in *Jane Eyre*, to unpack the Victorian patriarchal and imperialist social construction of madness. However, Rhys does not merely characterise madness as a symbol of feminist rage, as her narrative also illustrates the real psychological impacts of oppression and alienation. Furthermore, as Rhys writes her narrative directly into Brontë's, she also appropriates elements of Brontë's Gothicism, revising Brontë's aesthetic devices to expose the oppressive roots of Brontë's metaphorical use of madness. This chapter is divided into two sections, exploring the representation of the two Madwomen in Rhys' novel: Annette, and Antoinette. I will explore the ways in which Rhys frames these women as 'mad' under oppressive social structures, while revealing their individual traumas and experiences of mental illness stemmed from systematic oppression. As I read their representations as 'mad' women, I will observe how Rhys appropriates the stylistic techniques of Brontë's Gothicism to directly critique the Victorian trope of the Madwoman as imperialist and patriarchal.

⁵³ Jean Rhys to Francis Wyndham, April 14, 1964, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ed. Judith L. Raiskin, Norton Critical Editions (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 139.

⁵⁴ Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Vreeland, 'Jean Rhys: the Art of Fiction LXIV,' *Paris Review*, no. 76 (1979): 235.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's mother is perceived as the genetic root of Bertha's madness, as Bertha consequently inherits the 'germs of insanity.'⁵⁵ In *Wide Sargasso Sea* however, Rhys uses the narrative of Bertha's mother to further unpack the patriarchal elements of the social construction of madness, while also providing a more detailed representation of mental illness as real psychological distress. It was from Annette's narrative that I drew to write my character Vera's narrative of failed motherhood in *Ecdysis*, as Rhys uses Annette's position as a mother to explore some of the specifically gendered elements of madness and mental illness. Furthermore, by contrast to Antoinette's narrative, in which the madness of Brontë's Bertha is exposed as socially constructed through Rochester's oppressive gaze, it is through Annette's narrative that the real and even *embodied* effects of trauma from social oppression, are explored in more depth.

Through Annette's narrative, Rhys establishes the role of motherhood as essential to the performance of 'correct' femininity. Annette's psychological distress is first shown in response to her son Pierre's diagnosis: 'I don't know what the doctor told her or what she said to him but he never came again and after that she changed. Suddenly, not gradually. She grew thin and silent, and at last she refused to leave the house at all.'⁵⁶ This 'sudden' change in Annette's behaviour occurs following her 'failure' to perform her patriarchally assigned role as a mother. Her emotional response indicates a form of internalised sexism, as Pierre's disability is perceived as her own failure. It should also be noted the way in which Rhys writes Annette's psychological distress as an *embodied* condition, akin to physical illness, describing how Annette grew 'thin and silent' and 'kept her eyes shut and her hands clenched. A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep—it might have been cut with a

⁵⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 275.

⁵⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 10.

knife.⁵⁷ Immediately, the patriarchal construction of gender norms is established as both reinforcing the social construction of madness, and generating real mental illness through social oppression.

Annette's depressive mental state is further exacerbated by her family's loss of wealth under the emancipation act. However, unlike Antoinette who grows up during emancipation and 'd[oes] not remember the place when it was prosperous,' Annette has lived through the former age of slavery as the 'daughter' and 'widow of... slave-owner[s].'⁵⁸ It is due to this loss of wealth and consequent class shift, that Annette begins to speak of death: 'that would have been a better fate. To die and be forgotten and at peace. Not to know that one is abandoned, lied about, helpless.'⁵⁹ In an attempt to 'correct' her newfound Otherness — as an 'incorrect' mother and poor woman — she marries Mr Mason, who acts as the first patriarchal and Anglo-imperialist figure in the novel.

Mr Mason, who is a direct predecessor to Antoinette's husband, is immediately shown to perceive Annette as mad. When Annette expresses rational concerns for their safety from the former slaves, Mr Mason gaslights her by accusing her of talking 'wildly' and 'imagin[ing] enmity which does not exist.'⁶⁰ He further describes her as 'fly[ing] at [him] like a little wild cat' over his misuse of racial language, animalising her in accordance with Foucault's definition of the social construction of madness, as that of 'man in direct relation to his animality.'⁶¹ By referencing this perception, Rhys also directly critiques Brontë's characterisation of Bertha as a 'clothed hyena.'⁶² But Mr Mason's patriarchal dominance over his wife is asserted as he insists, she was 'never molested, never harmed.'⁶³ While insisting

⁵⁷ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 11.

⁵⁸ Rhys, 11, 19.

⁵⁹ Rhys, 12.

⁶⁰ Rhys, 19.

⁶¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 19; Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. Richard Howard (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 69.

⁶² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 263.

⁶³ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 19.

that Annette has not been subject to literal violence, it is his referral to specifically sexual violence that foreshadows Annette's rape that occurs later in the novel, due to her incarceration on account of Mr Mason's oppression.

The burning of the house in Coulibri is a racially motivated act of rebellion against the Cosways and Masons as imperialist oppressors. However, Annette's anger is not directed towards the former slaves, but towards her husband: 'I told you... you would not listen, you sneered at me, you grinning hypocrite, you ought not to live either.'⁶⁴ It is Annette's anger that marks her as socially mad, and leads to her incarceration, rather than her actual mental illness which is established long before this point, and ignored by Mr Mason. Furthermore, it is for threatening Mr Mason that Annette is labelled as 'mad' and, consequently, her incarceration acts as a means of control, a 'punishment' for her anger and defiance, rather than treatment for her mental illness.

Amidst the overt and internal forms of oppression in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette's rape demonstrates the most violent form of patriarchal oppression. Recent criticism has exposed Annette's rape as a demonstration of Rhys' internalised racism, as Annette's rapist is depicted using harmful racial stereotyping, as 'a fat black man with a glass of rum in his hand.'⁶⁵ This scene is also particularly problematic as black-on-white rape is used by a white writer to explore a gender-based conflict, whilst the other racial and class dynamics present are ignored. What does, however, remain significant in this scene is the act of rape itself which, even when considered with additional racial and class conflicts, remains fundamentally patriarchal. Chesler traces the patriarchal nature of rape by observing how 'rape has been systematically used by men of every class and race to destroy both their own women and the women of enemy men.'⁶⁶ Similarly, Ussher maintains that rape has been a

⁶⁴ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 24.

⁶⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 80; Jennifer Gilchrist, 'Women, Slavery, and the Problem of Freedom in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 462—463.

⁶⁶ Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 35.

part of patriarchal society ‘for as long as [patriarchy] has existed’ and has a history of being used to ‘celebrat[e] masculinity and power.’⁶⁷ While Annette is subject to sexual violence by a black man, Rhys instead uses her fate to expose Rochester and Mr Mason, the white Anglo men in the novel, as patriarchal and Anglo-imperialist oppressors.

Through the story of Annette’s rape, relayed by Antoinette in Part Two of the novel, Rhys critiques Brontë’s Anglo-imperialism and patriarchy in *Jane Eyre*. Through Antoinette’s dialogue, Rhys reveals how Mr Mason incarcerated Annette, abandoning her to her fate, while he moved to Trinidad and ‘almost forgot her.’⁶⁸ Mr Mason’s position of power as a white English man is revealed as, while Annette is subject to sexual violence due to her whiteness and her gender, Mr Mason escapes punishment. Through Antoinette’s narrative of her mother, Rhys also establishes Rochester’s position of power. Upon hearing Antoinette’s ‘side,’ he continues to dismiss Antoinette’s testimony: ‘I have tried to make you understand. But nothing has changed.’⁶⁹ Furthermore, as Rochester argues the end of slavery ‘was a question of justice,’ Antoinette calls his definition of justice a ‘lie’ insisting ‘my mother... what justice did she have?’⁷⁰ Through Annette’s rape, Rhys exposes the relative positions of power between the white characters in the novel as, unlike Annette, the white English men escape punishment for the sins of imperialism. Although Rhys reduces the experiences of the more marginalised black Jamaicans to props for her white Creole narrative, Annette’s rape serves to expose the patriarchal and Anglo-imperialist structures that inform the representations of Other women in *Jane Eyre*.

By contrast to Annette’s narrative of patriarchal oppression, for her daughter Antoinette, it is her Creole identity, demonstrated through her performativity of gender, sexuality, and race,

⁶⁷ Ussher, *Women’s Madness*, 31.

⁶⁸ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 80.

⁶⁹ Rhys, 77, 81.

⁷⁰ Rhys, 88.

that Rhys makes the focus of her critique of Brontë's depiction of madness. As Deirdre David argues, rather than 'allow us to think that filthy, crazed Bertha is a black woman,' Brontë's Madwoman 'is made more dreadful, even more obscene, even more monstrous, by virtue of the fact that she is a white [C]reole who behaves like a demented black person.'⁷¹ Although some critics have read Bertha as a black woman,⁷² it is Bertha's whiteness, made uncanny through her 'incorrect' performativity, that makes her truly 'monstrous' according to the Eurocentric Gothic. Madness is thus characterised not as the racialized Other, but as a corruption of the established norm of whiteness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is on Antoinette's white Creole identity, her 'hybridity,' as Homi Bhabha terms, that Rhys centres her revised representation of madness and mental illness.⁷³ Furthermore, and more significant to my own writing process, it is through Antoinette's in-betweenness that Rhys unpacks Brontë's aesthetic and metaphorical use of madness, dismantling the Eurocentric use of the uncanny and doubling devices. Although my discussion of socially constructed madness in *Ecdysis* focuses on gender and sexuality rather than race, I have drawn from the way Rhys challenges the imperialist Gothic of Brontë's text in writing against the white masculinist traditions of the Victorian high country.

Rhys establishes Antoinette's hybridity as both the basis of her socially constructed madness, and the source of her trauma and psychological distress. Antoinette frequently expresses her unhappiness with her hybridity as she 'often wonder[s] who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.'⁷⁴ While generating real psychological distress, it is also through Antoinette's conflict of identity, her inability to affirm her authentic Self, that Rhys applies her revision of Brontë's doubling aesthetics.

⁷¹ Deirdre David, *Rule Britannia: Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), 108—109.

⁷² Susan Meyer contests Spivak's reading of the 'native subject' in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by reading Brontë's Bertha as a black woman. Susan Meyer, "'Indian Ink': Colonialism and Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*," in *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1996), 63—95.

⁷³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54—55.

⁷⁴ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 61.

Annette acts as Antoinette's first double in the novel, foreshadowing Antoinette's own mental decline at the hands of an abusive husband. However, it is Antoinette's childhood friend Tia, Rhys' answer to Brontë's Helen Burns, who is Antoinette's most significant double, representative of Antoinette's authentic Creole Self. In *Jane Eyre*, the image of the double is used to enforce the socially established norm/Other binary, with Bertha acting as Jane's 'darkest double,' and Helen Burns presenting an 'impossible ideal' to Jane of feminine piety, embodying the archetypal 'Angel in the House.'⁷⁵ In *Wide Sargasso Sea* however, Rhys transforms Brontë's use of the Gothic double to instead explore the search for the authentic Self, amidst oppressive social structures that require inauthentic performativity as assimilation.

It was Spivak who famously read Tia as the 'Other who could not be Served' due to 'the fracture of imperialism,' as Tia signifies Antoinette's authentic Creole Self, which Antoinette cannot perform due to her 'alienating whiteness.'⁷⁶ It has been argued in more recent postcolonial criticism that Rhys' characterisation of Tia reinforces the same imperialist norm that Brontë projects through her Creolisation of Bertha.⁷⁷ While Rhys' representation of non-white ethnicities continues to justifiably be subject to criticism, my application of her doubling aesthetics in *Ecdysis* explores a conflict of gender and sexuality, rather than cultural identity and race. It is Rhys' use of the double to explore the search for the authentic Self, and its consequent rejection under oppressive structures, that I draw from in writing Grace's and Vera's experiences with internalised oppression.

When Antoinette's house in Coulibri is burnt by the former slaves, Antoinette's fractured identity is established through Tia's rejection:

⁷⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 360, 345; Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 235—242.

⁷⁶ Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts,' 250; Elizabeth Dalton, 'Sex and Race in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' *Partisan Review* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 433.

⁷⁷ Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories,' 37.

‘We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her... I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it... We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.’⁷⁸

In the Eurocentric Victorian Gothic of *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist must reject the deviant Other to uphold the established norms of patriarchy and imperialism. However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the protagonist is instead rejected by her double, as Antoinette is unwillingly forced to embody the inauthentic Anglo Self in her marriage to Rochester. Through her revision of Brontë’s doubling aesthetics, Rhys exposes the established norm as an oppressive social construct, as Antoinette is unable to embrace her authentic Creole Self. Furthermore, by showing Antoinette as being rejected by her authentic Self, Rhys establishes the foundation of Antoinette’s psychological distress, derived from her conflict of identity.

In Part Two of the novel, Rhys introduces Antoinette’s unnamed husband, and her allusion to Brontë’s Edward Rochester. As Antoinette’s husband takes over the narration, it is through his gaze that Antoinette’s Madwoman person and her predetermined fate in Brontë’s novel, are established. Upon Rochester’s marriage to Antoinette, her hybridity is immediately marked as uncanny and Other, as he observes ‘of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either.’⁷⁹ While marking Antoinette as Other for her ‘incorrect’ whiteness, Rochester’s patriarchal oppression towards Antoinette is established through his Victorian view of women’s madness, as something inherently female *and* hereditary.⁸⁰ Upon discovering that Antoinette ‘was [her] mother’s name,’⁸¹ Rochester renames Antoinette Bertha, attempting to strip her of her mother’s ‘germs of insanity’ and thus ‘correct’ her

⁷⁸ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 27.

⁷⁹ Rhys, 39.

⁸⁰ Through her study of the pseudo-mental illness hysteria, Showalter observes how the Victorians perceived madness as both inherently connected to female anatomy, and ‘the produc[t] of bad heredity.’ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 133.

⁸¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 68.

according to the Victorian norm of ‘sanity.’ Ironically however, it is through this process of renaming that Rhys identifies Brontë’s Rochester as the ‘true source’ of Bertha’s socially constructed madness, and an exacerbator of her mental illness. Rochester’s act of renaming, although working instead to ‘turn’ Antoinette into Brontë’s Madwoman, is a demonstration of Rochester’s oppression, as he forces her to perform a new, inauthentic Self that upholds the established Anglo norm. However, his attempt to ‘correct’ Antoinette is unsuccessful, as she objects to her new name, accusing Rochester of ‘trying to make [her] into someone else, calling [her] by another name.’⁸² Because the identity of Bertha is inauthentic for Antoinette, Rochester’s attempt is unsuccessful, and instead serves as a cause for her perceived madness: her anger, and her psychological distress.

The contrast between Rochester’s English, masculine norm and Antoinette’s Creole, feminine Other is further demonstrated through their juxtaposing focalisations of the Jamaican landscape. Gail Fincham observes how Antoinette’s ‘focalization of nature’ in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is ‘Rhys’s central strategy in dismantling Brontë’s text.’⁸³ According to Fincham, ‘where Jane Eyre’s focalization instrumentalizes nature, harnessing it to her own psychic development, Antoinette Cosway’s focalization refuses the instrumentalization of nature that results from the Nature/Culture binary in the Western master narrative of rationality.’⁸⁴ As the imperialist oppressor, Rochester’s perception of landscape embodies the Eurocentric norm, as he claims ‘everything around me was hostile... The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me. That green menace. I had felt it ever since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me.’⁸⁵ By contrast to Rochester, Antoinette expresses a strong affection for the

⁸² Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 88.

⁸³ Gail Fincham, ‘The Mind’s Eye: Focalizing “Nature” in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*,’ *English Academy Review* 27, no. 1 (2010): 16.

⁸⁴ Fincham, 21.

⁸⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 90.

landscape, as she ‘love[s] it more than anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person.’⁸⁶ Despite holding a deep affinity to the land, due to her hybridity, Antoinette’s connection is limited. As a child, Antoinette is unable to acquire the status of ‘insider’ compared to Tia’s black native position: ‘fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry.’⁸⁷ However, under Rochester’s imperialist gaze, Antoinette becomes an ‘insider’ as he assumes ‘this place is my enemy and on [her] side.’⁸⁸ Antoinette however, recognises the limitations of her connection to the land, as she explains that it is ‘not for you and not for me... That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else.’⁸⁹

While Antoinette and Rochester uphold contrasting focalisations of landscape, Rhys uses their opposing gazes to further demonstrate Rochester’s oppression towards Antoinette. As Fincham observes, ‘First [Rochester’s] paranoia about the flora, fauna and topography of the Caribbean destroys her delight in her island; then he forcibly removes her from her environment in their transplantation to England.’⁹⁰ However, Rochester does more than simply destroy Antoinette’s delight in her island, as his affliction of psychological trauma onto Antoinette is identified as the cause of this destruction. Antoinette insists ‘I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate... [Y]ou have spoilt it. It’s just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here.’⁹¹ Through this final statement, that ‘all the other things are nothing to what has happened here,’ Rochester’s oppression is identified as the primary source of Antoinette’s psychological distress. It is Rochester’s behaviour and his treatment towards her that Antoinette identifies as the greatest cause of her unhappiness, more so than her alienating cultural hybridity.

⁸⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 53.

⁸⁷ Rhys, 13.

⁸⁸ Rhys, 78.

⁸⁹ Rhys, 78.

⁹⁰ Fincham, ‘The Mind’s Eye,’ 15.

⁹¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 88.

In my writing of queerness as a form of socially constructed madness in *Ecdysis*, I have considered the ways in which Rhys depicts the perception of non-normative sexualities as Other under imperialist and patriarchal power structures. In addition to her gender and racial performativity, Antoinette's sexuality further serves to categorise her as Other. According to Nicola Nixon, the 'assumption in *Wide Sargasso Sea*' is 'that the lost voice in *Jane Eyre* was... the voice of female passion.'⁹² In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's sexuality is used to position her as a Madwoman, as 'sexual irregularity' for the Victorians, as Foucault observes, 'was annexed to mental illness.'⁹³ For Bertha, this sexuality is deemed Other for its overtness, and its barrenness — two breaches of the Victorian norm of 'correct' sexuality, defined as within the marital sphere and for the purposes of procreation.⁹⁴ Additionally, Bertha's sexuality is heavily racialized and Orientalised, as descriptions of Bertha's body and non-white racial performativity are akin to the Victorian sexualisation of non-white bodies.⁹⁵

Despite their marriage, Antoinette's sexual relationship with Rochester is depicted as non-normative by patriarchal and imperialist standards, as it is not portrayed as an investment in procreation. Rhys maintains the barren representation of Brontë's Bertha, as the prospect of procreation and the establishment of a family are completely absent between Antoinette and Rochester. While they do not engage in 'correct' marital sex, Antoinette and Rochester's relationship is not romantic either, as Rochester confesses 'I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love.'⁹⁶ Instead, their sexual relationship is pleasure-based, as Rochester

⁹² Nicola Nixon, 'Wide Sargasso Sea and Jean Rhys's interrogation of the "nature wholly alien" in *Jane Eyre*,' *Essays in Literature* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 267.

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Random House, Inc. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 36.

⁹⁴ Foucault, 36—37.

⁹⁵ Patricia McKee reads Brontë's descriptions of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* against those of Sara Bartman: a black woman who was enslaved as the 'Hottentot Venus.' Bartman's body was sexualised by Victorian society as she was displayed in freak shows, while colonial scientists used her physicality to deem non-white bodies as more overtly sexual by nature. Patricia McKee 'Racial Strategies in *Jane Eyre*,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37, no. 1 (2009): 79.

⁹⁶ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 55.

describes how Antoinette ‘made [him] breathless and savage with desire.’⁹⁷ Rochester and Antoinette’s sexual relationship is further Othered according to Victorian values, as they engage in sadomasochism. Critics have continuously debated the psychological implications of Antoinette’s attraction to violent sexual submission. Elizabeth Dalton reads Antoinette’s masochism as ‘a deadly working of the repetition compulsion’ as, ‘with her husband, Antoinette experiences again the coldness and contempt’ she experienced as a child from her mother.⁹⁸ By contrast, Jennifer Gilchrist argues that ‘Antoinette’s sexual desire for submission’ actually functions as ‘a psychological corrective to her childhood neglect.’⁹⁹ Regardless of whether Rhys writes Antoinette’s masochism as a reinforcement of her psychological distress, or a means to cope with it, it is through Rochester’s response to her non-normative sexual desires that Rhys depicts the oppressive social construction of madness. While attempting to maintain the established, imperialist norm of rationality, it is Antoinette’s excess of passion that, according to Nixon, ‘transgress[es] the limits of Rochester’s relentless rationality.’¹⁰⁰ Rochester is shown to fear the limits they push in their sadomasochism: ‘it was not a safe game to play—in that place. Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness.’¹⁰¹ According to Dalton, Rochester begins to fear the prospect of becoming sexually Other through what he patriarchally and imperialistically perceives as sexual excess.¹⁰² Through his sexual relationship with Antoinette, Rochester’s perception of Antoinette as a Madwoman becomes apparent, through his Anglo-patriarchal view of ‘correct’ sexuality, combined with the imperialistic racialization of ‘incorrect’ and excessive sexualities.

⁹⁷ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 55.

⁹⁸ Dalton, ‘Sex and Race,’ 431, 437.

⁹⁹ Gilchrist, ‘Problem of Freedom,’ 476.

¹⁰⁰ Nixon, ‘nature wholly alien,’ 267.

¹⁰¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 56.

¹⁰² Gilchrist, ‘Problem of Freedom,’ 477.

Rhys' reconfiguration of Brontë's representation of madness has influenced the narrative and aesthetic strategies applied in *Ecdysis*. Through the narratives of Annette and Antoinette, Rhys gives a voice to the 'silent' Madwomen in *Jane Eyre*, exposing the oppression that leads these women to be marked as Other. By revising Brontë's Eurocentric Gothic, Rhys exposes and refutes Brontë's imperialist and patriarchal aesthetic that reinforces the social construction of madness. Furthermore, by exploring Annette and Antoinette's abuse by white English men, Rhys represents the real psychological distress experienced by the marginalised white Creole women in Brontë's novel.

(Re)Writing Madness and Mental Illness in Kate Jennings' *Snake*

As mentioned in my Introduction, my decision to study *Snake* as a version of 'The Drover's Wife,' despite Jennings' intentions, stemmed from her alternative discussion of patriarchal oppression from previous versions of Lawson's story. Although there is considerable feminist rewriting of 'The Drover's Wife' that engages with its traditions of Otherness, little of it speaks to its construction of madness within the Australian patriarchal sphere. In Lawson's short story, the drover's wife 'stands on a terrain between sanity and madness' as the established norm is reinforced through the defined 'boundaries... of what is "sane."' ¹⁰³ It is this same narrative trope applied in *Jane Eyre* that Rhys responds directly to in her revised representations of madness and mental illness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. However, while Rhys' novel explores more overt forms of social oppression, Jennings' representation of more subtle and internalised forms of oppression is what I have drawn from in writing internalised sexism and homophobia in *Ecdysis*.

This chapter will explore how Jennings' discussion of madness, mental illness, and systematic oppression speaks to the discussions of gender politics present in 'The Drover's Wife' and its subsequent revisions. I will explore how Jennings' depictions of madness and mental illness provide an alternative representation of patriarchal oppression, not as the physical threat of men, but as something systematic and internalised that affects members of all genders who must maintain and preserve their roles within patriarchal society. I will read Jennings' character Irene as a drover's wife figure, observing how she encompasses the image of the Madwoman through her active defiance of the established patriarchal norm, while experiencing real mental illness derived from systematic and internalised oppression. By reading Rex as a drover figure, I will demonstrate how Jennings' characterisation reforms

¹⁰³ Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, 137; Ussher, *The Madness of Women*, 73.

those of previous feminist revisions, as her discussion of patriarchal oppression is broadened to explore the normative standards of masculinity and their impact on men's mental health. I will explore Jennings' use of the motif of the snake as a fluid and often contradictory image, to depict the fragility of socially constructed norms, such as those reinforced by Lawson's use of the snake in 'The Drover's Wife.' Finally, I will end with a discussion of Jennings' representation of lesbianism which, though only enacted as a form of hetero-feminist rebellion, is among the first examples of queerness used in a drover narrative, and was my inspiration to queer Lawson's heroine in my own novella.

At the beginning of her narrative, Irene is depicted as actively defying established patriarchal gender norms, aligning her to the image of the Madwoman as a feminist rebel. She is established as being a reckless woman, 'notorious for breaking the rules,' with a tendency to 'quicke[n] in the company of the opposite sex.'¹⁰⁴ In addition to her rebelliousness and overt sexuality, Irene's gender performance is deemed 'incorrect' as she 'kept forgetting herself' at her wedding before being 'checked' and told to walk with 'smaller, more ladylike steps.'¹⁰⁵ Immediately, Irene is depicted as socially 'mad' through her active defiance of patriarchal standards of femininity. However, the psychological impacts of patriarchal oppression are quickly revealed through Irene's marriage to Rex.

In 'The Genus Iris,' the early period of Irene and Rex's marriage is painted as the archetypal nuclear family unit in post-World War II New South Wales. Irene and Rex commit to performing of their assigned gender roles with Rex buying Irene a 'Singer sewing machine' to make clothes for the children, and a 'Hoover twin-tub washing machine,' into which she 'fed his mud-encrusted overalls.'¹⁰⁶ Irene also learns to bottle fruit and garden,

¹⁰⁴ Jennings, *Snake*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Jennings, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Jennings, 40.

allowing herself small, contained breaches of the established norm, as ‘ahead of her time, she planted natives.’¹⁰⁷ However, in the chapter following, ‘Crown’d with Snakes,’ Irene and Rex’s temporary conformity and ‘happiness’ is dismantled as their psychological distress is revealed, with ‘Irene’s moods fill[ing] the house’ and ‘Rex... pinned by them.’¹⁰⁸ Irene attempts to perform her assigned role, and to maintain an inauthentic performance of saneness, as she ‘woke determined to be cheerful, but by the middle of the day some small thing plunged her into a fury.’¹⁰⁹ She further harbours her distress by ‘knitt[ing] her lips,’ literally silencing herself as the Madwoman figure has been silenced throughout history, but later, ‘in the bedroom, the children asleep, she unknitted her lips and words poured from her, black as pitch.’¹¹⁰

It is Irene’s incorrect performance as a wife and mother that deems her Other according to the patriarchal norm. However, in the sphere of the Australian bush, gender norms manifest slightly differently, as women may frequently masculinise themselves when encountering the harsh landscape. In *Snake* as well as ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ the notion that ‘a country woman should be able to do everything her husband could and more’ is ever present.¹¹¹ Consequently, motherhood takes on a vital role in the construction of femininity in the bush, as women who adopt masculine performativities must therefore be reminded of their ‘place’ according to patriarchal discourse. As Schaffer observes in her reading of Lawson, a woman in the bush ‘can be phallic so long as she is also, and above all, a maternal woman.’¹¹² As an unmaternal woman, it is Irene’s inability to perform ‘correctly’ as a mother, far more than her unfeminine behaviour, that deems her Other according to bush patriarchy, and fuels her psychological distress.

¹⁰⁷ Jennings, *Snake*, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Jennings, 42.

¹⁰⁹ Jennings, 42.

¹¹⁰ Jennings, 43.

¹¹¹ Jennings, 65.

¹¹² Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, 135.

In the chapter ‘Who Would Live in a Country Town?’ with the birth of Irene’s first child, Irene’s failure to perform her newly-assigned role as a mother is used to explore the closely tied relationships between social oppression, mental illness, and socially constructed madness. Upon giving birth to Girlie, Irene compares herself to a cat she saw give birth, but ‘something was wrong with the cat’s instincts’ as it then proceeded to eat its newborn kitten.¹¹³ Irene blames her ‘instincts’ for her inability to conform to her assigned role, as she assumes, based on the essentialist ideology that motherhood is something fundamentally connected to the uterus, that she must be ‘incorrectly’ female. Irene’s psychological distress is shown as she is brought ‘on the edge of hysteria’ by the birth.¹¹⁴ Jennings’ choice of the word ‘hysteria’ deliberately references the taxonomy of the sexist social construction of madness, by acknowledging the nineteenth century pseudo-disease, its name derived ‘from the Greek word for the womb,’ that was used as a tool for social control against non-normative women.¹¹⁵ However, it is Irene’s angry response to her struggle, her rejection of her role, that leads her to be socially perceived as mad, as the midwife hears her cursing her child and ‘soon the whole town knew about Irene’s rebellion.’¹¹⁶ In this section, both socially constructed madness and real mental illness are presented through their relationships to the established patriarchal norm, as Jennings demonstrates Irene’s internal struggle to perform her assigned role, and the punishment she receives for her inability to do so.

Irene is the focus of *Snake*, but it is Rex who captures the reader’s empathy. Based on her own father, Rex is a relatively silent character, ‘imprisoned in loneliness’ and ‘suffocating’ under the weight of his marriage.¹¹⁷ ‘He hardly spoke,’ Jennings says about her father. ‘We

¹¹³ Jennings, *Snake*, 36.

¹¹⁴ Jennings, 37.

¹¹⁵ Ussher, *The Madness of Women*, 18, 76; Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 145.

¹¹⁶ Jennings, *Snake*, 37.

¹¹⁷ Jennings, 12, 42.

ate quickly and got away. We didn't talk at the dinner table.'¹¹⁸ *Snake*'s authentic representation of mental illness and its relationship to social oppression is not retained to Irene as Rex provides an alternative representation of patriarchal oppression. Through Rex's narrative of male madness and mental illness, Jennings provides a shift from both Victorian depictions of the feminised man, and the later feminist archetype of the 'mad,' abusive husband. In feminist rewrites of 'The Drover's Wife,' patriarchal oppression is usually personified through the drover himself or other white male characters. For turn-of-the-century feminist writing, such as by Louisa Lawson and Barbara Baynton, this is demonstrated through domestic and other patriarchal forms of violence.¹¹⁹ Later, mid-twentieth century feminist writers, such as Barbara Jefferis and Anne Gambling, continue to personify the patriarchal oppressor, although oppression is more subtle through 'the silencing of the woman character.'¹²⁰ In *Snake* however, Rex is also seen to 'go mad' as he struggles with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of the Second World War, and eventually takes his own life after Irene leaves him. Both social constructionists and feminist disability theorists observe the relationship between patriarchal oppression and male mental illness. As Chesler argues, 'what we consider "madness," whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype.'¹²¹ Furthermore, Nicki observes how 'cultural concepts of irrationality and sexist norms of mental health marginalize people with mental illnesses in attacking their personhood.'¹²² By highlighting Rex's struggle to conform to his assigned gender role, Jennings provides a different commentary on masculinity and mental illness to

¹¹⁸ Jennings, *On Kate Jennings*, 20.

¹¹⁹ Louisa Lawson, 'The Australian Bush-woman,' in Moorhouse, *The Drover's Wife*, 81—9; Barbara Baynton, *Bush Studies* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965); Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 26; Scheidt, 'Mateship and The Female Body,' 71.

¹²⁰ Barbara Jefferis, 'The Drover's Wife,' in Moorhouse, *The Drover's Wife*, 237—52; Anne Gambling, 'The Drover's De Facto,' in Moorhouse, *The Drover's Wife*, 91—102; Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 35.

¹²¹ Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 116.

¹²² Nicki, 'The Abused Mind,' 81.

other feminist reworkings of 'The Drover's Wife,' by exploring the impact of patriarchal gender norms on male psychology.

Despite his relative position of privilege to the women in the novel, patriarchal oppression is also at the root of Rex's depression as he too is unable to conform to his assigned role. Similar to Brontë's Rochester and Rhys' unnamed allusion to Brontë's character, Rex is also the unlucky brother who loses out in inheritance as 'the farm couldn't support two sons.'¹²³ In both Brontë's and Rhys' novels, Rochester uses this issue as the reason for his abusive behaviour towards his wife. In Jennings however, Rex's position opens a discussion about men's mental illness and its relationship to enforced gender roles. As an ex-serviceman, Rex is also shown to have post-traumatic stress disorder as he 'refused to talk about the war with anyone.'¹²⁴ When the children ask Rex if he 'killed any Japs,' Rex dismisses their questions and tells them to 'go and play' — 'What would I want to talk about that for?'¹²⁵ While Rex is characterised as a traumatised ex-serviceman, it is through his marriage to Irene, and his inability to perform his assigned role as a husband, that Jennings shows Rex's declining mental health. The very first chapter 'Poor Devil' paints Rex as unfitting of the dominant masculine presence in the family as Irene 'emasculates' him 'with the sure blade of her contempt.'¹²⁶ Unlike the abusive drover figures present in early feminist bush literature, 'it was not in Rex to exhibit temper.'¹²⁷ When he argues with Irene, he 'just st[an]d[s] there, arms dangling' and begs Irene to 'have a heart.'¹²⁸ It is when Irene leaves Rex that the extent of Rex's mental illness is shown through his violent and suicidal thoughts, as he considers 'picking up his shotgun, shooting her, turning the gun on himself.'¹²⁹ This is

¹²³ Jennings, *Snake*, 6.

¹²⁴ Jennings, 53.

¹²⁵ Jennings, 53—54.

¹²⁶ Jennings, 3.

¹²⁷ Jennings, 45.

¹²⁸ Jennings, 45.

¹²⁹ Jennings, 142.

the only expression of violence that Rex shows towards his wife and, unlike the archetypal abusive husband present in other feminist narratives of madness, Rex's violence is only imaginary. Instead, he kills himself by driving into the Murrumbidgee River, leaving 'no note for Girlie and Boy.'¹³⁰ The emotional strain of a loveless marriage takes a toll on Rex's mental health but, it is the emasculating nature of his marriage and how it prevents him from performing his assigned role, that has the largest impact. This discussion of men's mental health, and its relationship to patriarchy, sets Jennings' narrative apart from other feminist reworkings of 'The Drover's Wife.' As Butler has argued, 'those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished' and it is through Jennings' characterisation of Rex that the oppressive impact of patriarchy on all genders, including privileged genders, is shown through its systematic reinforcement of its established norm.¹³¹

The most significant aspect of Jennings' novel that has caused it to be read as a drover narrative, is the multilayered presence of literal and metaphorical snakes. It is Jennings' use of the changing and contradictory significance of snakes that I have drawn from in my motif of the snakeskin in *Ecdysis*, particularly in my representation of the fluidity and subjectivity of the social construction of madness. In Australian literature, snakes serve as a national motif that connects the reader to the place of the text and on the surface, the snake 'becomes an index of being "at home" or not in the bush, as well as the inherent dangers of the bush itself.'¹³² However, for Jennings, the change of her title from *Goodbye to the Farm* to *Snake* saw a shift away from the idea of home in the place of the bush. According to Jensen, 'Kate liked the way the meanings' of the snake 'criss-crossed and tangled. Some were at odds with others. "None of the meanings were without malice," she said. "And so I tried to hold the

¹³⁰ Jennings, *Snake*, 148.

¹³¹ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden; Oxford; Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 903.

¹³² Kossew, 'violence of representation,' 41.

book together with that idea.”¹³³ Snakes feature heavily in the text, all of them embodying varying and often contradictory meanings. Each character has a very different relationship with snakes from Girlie’s terrified fascination, to Rex’s knack for ‘decapitating’ them ‘with a shovel,’ to Irene’s belief that ‘snakes were necessary to the balance of nature.’¹³⁴ The snakes in chapter titles encompass biblical and national images, but also mythological and modern references such as ‘Crown’d with Snakes,’ a reference to Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and ‘In Sicily, the Black, Black Snakes are Innocent, the Gold are Venomous’ from D.H. Lawrence. According to Kossew, Jennings ‘both endows and empties the symbol of signifying power’ as the snake ‘is not firmly anchored to any one character or event, either symbolic or realistic... subject to endless configuring, like the figure of the drover’s wife herself.’¹³⁵ The way that Jennings writes the changing nature of the snake captures the ideas of madness and mental illness at the centre of *Snake*, while allowing the novel to be tied to the literary traditions of ‘The Drover’s Wife.’ By making Irene the focus of the narrative as ‘the snake in the book’s title,’¹³⁶ Jennings uses Irene’s madness and mental illness, her contrary and unpredictable nature represented by the snake, to ‘hold the book together.’

Jennings’ use of lesbianism is what inspired me to write a queer narrative based on ‘The Drover’s Wife.’ While Jennings’ use of homosexuality explores heterosexual appropriations of queer performativity to challenge the established norm, it was the presence of queerness in *Snake*, and queer characters, that inspired me to write a lesbian figure based on the drover’s wife. As mentioned earlier, having been so frequently read as a version of ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ *Snake* is consequently one of the first drover narratives to explore queerness. Irene and Rex are both heterosexual characters, but they both experience encounters with members of

¹³³ Jensen, *On Kate Jennings*, 55.

¹³⁴ Jennings, *Snake*, 85, 116.

¹³⁵ Kossew, ‘violence of representation,’ 41.

¹³⁶ Jamie Grant, ‘Have a Heart,’ review of *Snake*, by Kate Jennings, *Quadrant*, no. 42 (July/August 1998): 118.

the same sex that are coded with homoeroticism. Although neither encounter is explicit, Jennings uses these encounters to Other her characters further according to the patriarchal norm. With Rex, this is more subtly executed, through a drunken encounter with a former army mate with whom Rex ‘dance[s] a tango,’ the two falling ‘in a heap... giggling like girls’ — a very direct satire of the patriarchal and heteronormative ideas that encompass Australian mateship.¹³⁷ For Irene however, it is a more intimate, more detailed friendship with a German migrant who comes to Progress on a motorcycle with her girlfriend.

Although queerness is present in *Snake*, it is framed through a patriarchal understanding of gender norms, as opposed to a heteronormative view of romantic and sexual relationships. According to Jennings, ‘Mum was one for experimenting. Her reaction to that one was, “Well, I tried men, so I thought I’d try women.”’¹³⁸ It is Hildegard’s ‘foreignness’ that Irene finds appealing.¹³⁹ However, this ‘foreignness’ is not her German cultural identity but her gender, as it is explained that ‘Irene had no women friends.’¹⁴⁰ As a heterosexual woman, Irene’s attraction to Hildegard’s lesbianism is based on a hetero-feminist view of sexuality that deems same-sex relationships between women as non-patriarchal and anti-compulsory heteronormativity, rather than an expression of homosexual orientation. It is Hildegard’s Otherness — her open defiance of the gender and sexual norms assigned to her — that attracts Irene.

In representing lesbianism, Jennings draws out Hildegard’s and Audrey’s gender performances rather than their sexual behaviour to position them as Other within the community of Progress. While their overt lesbianism is ‘beyond [the] ken’ of the community, their masculine appearances deem them ‘plain janes’ as the town wonders why they make no

¹³⁷ Jennings, *Snake*, 57.

¹³⁸ Jennings, *On Kate Jennings*, 34.

¹³⁹ Jennings, *Snake*, 88.

¹⁴⁰ Jennings, 88.

effort to ‘make themselves more attractive to men.’¹⁴¹ It is their sexual unavailability to men demonstrated by their ‘incorrect’ gender performances, more so than their homosexual behaviour, that deems Hildegarde and Audrey Other within the community. The women are further ‘prescribed’ a remedy for their masculine appearances: ‘a little lipstick — lippie — or a chiffon scarf knotted at the neck.’¹⁴² The choice of the word ‘prescribed,’ which bears medical connotations, also alludes to the classification of homosexuality as mental illness during the mid-twentieth century. By acknowledging this classification, Jennings recognises the impact of socially constructed ideas of madness, and how they have prejudiced the scientific understanding of mental illness.¹⁴³ This remedy also applies to their clothing, which consciously acknowledges the performative nature of gender, as it is their ‘incorrect’ performances that deem them Other within the community. Consequently, by changing their ‘costume’ the women may then ‘correct’ their gender performances, and therefore be ‘cured’ of their sexual deviance which is perceived as an extension of their gender.

Irene engages in an intimate friendship with Hildegarde, though no explicit sexual acts take place between them. As a heterosexual woman, lesbianism appeals to Irene as something potentially non-patriarchal, in much the same way that madness has been adopted by feminist writers to demonstrate rebellion. As Jennings codes Irene’s relationship with Hildegarde with homoeroticism, Jennings aligns much queer imagery to images of madness. While camping with the children, Irene and Hildegarde go skinny-dipping together at night, ‘their naked bodies sh[i]n[ing] against the dark river, luminous and indefinite as ghosts.’¹⁴⁴ As the night-time setting is used to allude to lunar images of madness, Irene intentionally adopts a ‘mad’ persona in this scene as she does a ‘war dance... whooping, lifting her legs

¹⁴¹ Jennings, *Snake*, 87.

¹⁴² Jennings, 87.

¹⁴³ Nicki, ‘The Abused Mind,’ 83.

¹⁴⁴ Jennings, *Snake*, 95.

up, running in circles.’¹⁴⁵ Aside from her gender performance and sexual behaviour with Hildegard, Irene further rejects normative behaviour by rejecting whiteness as well — not by trying to perform as not-white or native, but as a white caricature of the native as ‘mad.’ In this scene, Irene consciously presents herself as Other by appropriating homosexuality and non-whiteness. In her active rebellion against the established norm, Irene demonstrates the same ‘mad’ rebellion that characterises the metaphorical literary representations of the Madwoman. By using the Otherness or ‘foreignness’ of lesbianism to defy the hetero-patriarchal norm, Jennings frames Irene’s encounter with lesbianism, not as an expression of homosexual orientation, but as a form of feminist rebellion.

Described by Jensen as ‘the great Australian novel,’ *Snake* builds upon traditions established by Australian and feminist writing, through its vivid portrayal of bush life, the enforcement of gender norms, and the psychological impacts of systematic oppression.¹⁴⁶ Based on her childhood experiences, Jennings’ portrayal of madness and mental illness speaks to a long tradition in Australian feminist writing of exposing and challenging patriarchal oppression; a tradition that has been heavily mapped in literature surrounding ‘The Drover’s Wife.’

Through her characterisations of Irene and Rex, who have come to be read as wife and drover, Jennings’ novel stands as a critical feminist revision of Lawson’s tale, as it provides a profound representation of the hardships of a loveless marriage, and the struggle to maintain the patriarchal ideal of the bush family. Through her use of the motif of snakes, unpacking their multilayered and contradictory nature both literally and metaphorically, Jennings exposes the fluidity of the socially constructed norm, while capturing the unpredictable and changing nature of real mental illness. By choosing to include lesbianism, Jennings also

¹⁴⁵ Jennings, *Snake*, 95.

¹⁴⁶ Jensen, *On Kate Jennings*, 15.

incidentally expands the drover literary tradition, as well as Australian literature about women's madness, to explore female queerness as another form of socially constructed madness under patriarchy. Drawing from Jennings' methods, I now turn to my own novella, to discuss my creative process in writing a lesbian drover narrative that explores the social construction of madness, and the experience of real mental illness triggered by systematic oppression.

Queering the Victorian Madwoman: Rewriting Madness and Mental Illness in *Ecdysis*

‘The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath.’

— Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The previous chapters have demonstrated the many parallels between the feminist traditions spawned in response to *Jane Eyre* and ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ particularly their Victorian representations of madness and mental illness. Through my readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Snake*, I have interrogated how such feminist works revise Victorian representations of madness and mental illness, using them as narrative tools to expose and critique social oppression. In this final chapter, I will engage directly with my novella *Ecdysis* to explore how I have drawn from the narrative traditions of madness and Otherness established in Victorian works, and the revisions of such representations by successive feminist writers. I will explore how I have drawn from signature narrative points in *Jane Eyre* and ‘The Drover’s Wife’ to create my own narrative that challenges the patriarchal representations of gender, sexuality, madness, and mental illness. I will discuss the historical context of the early 1950s, observing the ways I have used the social politics and psychiatric practices of this period to explore the social construction of madness as Otherness, as well as the experience of oppression-based mental illness. I will explore how I have used the Australian landscape to revise the Victorian representations of Otherness, writing against the existing imperialist, masculinist artistic traditions of the Australian bush, particularly the Victorian high country. Having explored Rhys’ revision of Brontë’s Gothic configuration of madness, I will discuss how I have drawn from Rhys’ use of doubling to explore the fractured identities

of the queer women in my narrative. Finally, I will discuss the ending of my novella as a point of departure from the existing feminist traditions surrounding the Madwoman, while also embracing more current traditions in fiction that empower queer narratives.

Queering the Victorian Narrative: *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife'

Drawing from the narratives of *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife,' I have reworked key plot points from both texts, in which their female protagonists encounter Otherness, and are threatened with the prospect of deviating from the established norm. In Lawson, this is the drover's wife's encounter with the snake; and in Brontë, Jane Eyre's central encounter with Bertha Rochester. As Grace, my own Jane Eyre, meets Vera, my drover's wife and Bertha Rochester, I simultaneously rework the Victorian narratives of madness by posing the following questions: What if the snake that enters the drover's wife's home were instead a lesbian lover? What if Jane Eyre, in coming to Thornton Hall, had fallen in love with Bertha instead of Edward Rochester? While I have drawn from the central confrontations in these texts, I have also drawn from another significant narrative point in *Jane Eyre* to inform my exploration of specifically internalised forms of oppression, as well as the representation of queerness in my narrative. Helen Burns, who is often read as a moral guide or maternal figure for Jane, incites the beginning of the ongoing shift in Jane's behaviour, away from the rage and passion she displays as a child, towards a normative woman who represses such Otherness.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, there are readings of *Jane Eyre* that identify the potential for queer-coding in Jane's relationship with Helen. Mary Armstrong observes how Jane's relationship with Helen 'opens up female homoerotics and then compresses them below the heteroerotic surface.'¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Patricia Smith identifies how Helen's narrative

¹⁴⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 346.

¹⁴⁸ Mary A. Armstrong, 'Reading a Head: "Jane Eyre," Phrenology, and the Homoerotics of Legibility,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33, no. 1 (2005): 118.

demonstrates an ‘authorial’ form of ‘lesbian panic’ (a narrative device which I will explore later in this chapter) wherein ‘the woman writer creates a compelling and “dangerous” (and thus interesting) female character only to destroy her so that the narrative ideologies of institutional heterosexuality may be fulfilled.’¹⁴⁹ It was both Helen’s moral instruction and her affection shared with Jane that inspired me to develop Grace’s internalised homophobia through her childhood relationship with Mary Crawford.

Mary is immediately established as being a childhood love interest for Grace who recalls, during her time at the orphanage, being comforted by Mary after waking from a bad dream. Grace describes how she ‘felt a lightness, a quickening through [her] heart,’ and regards the moment as ‘the first act of kindness someone ever showed [her].’ [9] While awakening Grace’s undiscovered lesbian desire, Mary also provides Grace with the same teaching of repression as Helen provides Jane. When Grace recalls being punished for her left-handedness, it is Mary Crawford who offers her a sock to cover her hand, saying ‘the nuns wouldn’t object... not once they saw [her] writing properly.’ [12] My choice to make Grace left-handed gives way to multiple levels of meaning as left-handedness has a similar history to queerness, having been perceived and treated as something ‘sinister,’ ‘unnatural,’ and ‘queer,’ with many individuals subjected to trauma-inducing abuse for the sake of being ‘corrected.’ However, hands also have a specifically lesbian meaning as the most common means by which lesbian sexuality is practiced. While introducing Grace to her perceived Otherness, Mary also provides her with a means of harbouring that Otherness — an item of clothing, a literal closet. Just as Jane Eyre learns from Helen Burns to harbour her passion and Otherness, Grace learns from Mary Crawford to repress her own Otherness — her queerness, connoted by her left-handedness.

¹⁴⁹ Patricia Juliana Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women’s Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 10.

Historical Context

Drawing from Jennings' representations of patriarchal oppression in *Snake*, I have set my novella in the early 1950s to engage with the period's social politics surrounding gender and sexuality. The post-World War II setting has allowed me to explore the social and psychological impacts of the return to civilian life, particularly the resurrection of traditional gender roles for women. More significantly however, it has enabled me to draw from the oppressive history of the social construction of madness, and how the oppressive structures upon which it is based continue to manifest. It is well known that historically, the practice of psychiatry, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was infamously prejudiced by oppressive social structures. The effects of this prejudice have been immortalised in extensive literature, from Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). Setting my novella in the early 1950s has enabled me to use the oppressive psychiatric practices employed in Australian asylums in the post-World War II period, to deepen my representation of gendered and sexual oppression, socially constructed madness, and trauma-based mental illness. I have written Vera's narrative of psychiatric treatment, giving her a diagnosis of 'puerperal insanity' (perinatal depression), which subjects her to the oppressive psychiatric practice of Insulin-Coma Treatment, or ICT.¹⁵⁰ Although ICT began to be phased out in the late 1940s on perinatal patients, and was predominantly used for schizophrenic patients,¹⁵¹ I have chosen to use ICT in *Ecdysis* as a way of exploring the power dynamics within psychiatric practices during this period, particularly towards women and queer people. More significantly however, the actual

¹⁵⁰ Although 'puerperal insanity' was removed from medical texts in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, I have chosen to use it in my novella due to Alison Watts' study of maternal insanity cases in Victoria, Australia. Watts observes how 'puerperal insanity' continues to appear in medical journals until 1951. Alison Watts, 'Maternal insanity in Victorian Australia: 1920—1973' (PhD diss., Southern Cross University, 2015), 212.

¹⁵¹ Watts, 'Maternal insanity in Victoria Australia,' 257; Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 205.

procedure of ICT has allowed me to explore Vera's psychological distress in more aesthetic and literary terms.

Showalter describes the procedure of ICT: 'patients were given injections of insulin to reduce their blood-sugar level and to induce hypoglycemic shock, which produced convulsions or a coma. After twenty minutes to an hour they were revived by the intravenous injection of glucose.'¹⁵² By being subject to ICT, Vera is ironically made to re-live her suicide attempt, repetitively bestowed with the prospect of dying: 'at Mayday Hills, when they put me to sleep, I thought, each time, now it shall happen. I let them do it, because I thought it would kill me. But they refused to let me die.' [55] Rather than attempting to 'cure' Vera of her mental illness, her treatment acts as a punishment for attempting suicide, and for not harbouring her symptoms through a normative performativity of saneness. Furthermore, upon returning home, Vera's treatment of performing 'light domestic work' [6] centres around assuming 'correct' gender performativity, although she maintains small moments of defiance by choosing instead to draw and press native plants.

The psychiatric paradigm during the 1950s has also allowed me to explore other forms of social oppression, namely homophobia. Jill Matthews observes how in mid-twentieth century Australia, 'lesbianism was formally classified as a mental illness,' and consequently 'lesbians could be subjected to medical persecution' from 'incarceration in psychiatric institutions — often against their will,' to 'treatment... by a variety of horrific therapies.'¹⁵³ However, despite this classification and these practices, the medical persecution of lesbians was significantly less to male homosexuality, due to the patriarchal and phallogentric view that deemed 'sexual relations between women impossible.'¹⁵⁴ Although neither Vera nor Grace is incarcerated for their lesbianism, the knowledge of homosexuality's

¹⁵² Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 205.

¹⁵³ Jill Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Sydney; London; Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 118.

¹⁵⁴ Matthews, 118.

classification as mental illness causes serious anxiety for Grace. Upon having sex with Vera, Grace fears the social implications of their relationship, as she stresses to Vera, who has experienced life inside an asylum, ‘you know what they do to them.’ [48] For Grace, it is the medical perceptions of homosexuality that have a greater impact on her mental health, than the more overt forms of homophobia she experiences in her loss of employment and her rejection from her unnamed love interest in Melbourne. Grace’s fear that she will be marked as ‘mad,’ like her patient Vera, has the biggest impact on her mental health, already weakened from a lifetime of systematic oppression.

Landscape

My choice to set my narrative in the Victorian high country arose from a desire to write against the location’s existing white masculinist literary tradition. With works such as Banjo Patterson’s ‘The Man from Snowy River,’ the high country mythos projects an image of the bush as a wild, untamed space, where native and introduced species must be mastered by white men. As I have written back to two Victorian works within which patriarchy is framed through an imperialistic lens, I have also written my queer women’s narrative into a landscape where voices that do not embody the norm of the white, straight man, are frequently silenced. In my narrative, the bush with its perceived wildness and sublimeness becomes a place of opportunity for marginalised groups, namely queer women, who have for the most part been absent in the high country mythos. For my characters, the bush becomes a place to embrace the authentic Self away from the normative sphere where the Self is perceived and marked as Other. This is not unlike many gay and lesbian pastoral narratives in which ‘the natural idyll constructs a fantasy-like space where... same-sex love and desire can

flourish, free from censure or punishment.’¹⁵⁵ However, unlike many pastoral narratives, including queer pastorals, that embrace the imperialist and masculinist tradition of ‘taming’ the landscape, it is the natural, untouched environment of the bush where my characters find their refuge and unveil their authentic Selves.

Writing against the imperialist metaphors for madness in the Australian landscape, I have frequently employed images of animals. As mentioned in my analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it was Foucault who observed how it is ‘the animality that rages in madness’ that ‘dispossesses man of what is specifically human in him.’¹⁵⁶ As explored in my previous chapter on Jennings, snakes have a particular place in literature due to their varying and often contradictory literal and metaphorical significance. My choice to queer the central image in ‘The Drover’s Wife’ and *Snake* arose from my desire to challenge the imperialist construction of ‘mad’ imagery, but also the creature’s changing nature, both realistically, and as a signifier. In ‘The Drover’s Wife,’ the snake is encoded with its Christian meaning, ‘bound by the long-held European cultural conflations between the snake and the Edenic devilish seducer.’¹⁵⁷ By contrast to this imperialist reading, for Australia’s First Nations peoples, there exists ‘systems of kinship’ that ‘undermine ideas of a “natural” human/snake antipathy.’¹⁵⁸

When Grace and Vera discover a snakeskin in the bush, Grace’s learned imperialistic view of the landscape is established through her ‘strong dislike for snakes.’ [18] This view is maintained by Ruth, who regards the snakeskin as an ‘unlucky’ presence when it is brought into the house. [22] By contrast, Vera demonstrates a fascination with the snakeskin which

¹⁵⁵ Although English’s study explores pastoral narratives about male homosexuality, this observation may also be applied to lesbian pastoral fiction. Elizabeth English, ‘Tired of London, Tired of Life: The Queer Pastoral in *The Spell*,’ in *Sex and Sensibility in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst*, ed. Mark Mathuray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 98.

¹⁵⁶ Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, 69.

¹⁵⁷ Pyke, ‘Citizen Snake,’ 229.

¹⁵⁸ Pyke, 223.

reinforces her perceived Otherness, as her ‘eyes’ grow ‘wide with wonder’ when she discovers it, and she proceeds to ‘cradl[e] her newly found treasure to her breast.’ [19] Throughout the novella, Grace’s process of unlearning her imperialistic view of snakes parallels her greater process of unlearning internalised homophobia. Furthermore, this journey towards embracing the authentic Self, by abandoning inauthentic, assimilating performativities, is projected through the motif of a snake shedding its skin, as suggested by my novella’s title ‘ecdysis.’¹⁵⁹ Grace’s relationship with clothing, specifically her nurse’s uniform, demonstrates her inauthentic performativity, as she feels physically uncomfortable in her uniform that ‘cl[i]ng[s] stiffly to [her] body,’ [3] and psychologically, as she often feels ‘like a stranger in it, like a crab trying to crawl back inside an old shell.’ [46] Furthermore, the presence of the heart sewn into one of her dresses acts as a constant reminder of the ‘punishment’ she received when she previously attempted to embrace her authentic lesbian Self. It is at the end of my novella that Grace removes her uniform, as Vera helps her into a different dress that ‘embrac[es] [her] figure like a second skin.’ [73] This is shortly followed by the conclusion of my novella which features the only encounter with a live snake. As Grace sees the snake, she feels ‘a familiar unease,’ [74] indicating her persisting predisposed perception of snakes, and by extension her homosexuality, as Other. But, as Vera squeezes her hand, Grace finds the courage to challenge her learned perceptions, as she feels a ‘determination to not be afraid.’ [74]

Another animal central to the high country mythos is the horse, both feral and tame. As an introduced species, horses are displaced within the Australian landscape as they are subject to humans, having been introduced by European settlers, but also damaging to the landscape’s native flora and fauna.¹⁶⁰ I have used the displacement and treatment of horses in

¹⁵⁹ Lexico online, s.v. ‘Ecdysis,’ accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/ecdysis>.

¹⁶⁰ Kelly K. Miller and Dale Graeme Nimmo, ‘Ecological and human dimensions of management of feral horses in Australia: a review,’ *Wildlife Research* 34, no. 5 (2007): 408—417.

my novella to parallel the systematic oppression experienced by my women characters. Like women under patriarchy, horses are also valued by how useful they are to men and are perceived in binary terms as either normative: obedient to men; or Other: feral and untamed. In *Ecdysis*, Mason's black Australian Stock Horse is his pride and joy, while the brumbies and the Arabian that broke her leg are 'worth more' [20] if they are shot, so that profit may be sourced from their dead bodies. When Grace first sees a brumby in the bush, it is 'not a great, majestic thing' like the brumbies in much masculinist mythology, 'but a fuzzy creature' with 'its mane... matted' and 'its coat overgrown.' [20] It is also made clear that 'brumbies [are] not wild. They [are] an introduced species, and feral,' [20] stripping them of any romantic qualities, rendering their Otherness as ugly and useless. Vera's displacement as a 'failed' wife and Madwoman is immediately tied to that of the horses as Vera tells Grace the story of her Arabian filly. Vera describes how when she decided to marry Mason, 'it was the horse [she] fell in love with.' [21] She explains how she 'didn't want to see her broken. Not all horses are meant to be ridden,' but her husband 'doesn't understand that,' as it would render the horse not useful. [21] As Vera describes how 'he put a bullet in her head,' [21] as soon as the horse broke her leg, Vera's own uselessness is established, as her inability to mother a child and perform as a normative 'sane' woman deem her Other, a Madwoman, like a useless horse.

Rewriting the Gothic Double

In my chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I explored Rhys' revision of Brontë's doubling aesthetics to represent the ongoing struggle for Antoinette to embrace her authentic Self and defy patriarchal and imperialist oppression. I have discussed how I have used animals as doubles for my central characters to conjure images of madness and Otherness. In the depiction of my central characters Grace and Vera, I have used the image of the double to

project the ongoing conflicts that both women have between their harboured authentic Selves, socially marked as Other, and the inauthentic, normative Selves they perform. For Vera, this is shown through her discussion of her pregnancy and suicide attempt, as she describes how becoming a wife ‘changed’ her, and she ‘became a completely different person, and not someone [she] liked.’ [37] These changes are not only performative, but embodied, as her pregnancy turned her into ‘something else entirely,’ to the extent that ‘not even [her] body belonged to [her] anymore.’ [37] Having experienced the traumatic oppression of performing an inauthentic Self, it is upon consummating her relationship with Grace that Vera identifies her survival as ‘a second chance’ [55] to embrace her authentic lesbian Self.

By contrast to Vera, it is through Grace’s conflict with her repressed authentic Self that I develop the image of the double further through Grace’s attraction to Vera. As a queer and ‘mad’ woman, Vera presents to Grace the Otherness that Grace fears within herself, while simultaneously being the object of Grace’s desire. Vera then becomes both the subject and object of Grace’s gaze, as Grace fears the prospect of becoming *like* Vera, while also fearing her attraction *to* Vera. Spivak identifies how Rhys applies the thematics of Narcissus in the projection of Antoinette’s conflicted and fractured identity.¹⁶¹ In *Ecdysis*, I have drawn from Rhys’ use of Narcissus as Vera embodies the reflection in the pool as both Grace’s double, the long repressed lesbian Self, and the romantic object of Grace’s lesbian desire. However, my use of this device differs slightly as Vera does more than embody the authentic Self that rejects the established norm. Vera also observes these traits in Grace and reflects them *back* to her, through her verbal observations of Grace, and even visually, through the portrait of Grace that she draws. Vera then, is not only the reflection in the pool, she acts as the pool itself. Throughout the narrative, Vera’s observations, her ‘reflections’ of Grace’s repressed authentic Self, become essential to Grace’s journey towards self-acceptance and

¹⁶¹ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts,’ 250—251.

healing from her trauma derived from systematic oppression. The most significant of Vera's 'reflections' of Grace is the very first observation she makes, that Grace is naturally left-handed. Although Grace insists on writing with her right hand, Vera observes she 'do[es] almost everything else with [her] left.' [11] By observing Grace's authentic Self that she has long repressed, Vera is immediately established as being able to 'see through' Grace's inauthentic performance, which has become unconscious for Grace.

Narrative Ending

I believe that my novella's ending, with my protagonists' intention to pursue a relationship together, functions as a political revision of two problematic tropes in literature: the metaphorical use of madness to signify feminist rebellion, and the 'axiom' of 'homosexual panic,' as identified by Eve Sedgwick.¹⁶² As noted in my Introduction, madness as a literary device for feminist protest has become a problematic trope, as it reinforces patriarchal perceptions of women and promotes misconceptions of mental illness as something purely social. However, it is for the *heterosexual* Madwoman that her madness is characterised by her anger in response to patriarchal oppression. For the homosexual Madwoman however, it is her queerness that deems her 'mad': her authentic Self, socially marked as Other.

Caminero-Santangelo argues that 'in order to use madness as a metaphor for the liberatory potentials of language, feminist critics must utterly unmoor it from its associations with mental illness as understood and constructed by discourses and practices both medical and popular.'¹⁶³ As Grace asks Vera to leave the high country with her, to embrace their queerness in a lesbian relationship, Vera's objection is that she is 'still not well,' [71] demonstrating that her mental illness and perceived madness are different phenomena. It is

¹⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1—63.

¹⁶³ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, 2.

only as Grace says that their relationship ‘could be something else,’ [72] a different means of relieving psychological distress and fighting trauma, that Vera decides to join Grace and embrace her authentic queer Self. Writing a queer Madwoman narrative, I have attempted to demonstrate how the Madwoman may embrace her perceived madness, *and* combat her mental illness, by embracing her authentic Self, not the inauthentic Self she has adopted in response to social oppression.

While attempting to correct the problems of the heterosexual Madwoman trope, my novella also embraces a newer tradition in queer fiction that seeks to depict successful queer relationships as a means of empowering queer narratives. The narrative trope identified by Sedgwick as ‘homosexual panic,’ and reconfigured for queer women’s narratives by Smith as ‘lesbian panic,’ is a tradition that sees any represented queerness compromised in order to maintain the established heterosexual norm.¹⁶⁴ Smith observes in her study of female-authored texts that ‘because the narrative closure... relies on the female protagonist being subsumed into institutional heterosexuality (or being annihilated), lesbianism may be said to have no legitimate or fixed place in the narrative conventions that have historically informed female-authored texts.’¹⁶⁵ In this way, the representation of queerness in fiction has, for so long, been dependent on its inevitable failure in order to be accepted by heterosexual audiences. So much so that in contemporary queer fiction, writing uplifting endings with successful queer relationships ‘has come to be seen as a political act’; as Fiona Shaw states in defence of the ending to her novel *Tell It to the Bees*, which was ‘changed... for a straight audience’ when adapted for screen in 2019.¹⁶⁶ Just as the Madwoman can no longer be sacrificed if feminist literature is to move forward, neither can queer characters, as both

¹⁶⁴ Smith, *Lesbian Panic*, 4; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 182—212.

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Lesbian Panic*, 7.

¹⁶⁶ Fiona Shaw, ‘My book *Tell it to the Bees* was made into a film — but they changed the ending for a straight audience,’ *The Conversation*, July 19, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/my-book-tell-it-to-the-bees-was-made-into-a-film-but-they-changed-the-ending-for-a-straight-audience-118639>.

tropes have come to be equally exhausted. By revising the Madwoman figure through queering, and having her embrace her mad, authentic Self in a queer relationship, I have attempted to demonstrate how socially constructed madness may be embraced to help alleviate psychological distress and oppression-based mental illness. It is through my novella's ending that I have attempted to correct two narrative tropes in feminist and queer fiction that have come to be exhausted and recognised as oppressive. Furthermore, through my revision of these tropes, my narrative applies both social constructionist readings of madness *and* feminist disability theories of mental illness, in their differing but interlinked relationships to social oppression, the trauma of discrimination, and performing according to an established norm.

My novella *Ecdysis* responds to *Jane Eyre* and 'The Drover's Wife,' drawing together the feminist traditions spawned in response to these iconic Victorian narratives, reworking them again into an original queer narrative. By investigating the traditions of these two Victorian works in a collective study, I have exposed their many parallels in the representations of women, madness, and mental illness and how such representations have incited streams of responses by feminist writers; from the global traditions surrounding *Jane Eyre*, to the local, Australian traditions surrounding 'The Drover's Wife.' With my focus on *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Snake*, I have demonstrated how Jean Rhys and Kate Jennings revise the Victorian works with which they are affiliated, and how I draw from both texts, particularly their revised representations of madness and mental illness. Drawing from recent studies that recognise social oppression as a form of trauma, I have shown the relationship between the perception and treatment of non-normative, 'mad,' or Other behaviour, and the generation of trauma-based mental illness. Furthermore, by queering the figure of the Madwoman, I have attempted to provide a new way of exploring socially constructed madness in literature, while

also depicting the real experience of mental illness through my protagonists' struggle with patriarchal oppression and internalised homophobia.

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