Who I am for you: a fictocritical examination of the identities and desires of reader and writer, inspired by the works of Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson

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Who I am for You
A fictocritical examination of the identities and desires of reader and writer,
inspired by the works of Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson

By
Xanthe Wells

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of
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Abstract

This fictocritical novel and its critical introduction are specifically concerned with the self and creative space, focusing in particular on detailed readings of Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) and Jeanette Winterson (1959 - ). In so doing, it explores the presence of a creative space between reality and reverie. The nature of this 'space between' is examined creatively from psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives. Focusing on the nature of creative space offers a reading of these authors and their work, whilst also providing an original and important response to the relatively unexplored concept of a 'space between'.
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Critical Introduction
Contents

The Best Intentions ................................................................. i
To Read or Not To Read ........................................................... vii
Fictocriticism: A Rose By Any Other Name ................................. ix
Maternal Space ....................................................................... xvi
Transitional Texts ................................................................... xx
Reading... and Writing ............................................................. xxiii
Who Are We and Where Are We Going? .................................... xxv
Appendix: Floor Plan ................................................................ xxvii
References ............................................................................. xxviii
'Why do you write novels?... With writing it seems to me there's so much' — she paused for an expression, and rubbed her fingers in the earth — 'scratching on the match-box. Most of the time when I was reading Gibbon this afternoon I was horribly, oh infernally, damnably bored!' (Woolf, The Voyage Out, 1915)'

To the extent to which anything can be planned, this was not what I had planned. Writing this introduction, I am at the end of my project, not the beginning, and so already I have inverted convention and moved away from the traditional methods of writing. But these were not my intentions. Four years ago, as I embarked on my doctoral thesis, I contentedly submitted a proposal that looked much like any other PhD application:

This research will be specifically concerned with the self and creative space, focusing in particular on detailed readings of Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) and Jeanette Winterson (1959 - ). I shall explore the presence of a creative space between reality and reverie. The nature of this 'space between' will not only be examined from psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives, but will also draw on historicist modes of enquiry to produce accounts of space that are specific to Woolf's modernist movement and Winterson's postmodernist movement... Focusing on the nature of creative space will offer a creative reading of these authors and their work, whilst also providing an original and important response to the relatively unexplored concept of a 'space between'.

As my first year got under way, I dissected this proposal into chapters and themes. I compiled reading lists and research timetables. I scratched around on the match-box and grew, like Rachel in The Voyage Out, 'horribly, oh infernally, damnably bored!' I had a proposal and a plan that were strong and solid, grounded in theoretical and literary references. My map was drawn clearly from A to B and all I had to do was follow the path, stop in all the right places and reach my destination. But scratching on
The match-box ignited a spark that caught into flame. Holding onto the fire, I took a risk. I burnt my map. As the flames twisted into red and yellow and brilliant blue, I smiled.

Next morning, the ashes lay cold and grey on my desk. I traced a pattern in them with my finger and licked the carbon blackness from my skin. The plan was still there. It had just condensed into itself. All I had to do was write it out. I dipped my finger in the ashes once more and reached for a new piece of paper.

Two hours later, I had filled several sheets of paper. My new foundations lay before me. I picked up the phone and rang my supervisor.

'I've got a problem,' I said.

'Oh?' she said.

'I've started writing,' I said.

'That's great!' she said.

'Not really,' I said.

'Oh?' she said, again.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's all gone a bit weird.'

'It's all gone a bit weird' was how I described my writing for quite some time after that. My supervisor agreed that is was a bit weird, but gamely humoured me in my sudden spurt of energy. Surely it is better to have a student who is writing, than one who is yawning in the library? But what appeared on those first sheets of paper was not critical writing. Try as I might, I could no longer write critical theory. Like Alix’s lover in The PowerBook, I wanted freedom: I wanted the freedom to write something else:

If I were a philosopher, I could never allow myself to speak in terms of presence, essence, etc., or of the meaning of something. I would be capable of carrying on a philosophical discourse, but I do not. I let myself be carried off by the poetic word.5

 Trusting in Cixous, I too let myself be carried off by the poetic word. I would have been capable of carrying on a critical discourse, but I did not. (I could be capable of carrying on a formal introduction, but I do not.) Instead, I let the words carry me off into unchartered territory. I had burnt my map and would travel any way the wind blew.

Leaving behind the terra firma of critical theory, I set sail for the green and pleasant
Land of fiction. The water was calm and the wind was strong, but as I reached the middle of the sea, the wind stopped. I stopped. I could see both shores, yet I could set foot on neither of them. I waited. And then, in the space between the worlds, I began to write:

There is always the space between: the space which is neither one nor the other, neither here nor there. Does waiting or writing create this space? During the anxiety induced by waiting and writing, I fill the space between with words. Surely, then, it is the space between which comprises the story?  

Inadvertently, I had journeyed into the very space that I wanted to write about. A creative space and yet a critical space. Perhaps if I could fill this space with words, perhaps if I could comprise them into a story, I would still be able to fulfil my original proposal. But what would I write about?

As writer/readers, we are in a dialogue through which we write the space between as a desiring narrative. The desire is contingent on the encounter with the other, but not determined by a lack.

And then it came to me. I would write to my reader. I would write about you. I would write about you and desire and our relationship. I would write about our relationship to other writers. I would write about our relationship with books. I would write about our relationships with our mothers, real or metaphorical. I would write about Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson.

‘What is [your story] about?’
‘Boundaries. Desire.’
‘What are your other books about?’
‘Boundaries. Desire.’
‘Can’t you write about something else?’
‘No.’

I would write this because, like Winterson, I couldn’t write anything else. I would write like Woolf and like Winterson; like Cixous and like Irigaray:

"Like" and "like" and "like" - but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?"
I would write like myself. My voice. My words. My boundaries and desires. Beneath the surface of the text, I would hide myself and, from this hiding place, like Rhoda, I would be able to 'see the thing'.

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation.

To write my story, I must create the 'perfect dwelling-place'. I needed to weight down my flights of fancy with concrete and bricks. I looked back at my foundations and then caught sight of Barthes' *Mythologies* on the bookshelf. I would follow his advice and 'tie the adventures of art to the strong pillars of the home'.

Suddenly, I had a new plan. But this time it was a floor plan: tangibly architectural but implausibly ethereal. I would use the structure of a house to entice my story into being. Each floor would engage with a different topic and the rooms would hold their own significance. As Woolf and Winterson haunt each other and would haunt my writing, so the house would represent the unheimlich, producing unsettling, Escher-like dimensions to its structure. There would be no certainty of direction and no consistency of travel. Where floors or water were to be crossed, the space between would be filled with a separate story, in the form of a fairy tale. The only way out would be to finish the story.

Like a tour guide, I mapped out my route. Our route. This was to be a shared journey and you would have your role to play. Now I was ready and, across the space, so were you. I began to write.

Write? I was dying to do it for love, to give the writing what it had given to me. What an ambition! What impossible happiness. Feed my own mother. Give her, in her turn, my milk? Mad impudence.

Allowing the words to settle on the page, I settled in to the story. The house held itself proudly about us whilst the text spun its web of Woolf and Winterson into the narrative.

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1 See Appendix at end of Critical Introduction (p.xii)
I had created a hybrid; a mutated fusion of theory and fiction that could be read as everything all at once, or as nothing at all. It reconstructed the old and generated the new. Through my creative criticism I was able at last to give something back to the writers who inspired me. With you reading over my shoulder, I was able to both ‘think back through our mothers’ and extend my arms forward into a future ‘lineage of art.’ When my pencil pressed the full stop of the final word, of the final sentence, of the final chapter, I was happy. The journey through the house had led me back to the front door. I had joined up the loop and was content to be inside of it.
To Read or Not To Read

Not much touches us, but we long to be touched. We lie awake at night willing the darkness to part and show us a vision.

(Winterson, *The Passion*, 1987) ¹

Finding the front door to my story was easy, but opening it was another matter. I had discovered a way of writing which felt exciting and natural, but somehow I had to mould it into a coherent whole. With the support of my supervisor, I set about constructing some guidelines:

- I would not seek to incorporate all of Woolf’s and Winterson’s texts into my thesis but rather I would integrate the phrases and themes of the texts that best reflected my chosen focus of reading and writing, desire and identity. Of particular note, however, would be Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out* and *The Waves*, and Winterson’s *Oranges are not the only fruit* and *The Passion*.

- When integrating quotations, I would indicate their presence through the use of italics. I would not place endnote references in the body of the text, but would trust the reader to trace the relevant quotation reference from its order of appearance on the page. This decision was intended to prevent the reader from being distracted by any endnote superscript and so maintain the illusion of a fictional text.

- It was also decided that the integrated quotations would be altered as little as possible to maintain accuracy. Where appropriate, quotations would be contracted (as noted by ...) or have their pronouns adjusted to fit the text (shown in non-italicised script). However, I resolved not to alter the tense of quotations (most were in past tense, whereas my narrative would be present tense). This discrepancy was minimised where possible but, in some instances, proved a useful marker of a significant quotation. As such, it would not be too detrimental for a reader to have their reading pattern briefly disrupted.
Critical Introduction

The Best Intentions

• Just as I could not incorporate all of Woolf's and Winterson's texts, so it would not be feasible for me to employ a large array of theoretical texts. It was decided instead that I would limit my research to feminist philosophical/psychoanalytical thought, focusing in particular on Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. These theorists were chosen not only for their relevance to my research subject, but also, and as significantly, for their poetic prose which could be easily blended into the text.

With these guidelines in place, I was provided with a clearer path to journey down. I knew what I was doing. My supervisor knew what I was doing. The only difficulty came in justifying it to other people. What could have stood as a traditional PhD in its original form was now moved into the Creative Writing stream. But it wasn't just fiction. It was a fictional carpet with an underlay of theory. It was a creative interpretation. Whatever it was, it didn't want to fit in an existing box. It needed a name.
Fictocriticism: A Rose By Any Other Name

In short, every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works; yet we require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the other.

(Woolf, Orlando, 1928)

My work needed a name. Not just a title, but a genre. Explaining to people what I wrote was becoming increasingly complicated and using the term ‘it’s a bit weird’ didn’t seem to instil them with either confidence or enthusiasm. An ‘academic story’ sounded boring and highbrow to regular readers, yet trivial and trite to academics. Luckily, a chance search on the Internet generated not only a name but also a collection of definitions. I got back on the telephone.

‘There’s a word for it,’ I said eagerly into the mouthpiece.
‘For what?’ said my supervisor.
‘The weird stuff I write.’
‘Really?’
‘Yes, it’s called fictocriticism.’
‘Fictocriticism?’
‘Yes. I’ll send you the link.’

The first reference I found was by the Australian academic, Anna Gibbs. In her article, entitled ‘Bodies of Words: Feminism and Fictocriticism – explanation and demonstration,’ she says:

[Fictocriticism] does not illustrate an already existing argument, does not simply formulate philosophy (or anything else) in fictional terms. It is not translation or transposition: it says something which can’t be said in any other way: because it is not reducible to propositional content.

Not only does Gibbs explain the genre of fictocriticism, but she also locates its genesis with the ‘strange, exciting and provocative texts’ of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray – both of whom figured highly in my research. Cixous in particular has been quite vocal about theoretical discourse, stating in an interview with Verena Andermatt Conley that,
'I do not have to produce theory.' Interestingly though, as Toril Moi notes: 'Cixous believes neither in theory nor analysis (though she does practise both).

It is at this point, no doubt, that Gibbs would say that Cixous practises theory and analysis through the medium of fictocriticism. Certainly 'Vivre l'orange' in L'heure de Clarice Lispector engages poetically and fictitiously with the notions of authors, reading and l'écriture feminine, whilst continuing to hold a visible and focussed meaning. The following passage in particular was most resonant to my research:

A writing came, with gleaming hands in the darkness, when I no longer dared to help myself, my writing so far away in pure solitude... I spoke no more, I feared my voice, I feared the birds' voices, and all of the calls that look outside, and there is no outside except nothingness, and are extinguished – a writing found me when I was unfindable to myself.

Inspired by Cixous' inspiration, I extracted the courage to find my voice and pursue the exploration of a fictocritical text. When I embarked upon my research, there was little mention of the genre in the academic arena and so I had to follow my intuition and write with my own motives in mind. Interestingly, having generated my own concept of a 'space between' and the occupation of this space by reading and writing, I then found a significant Australian text on the use of fictocriticism entitled The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism. Now what was I to do? It seemed perhaps I wasn't original after all. I had a look for other literature about the genre and began to panic. It seemed that my search for a genre had thrown up a host of further research questions about its very nature: 'Is fictocriticism neither fiction nor criticism?', 'Is fictocriticism self-indulgent?' 'What are its limitations?' and so on.

To consider these questions would take my focus away from the literature of Woolf and Winterson. Indeed, the genre of fictocriticism could generate a thesis in its own right. For me, however, the name 'fictocriticism' was really just a 'best fit' in the search for a definition. I wanted to explore the role of a 'space between' from the inside out rather than the outside in and so I decided to remove myself from questions of genre and return to my original intentions; for as Deleuze and Guattari state:

The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo – that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all of her work, never ceasing to become.
I wanted to use the inspiration and literary analysis of Woolf and Winterson to create a text that would never locate itself as solely academic or fictitious. I did not want to shy away from theory. I wanted to view things differently. Most importantly, I wanted to create something new.

Using these concepts, I set about enjoying myself. I took existing texts and situated them within my own; blending them, blurring their edges so that, without the visual illumination of italics, one would not necessarily know where the old text ended and the new text began. For a few months I struggled with the moral issues of appropriating another writer's work. I was semi-content with the rigorous referencing that I listed at the end of the text, but still, deep down, I was concerned that what I was doing might be 'wrong'. Late one night, looking for redemption on the Internet, I found the website of the French writer Ray Federman. My work was suddenly validated by one word: plagiarism.

You're born a plagiarizer or you are not. It's as simple as that. The laws of plagiarism are unwritten, it's a tabou, like incest, it cannot be legalized. The great plagiarizers of all time, Homer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Diderot, Rimbaud, Proust, Beckett, and Federman have never pretended to do anything else than plagiarizing. Inferior writers deny that they plagiarize because they confuse plagiarism with plagiarism, not the same. The difference is enormous, but no one has ever been able to tell what it is. It cannot be measured in weight or size. Plagiarism is sad. It cries, it whines. It always apologizes. Plagiarism on the other hand laughs all the time. It makes fun of what it does while doing it.\textsuperscript{8}

According to Federman, one 'cannot explain how plagiarism works - you do it or you don't do it.'\textsuperscript{6} However, I would suggest that plagiarism works specifically through its overt intention to 'play' and to manipulate. This manipulation is a primary factor in Paul Dawson's commentary on the evolution of fictocriticism in his recent book, \textit{Creative Writing and the New Humanities}. Here, Dawson states:

\begin{quote}
If one decides to write fictocriticism one consciously determines to blur generic boundaries in their writing, via a hybridization or mongrelisation of disparate textual elements, and thus enact or perform a critical operation.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

By producing a critical text that blends textual elements rather than separates them, the writer can indeed create something new. In a society saturated with
commentaries, analyses and biographies of Virginia Woolf and experiencing a rapid increase in similar texts regarding Jeanette Winterson, it was imperative that my text should say something original. Not because original is better, but because original is more interesting. More than anything, I want you, my reader, to be interested. As Norman Holland points out in The Dynamics of Literary Response:

What is worth something to everybody, though, is not the general statement that informs the literary work, the 'moral' of the story, but our pleasure in the act of transformation which reaches that moral (or social, intellectual, religious, or philosophical) theme. Fantasy gives force to conscious meaning, but conscious meaning mollifies and manages our deepest fears and drives. If we wish to see literature in its fullness, then, we must deal not with conscious meaning alone or unconscious alone, but the transformation of each into the other.11

Discovering and rediscovering Woolf and Winterson through fictocriticism creates and goes on creating something new. It says things, about the authors and their work, which may not have been said before, purely because they could not be articulated in any form other than fiction. It discusses their themes and preoccupations. It comments on their roles as authors. However, unlike a rigid structure of critical readings, the fictocritical text is never fixed. The words on the page remain the same for each reader but, by the nature of fiction and the dynamics of reader response, each reading of the text offers new critical readings as the reader unpacks, examines and repacks the narrative.

Anna Gibbs suggests that fictocriticism is 'a haunted writing: traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord.'12 It is true that my text is haunted by authors and theorists: their voices can be heard calling throughout the narrative. But it is also true that Woolf's and Winterson's writings are haunted. Much of Winterson's work is haunted by Woolf and she even admits, in an online discussion with her readers, that she too engages in playgriarism:

I draw on everything I can find for my work – I'm a robber and a hoarder and a pawn broker and a collector. The trick is to merge all this stuff into my own preoccupations and make new connections and a new whole.13
Woolf too felt the need to create something new, to 'make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words.' Such was her determination to develop the novel's form that she even considered creating a new genre:

I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new ___ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?

It could be said that Gibbs' concept of fictocriticism as a haunted writing is not too dissimilar to Woolf's suggestion of the term 'elegy' as a 'song of lamentation, especially for the dead.' However, unlike an elegy, whilst fictocriticism looks back, it also looks forward. By using the work of Woolf and Winterson, I can carry their work into the future and offer new approaches to their texts. In return, they can offer substance to my narrative and provide reflection to my arguments. They can interact with the theory. They can 'play' with the fiction.

As fictocriticism has developed, so it has become more apparent in academic institutions. Over the course of my doctoral research, presenting papers on the subject at various conferences, I found that more and more people had heard of the genre. Some even admitted to practising it themselves: although they were often unaware that it existed as a named technique and felt compelled to write secretly, away from regular, 'real' critical writing. However, as literary theorists pick up on the general themes of fictocriticism, the area in which they still seem to stumble is the automatic assumption that fictocriticism, because it appears to be two things at once, is self-reflexive. This is not the case:

Playgiarism is not self-reflexive. How could it be? How can something reflect itself when that itself had, so to speak, no itself, but only a borrowed self. A displaced self.

Within the fictocritical text, the voices rest inside each other, opening out, one after another, like a string of Russian dolls. But these dolls are not made of wood. These dolls are made of glass. Mirroring themselves and each other, they create illusory selves, reflecting, at times, onto nothing. Pass your hand through them and you will not feel anything, but you can still see them. And they can still tell you a story.
Critical Introduction

Fictocriticism can not reflect solely upon itself because it is not simply two things at once. It is not fiction and criticism. It is not story and explanation. It cannot be separated out into two distinct disciplines so that one may comment on the other. Fictocriticism is a genre on its own. It is true that it contains fiction and it is true that it reveals theory. But one is not dependent on the other. You can unpack them briefly and hold them up to the light, but you must always return them to their rightful place. The fascination with fictocriticism is not trying to separate the threads of the text, but standing back and absorbing the bigger picture. Like Rachel Vinrace’s definition of music, fictocriticism ‘goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once.’

With this in mind, the rest of this introduction will consider some of the theoretical perspectives that are at work in or may have inspired my text. It will not directly analyse my work but will offer instead a background to my intentions. It is not that a critical reading of the thesis would be irrelevant or unimportant per se, but rather that it should not be done by its own author. To choose to critique my fictocriticism would negate the selection and generation of a genre that intentionally rejects traditional criticism.

However, rather than fictocriticism suggesting that we don't need 'theory', it is more realistic to consider it as a central construct, highlighting the ever-present and necessary tension between fiction and theory. Winterson says that 'what is important though, is that creative work influences theory and not the other way round.' But why should this be the case? Surely theory can influence creation? Interestingly, immediately after this statement, Winterson says:

'Cixous is fabulous and not one of those intestinal theorists whose name, for instance, begins with F...'

Hélène Cixous, as I have already mentioned, is an unintentional ambassador for fictocriticism. She writes theory yet lifts her cloak to shield it from our gaze. She inspires theory from her creativity and creativity from her theory. She is an unquestionable example of the reciprocal nature of influence; of the shifting of directions between theory and fiction. As Deborah Jenson remarks in her essay on reading Cixous:
The reader authorizes a reading, the writer reads the woman into writing, the reader becomes writer, the writer becomes reader – in which direction are we going?21

And from across the space of theory and fiction comes Luce Irigaray's reply:

You touch me all over at the same time. In all sense. Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time?22
Maternal Space

She is the natural centre, the sun, and however confused relationships get, it all comes back to her, is resolved into simplicity by her word or presence.

(Hartman, 'Virginia's Web', 1970)

In the above quotation, Hartman is referring to Mrs Ramsey in perhaps Woolf’s most celebrated text, To the Lighthouse. A maternal icon, Mrs Ramsey is often considered as one of Woolf’s most significant characters: significant by her presence in the first section of the novel and equally, if not more significant, by her death in the central section and her absence in the latter. On completing To the Lighthouse, Woolf wrote:

Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind... What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice, I do not see her.

Maternal obsession can be located in the majority of Woolf’s texts, as well as in many of Winterson’s. It may not be overtly present through a literal mother, such as Mrs Winterson in Oranges are not the only fruit, or even a mother-figure, such as Dogwoman in Sexing the Cherry, but, nonetheless, the mother-daughter dynamic rests beneath the surface of the texts as a seemingly natural basis to the narrative. Indeed, as Ellen Bayuk Rosenman notes in her book on Woolf and the mother-daughter relationship: ‘[Woolf’s] identity as a writer is bound up in her identity as her mother’s daughter.’

The innate yet highly-charged relationship between mother and daughter, whether biological or sociological, underpins much of our thinking. We have all come from a maternal presence and, according to psychoanalytical theory, we all wish to return there. As Irigaray writes:
You took me into yourself. You took me back to yourself so that you could get back to that sameness whose origin remains a mystery to you. To get back to that sameness, you took me inside outside yourself. And so you continue to suck me up: my life. You continue to absorb me, inside you, turned inside out, in this cavern where I am still alive.

From the first cut of the umbilical cord, we are plunged into space. As the space between mother and child grows, we desire only to close the gap and mend the fissure. But the gap is too great and the way is too treacherous, and so we spend our life instead longing for the mother we know will make us whole and attempting to replicate that relationship with others.

When Woolf famously announced, 'We think back through our mothers if we are women', she was referring not only to her own ancestry but also to the metaphorical heritage of the literary world. Writers such as George Eliot, Jane Austen, and the Brontës gave Woolf a maternal comfort and support that she was unable to receive from her own mother, who died when Woolf was only thirteen. Ironically, some fifty years later in her book of essays on art and reading, Winterson confesses a similar sentiment of maternal respect and even adoration: 'When I read Virginia Woolf, she is to my spirit, waterfall and wine.'

Of course, Winterson is also renowned for her comment that she is 'the natural heir to Virginia Woolf' and, although she retracts that comment in an interview in 2004, saying that 'I don't think that I'm the direct heir to Woolf or anything like that. I think I'm doing the work, or taking up some of the challenges, and I'm very excited by other writers who are doing it, too', her feelings of attraction and dependency on Woolf as a mother figure still remain.

During their life, both Woolf and Winterson have expressed a fondness for the female sex, preferring friendships and, for Winterson in particular, relationships, with women rather than men. It may be said that this is a symptomatic response to the lack of a maternal presence within their lives. It could even be suggested that the relationships they shared/share with other women were/are replicas of the mother-daughter
dynamic. This is not to claim that their lesbianism should be presumed to be a re-enactment of the mother-daughter relationship, but rather that the desire for maternal nurturance can be seen as a facet of both Woolf’s and Winterson’s characters. Indeed, as Rosenman notes:

For the rest of her life, Woolf sought compensation for the loss of maternal love. She sought in her sister Vanessa, in female friends and mentors (and, according to some accounts, in Leonard Woolf) a re-enactment of the mother-child relationship and its nurturance.8

This statement is further supported, for in her diaries Woolf admits appreciating the 'maternal protection' which Vita Sackville-West lavishes on her, saying that it 'is what I have always most wished from everyone.'9 Perhaps then, internally, both Woolf and Winterson hold a needy child who needs to be loved and kept safe from harm. Perhaps also, they both hold a delinquent child who wishes to destroy the maternal presence that keeps them young and unworldly, preventing them from becoming free. But these conjectures, though interesting and worthy of additional study, are not of immediate significance to my research. What is of more interest to me is the significance of the maternal presence located within Woolf’s and Winterson’s writing.

Aside from the literal mother figures present in their texts, Woolf’s maternal presence locates itself in her watery imagery, which, according to Clare Hanson:

seems to represent the safe, sealed medium or space of the mother, even perhaps the watery state before birth... expressing, subliminally, the desire to return to a state when the I can also be the other and the articulation of subjectivity is not fatally compromised by the ego.10

Winterson’s texts are also layered with images of water and the sea. Interestingly, the use of water by both authors is often to provide a passage or space between. For example, in Woolf’s writing the sea lies between the house and the lighthouse in To the Lighthouse; whilst passages about the sea sit in between the narrative in The Waves. Winterson, in turn, uses the crossing of the river in Winnet’s story in Oranges are not the only fruit, and features the separation of the boundaries of love across the canals of Venice in The Passion. All of these examples could be seen to suggest not
the desire to return to the mother, as Hanson suggests, but the need to traverse the maternal space in order to reach a desired autonomy. Consider Rosenman’s statement:

The blurred coalescence of sounds and sights; the image of waves, familiar in Woolf's work as an evocation of union; and Woolf's own trance-like state half-way between sleeping and waking give the impression of a mind just coming to human consciousness, perhaps retaining a sense of the womb but beginning slowly to distinguish another world.11

Distinguishing another world, however, means the complete rejection of the mother and this is something that most of us are fearful to do, even metaphorically. To step forward into a world of consciousness, into a world of speech and language, we must leave the desirable yet stifling, over-protective grasp of the mother, for to remain in her arms would allow her to consume our identity and independence. As Miglena Nikolchina points out, there is only one solution:

The threat that the archaic mother presents is of a total loss of self rather than of castration; and the necessity of matricide faces the would-be speaking being as the only way toward subjectivity and language.12

Surrounded by watery imagery, we kill the mother in the only way we know how. Like resuscitation from drowning, we bring ourselves back to life in Julia Kristeva's eyes, by 'vomiting the mother'.13 Rejecting her from our inner self, we are now able to speak. But we cannot go back. Casting out the mother casts us into exile, leaving us only to repeat but not undo; as Kristeva says, to 'translate the mother' as 'orphans but creators: creators but forsaken'.14 It is no surprise then that Woolf and Winterson repeatedly generate the same themes and the same preoccupations. For one could argue that, through their writing, they are translating the mother to justify her death.
A hunger remains in place of the heart. A spasm that spreads, runs through the blood vessels to the tips of the breasts, to the tips of the fingers. It throbs, pierces the void, erases it, and gradually settles in.

My heart: a tremendous pounding wound.

(Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 1983)

Removing the mother from the child inevitably leaves a void. And in order to remove the pain of that empty space, something must be put in its place. As Anthony Storr suggests, 'part of the compulsion to create may be motivated by the idea of making restitution for what has been destroyed.' Could it be then that Woolf and Winterson use their texts to fill the gap created by the loss of the mother? Certainly Rosenman’s observations would suggest so:

Woolf herself often grounds creative effort in the desire for restitution by revealing the sense of loss in which art originates. When the 'centre' of the unifying maternal presence becomes a 'centre of complete emptiness' with [the mother’s] death, as it does in the autobiographical *To the Lighthouse*, art is born as a source of compensation.

In his book *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott puts forward the notion of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. These, he explains, are objects or behaviour patterns, such as thumb-sucking or a comfort blanket, that signify the move away from the mother and into autonomy. Although Winnicott goes on to locate artistic creativity as a later phase of development, it could be suggested that the special qualities he distinguishes as part of the transitional phenomena may also be applied to a writer’s relationship with his/her work. For example:

1. The infant assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption...
2. The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated.
3. It must never change, unless changed by the infant.
4. It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating...
5. Yet it must seem to the infant... to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.
6. It comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the
point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not
a hallucination.4

Applying these qualities to a writer and their text is not difficult. We understand the
possessive nature of a writer towards their work and humour their secrecy and
attachment with the understanding that they have control of its destiny. It is possible
also to see the text as generated from a space between writer and reality, forming of
itself yet not wholly from the unconscious. As Holland states, ‘what is “out there” in the
literary work feels as though it is “in here,” in your mind or mine.’5

Perhaps most significantly, we understand that a love/hate relationship evolves
between writer and text, giving rise to the concept that the text can take control of its
own destiny and create its own reality. Commenting on the desire to write, Hélène
Cixous illustrates the origin and role of a transitional object as she acknowledges the
‘limitless space’6 within her body that demands the creation of a text. She goes on to
describe the force of this space:

Because it was so strong and so furious, I loved and feared this breath.
To be lifted up one morning, snatched off the ground, swung in the air.
To be surprised. To find in myself the possibility of the unexpected. To
fall asleep as a mouse and wake up as an eagle! What delight! What
terror. And I had nothing to do with it, I couldn’t help it.7

Winnicott’s final quality of the transitional object is that ‘its fate is to be gradually
allowed to be decathected’,8 not so that it is forgotten but so that it is located in ‘limbo’.
In the context of an author, it could be suggested that this relegation of the transitional
object applies to their current text. In this case, transferring their book into the
indeterminate state of limbo may seem right and proper. But, due to the writer’s
intrinsic need to continue to translate the mother, the dismissal of the text will soon
create a lack, forcing the writer once more into creativity.

However, it is not just the text that becomes a transitional object. Perhaps more
significant as a transitional object, inhabiting the space between writer and text, is the
physical form of the book. Winterson in particular has a great need to possess books
and to both read and handle them. As she says in her essay, 'The Psychometry of Books':

If you love books as objects, as totems, as talismans, as doorways, as genii bottles, as godsend, as living things, then you love them widely. This binding, that paper... But they do need to be handled. The pleasure in a book is, or should be, sensuous as well as aesthetic, visceral as well as intellectual.9

Winterson admits that her dedication and desperation for First Editions, with their thick bindings and signed frontispieces, stems from a childhood without books: 'An early unprinted existence where paper was something pasted on to walls and likely reading matter was either The Bible or the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, always open at underwear.'10 For Winterson then, not only did she lose her mother as a child, but she also lost her desired transitional object. With a double void to fill, creativity could have been even more appealing and necessary. As an adult, maybe this is what makes her such a strong, distinctive author. Or maybe it is the training in an oral tradition, symptomatic of not having any books, that has contributed to her success as a writer. For as Walter Benjamin notes:

Storytelling is always the art of repeating stories and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained... The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself.11
Reading ... and Writing

I go on writing so that I will always have something to read.

(Winterson, The Passion, 1987)\(^1\)

It would make sense, at first glance, to consider reading and writing as two distinct sections. However, teasing the two apart is not so easy a task: a writer cannot but read their own writing; whilst a reader always 'writes' a new reading, since, as Deborah Jenson says, 'in the act of reading, one chooses one's subject of reading, and in doing so, one becomes the author of the reading.'\(^2\)

Woolf and Winterson are writers and yet they are also readers. Reading themselves and reading others, they create a web of interpretations that spin backwards and forwards across time and space. Using fictocriticism to explore their readings and writings allows this web to expand rather than condense into the inevitable cul-de-sac of theory. Taking as inspiration Roland Barthes' statement that a writer's 'only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them,'\(^3\) pushes me forward into a new discourse where my reading becomes a literal writing. Finding my story, I have joined Woolf and Winterson in the role of writer.

But first I was a reader. And as Winterson remarks:

> The ordinary reader is not primarily concerned with questions of structure and style. He or she decides on a book, enjoys it or doesn't, finishes it or doesn't, and is, perhaps affected by it. When the fiction or the poem has a powerful effect likely to be lasting, the reader feels personally attached to both the work and the writer.\(^4\)

Reading Woolf and Winterson, I engaged with their texts and read myself into them as Winterson must have read herself into Woolf. I was open to their charm and to their poetry. I was open to their sentiments and their beliefs. In short, I felt a connection. Suddenly, I knew what Shoshana Felman meant when she said:

xxii
I cannot confess to my autobiography as missing, but I can testify to it. I cannot write my story (I am not in possession of my own autobiography), but I can read it in the Other.  

Finding myself in the texts of Woolf and Winterson, I could use the dichotomy (or trichotomy?) between us to create an understanding. I knew how to apply theoretical research to a text but, with Woolf and Winterson, I felt something stronger. I felt a need to write. And in this state, I understood Jenson's sentiments when she said:  

Pursuing the elusive author not only in her trapdoor escape into the new, but in her wanderings back into the fairytale forest of the familiar, the reader strays deeper and deeper into the question of how to read one's way to writing.  

But beginning to write was not the liberating experience I had first imagined. Instead I was surrounded by the same questions that came to Felman:  

Whom do we write for? Whom do we wish to be read by? Whom are we afraid to be read by? Whom do we trust to know how to read our writing? Whom do we need in order to help us grasp the truth that lies in wait (for us, for others) in our story but that alone we do not have the strength to grasp? Who can help us, or enable us, to survive our story?  

Late at night, sitting at my desk with pencil and paper, I discovered the answer: You.
Who Are We and Where Are We Going?

You and I, separated by distance, intimate of thought, waited.

(Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 2000)¹

Who are you? Where are you? As I write this you are not there. As you read this do I no longer exist? Barthes would say that the 'modern scription is born simultaneously with the text... there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.'² If this is the case then you are now the author and I... who am I?

I carried a message, I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed.³

Like Rhoda in *The Waves*, as I enter the space between, identity fails me. I fall into the void of creativity and surrender to its wishes. Writing this, I am no longer here at my desk; I am within the text, inside the text. I am the text. The text is me and Winterson and Woolf. We are playing hide and seek between the words. And you, you look on. You close your eyes. You wait. You count. Come and find us, ready or not.

Without you, there is no game. Hide and seek without the seeker is just existence. There is no anticipation of discovery and no generation of emotion. But when you play our game, you call forth a new dynamic, a direct exchange of intentions. You look for me and I wait for you. And when we find each other the story truly begins. As Norman Holland states:

The text has a direction; it begins, progresses, and ends. But a skilled reader also gives the text meaning by making connections between all the parts of the text, regardless of direction or position... The skilled
reader abstracts recurring images, incidents, characters, forms, and all the rest into certain themes.  

I need you to understand the text. You are fundamental to my meaning and yet I know that the meaning you make will not be the same as the meaning I make as a reader of my writing. I know also that the readings I make will differ with each interaction with the text. As Winterson points out: ‘to say exactly what one means, even to one’s own private satisfaction, is difficult. To say exactly what one means and to involve another person is harder still.’

This thesis, this story, is a creative interpretation, a fresh perspective on two authors who have already had much criticism published on their work. I am not claiming to make new, ground-breaking revelations about Woolf and Winterson. I am claiming to offer a new, ground-breaking structure from which to view their work. My literary response requires active participation and freedom of thought. I need you. I need you to be active and I need you to be aware. You are the reader of my story and the writer of your own.

In the journey that follows, you will need your eyes open and your wits about you. You may experience nothing more than the exploration of a house. But this is a house of fiction, not dissimilar to the one inhabited by Henry James, and your reading may be different to others. As you read, you may discover themes and truths that would not have occurred to you from a critical text. The story is no longer mine. The story will belong to you. But we will be there with you. Look out for me hiding between the leaves of a book. Watch out for Woolf in the attic. Beware of Winterson in the toilet. And never be afraid of your reflection in the mirror.
The only way into a piece of literature is through the front door – Open it. Once there, if the arrangement of the rooms is unfamiliar and the fabric strange, reflect that at least it is new, and that is what you say you want. It will be too, a world apart, a place where the normal weights and measures of the day have been subtly altered to give a different emphasis and perhaps to slide back the panel by the heart. Check that the book is made of language, living and not inert, for a true writer will create a separate reality and her atoms and her gases are words.

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Reading ... and Writing


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You and I


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Who I am for You

A fictocritical novel
Contents

Preface

Prologue: Foundations ................................................... 2

Part I: The Cellar
Threshold ................................................................. 6
Hallway ................................................................. 8
Spiral Staircase .......................................................... 12
Cave ................................................................. 15
Sea ................................................................. 17
Cellar / Nursery ......................................................... 22
Maze ................................................................. 35
Forest ................................................................. 40
River ................................................................. 45
Garden ................................................................. 50
Terrace ................................................................. 54

Part II: First Floor
Drawing Room ............................................................ 58
Main Staircase ........................................................... 61
Landing ................................................................. 65
Dining Room ............................................................ 67
Study / Library .......................................................... 70
Dumbwaiter / Ladder ................................................... 75
Attic / Toilet ............................................................. 81
Sitting Room / Bedroom ............................................... 85
Printing Press / Mainframe ........................................... 90
Preface

[The writer's] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.

(Barthes, Image, Music, Text, 1977)

This novel takes its inspiration from a variety of critical and literary sources, but predominantly from detailed readings of the works of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Jeanette Winterson (1959- ). Drawing on their recurring themes and motifs, it offers a fictocritical approach to the nature of reading, writing and identity.

Resonant quotations from both primary and secondary texts are incorporated into the main body of the novel and are highlighted with the use of italics. Full references are available at the end of the text but are by no means compulsory reading.
The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm

The house was quiet and the world was calm
The reader became the book; and the summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

(Wallace Stevens, 1947)
Prologue

Foundations
If this word be allowed to talk, it can be expected to tell a story. Words have that kind of value, they have etymological roots, they have a history: like human beings, they have a struggle sometimes to establish and maintain identity.

(Winnicott, *Home is where we start from*, 1986)

This story is about you. It's about you and it is you. You are the story and I am merely the space that tells it. At first the story was about me, but the wind changed and blew the meaning inside out. With a sudden gust, it carried you away and left you to find your own way home.

Trust in me. I can guide you on your travels. I can help you slide from page to page, chapter to chapter. Who I am and who I will be cannot be captured by the pen alone. You may find me on this journey as you may find yourself. Just the turn of the page may be enough to see your own reflection behind the ink. I cannot promise you this. I make no promises in the role of storyteller. For that is all that I am, if that is all that you want me to be.

*I'm telling you stories. Trust me.*

But I am a storyteller and so the story tells me. It lays me down upon the page, spreading me over the words like butter. In the light of the reader, I glisten and warm to gold, melting, rich and salty, into the words.

If you were to lick this page, would you taste me?

I dropped a book in the bath once, to see if the person trapped inside it would swim free of their pages. I waited on the enamel shore as the print bled into a blur and stained the bathwater with its tears.

My quest was unrewarded. The voice inside the book drowned with her ship, loyal to her words. I fished the book from the water and watched the pages wrinkle in the air. Turning the book over in my hands, it dripped punctuation marks on the bathroom floor.

I dried it in the airing cupboard, nestled amongst the old towels and orphaned socks. Then I returned it to the shelf, because I knew that its story was still there. The book had been reborn, baptised in bubble bath. A new story was waiting to be told.

*It was a long story, and like most stories in the world, never finished. There was an ending – there always is – but the story went on past the ending – it always does.*
Even after the last words commit themselves to the page, the story continues inside you. The characters have grown accustomed to your space and feel at home in your unconscious, relaxing into your psyche as though it's a saggy old armchair. Here they sit, picking at the frayed piping, leaving worms of thread upon the carpet to remind you of their presence.

Every time the door opened and fresh people came in, those already in the room shifted slightly; those who were standing looked over their shoulders; those who were sitting stopped in the middle of sentences... Who was coming in?

After a while most of them become uncomfortable. You sigh as you vacuum beneath their lifted feet and, sensing your dismissal, the characters slope off into the darkness.

And then there are the characters that stay. The heroes and heroines, who share their lives with you between their pages, settle into your unconscious like old friends. They will not desert you nor betray you, but remain loyal to your thoughts as they kick off their shoes and relax against your cortex. They sink themselves into you so that you may resolve each other. They know that you need them to finish your story.

Why then do we say that we have 'finished' a story?

As a child I remember the torture of wanting to know the story but not wanting the book to end. I would try to read with painstaking sloth in an attempt to drag the book's pages into infinity, but I could never resist the taste of one more chapter. Greedy for words, I would close the cover of one book and reach immediately for a new literary meal, a lexically-addicted chain-reader.

Soon it was standing room only inside my head as the mêlée of characters jostled for space with pointed elbows and angry glares. I read each new book with the previous characters peering over my shoulders, interfering with the story. Plots became tangled. Relationships became affairs. Sense became insanity.

I stopped reading.

With the books sleeping on the shelf, I lived for days within my head, following stories that will never be told.

Years later, I learnt to savour the time between books because that is when the story really finds you. A real book will get into your bloodstream and flow behind your eyelids, waiting to seep into your unconscious. Some stories unfold themselves at night, attracted like moths to the light of your open mind. Others dance upon your taste buds, demanding your attention, bittersweet.
Let this story climb into your inner spaces. Engage with it and in it and for it. Follow it to an end that you know will never come and the story will reward you. It will grow within you until it is you. For this is your story. My story. History and future wrapped up into a ball of cosmic wool.

Gently take the end between your fingers and feel the twisted fibres separate themselves into individual threads. Find your thread and follow it to the end. Tease it out. Untangle it. Suck it until it is as thin as a splinter and its taste is imprinted on your tongue. Hold it. Roll it. Follow it to its heart.

And never let it go.
Part I

The Cellar
Threshold

Let us tie the adventure of art to the strong pillars of the home: both will profit a great deal from this combination: where myths are concerned, mutual help is always fruitful.

(Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957)


Stand at the threshold. See the door bold and brave in front of you, a solid shaft of wood. Put your hand flat to its heart and feel the wood throb against your pulse. Let it pour itself into you and run along your lifeline. This house is your house.

But something stirs on the other side of the door. A whisper of being shivers through the keyhole and shadows up your spine. ‘Come into the house,’ it murmurs in your ear. ‘Come into my space and share my secrets. This house is your house but I can be your guide. I can take you where you dare not go, show you what you would not see. I can lead you to yourself. I will give myself up for you.’

I stand outside a door, outside a house. My house is flesh and blood, the door carved from bone. It stands tall like ivory before me. I put my hand to the contours of its heart and feel the marrow sticky beneath. Our cells displace each other as the house is grafted to my skin. This house is my house.

But behind the door something stirs. And if I push my fingers into the recesses behind the bone I find you like a soft shell crab.

Vulnerable to your call, I feel you thread yourself into my spaces, tempting me, with promises of discovery, into the house.

And here the journey starts.

Our hands reach for our door, twist the handle firmly from its bed. Each door swings inwards and we face each other across a square of space. Barely apart yet different in time, we see each other in pale silhouette. Straining to see further, we step into the space.

Crossing the threshold tips us to the infinite. Falling into the void, the blood courses through our ears and fights inside our veins. Our hands grasp out as the cold air rushes over our heads. Finding each other, we draw ourselves together, gasping as
the oxygen runs away from our lungs. We pull ourselves inwards in our spiral descent. Clutching. Clinging. Eyes smarting with the speed, we bury our heads, aware only of each other's existence. Our legs twist together like the ribbons of a maypole. We blur into white. Two become one and one. And one.

Same space; different times. Same journey; different meanings. There is always a new beginning, a different end.
Hallway

We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.

(Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, 1987*)

The light clears and our feet are still, gently placed at peace upon the floor. Seeing each other for the first time, we do not see each other. We are together and yet apart. Separate but entwined.

*Undress.*

*Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door.* Let me see who you are.

I look at you and create your identity. For me you do the same. Now there are four people in this space: the I that I am and the I that you have made me; the you that you are and the you that I choose you to be. *Who I am for you and who I am for me is not the same, and such a gap cannot be overcome.*

Disturbed by this sudden duplication, we reach for our skin and hide ourselves behind our flesh. We return to two figures, aware nonetheless that within our bodies' cavities we continue to multiply meiotically.

We are more than we were and yet less than we will be.

Nervous of each other, we turn our attention to the house. The room denies physics, spreading into curves and corners as it arches round us, its pillars holding up the sky. *A great hall I could liken it to; with windows letting in strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence.*

There are no objects in the hall. No furniture. No pictures. We are lost without their comforting presence, growing fearful as the *cathedral space* threatens to smother us with its excess. Although I do not know you, you are my only lifeline in this empty world.

Drawing towards you, something catches underneath my foot. Looking down I see a virgin pencil glinting in its glossy paint. The needle point threatens as I press it to my fingertip. Slowly the skin gives way. A drop of crimson spots onto the floor.

‘You’re bleeding.’

My voice hangs in the empty air. Repeats with disbelief.
‘You’re bleeding?’
You hold out your hand and we watch as the blood pools upon your fingertip, domes and then trickles to your palm. You pull my hand before you too, but my finger is pink, intact.
‘I don’t understand.’
Your voice joins mine in the silence. Our words, rising up, form a thick cloud above our heads.
‘How?’
Carefully you take the pencil from my grasp, wipe your bleeding hand upon your leg. Shaking slightly, you raise the pencil above the cushion of flesh below your thumb and impale it through your skin. I flinch. But it is you who cries as the blood runs dark into your palm.
Bitter tears flood to your eyes and you curl around your pain. Our words close darkly over you, casting you in shadow.
I want to put my hand upon your shoulder, but your back scorns the touch of my unpunctured skin. I hesitate, but dare not speak for fear of adding to the cloud above your head. Instead, I see the pencil dropped upon the floor and stoop to pick it up.

Kneeling down, I find that the floor is a mosaic of paper. I rest the pencil against a tile of carbon whiteness. I wait. I write.

And as I write, an inclined plane of light comes accurately through each window, purple and yellow even in its most difficult dust, while where it breaks upon my words they are softly chalked red, yellow and purple. Neither snow nor greenery, winter nor summer has power over the old stained glass as time suspends itself and the world fades away.

As life pauses, so the words that hang in black above you become flecked with colour, brighten, fade: become translucent, transparent until you are at peace in a body of air filled with palpitating blue. Comforted, you turn to watch me write.

Read me, hold me, but don’t crush me, don’t get too close. Above all, don’t think you know, and I would want to add, don’t expect to get it right.

With the pencil in my hand, it warms to my touch. The wood nestles into the cradle of my palm and relaxes into my thoughts. It becomes a part of me. Connects to my desires. It begs me to write itself out. A selfless suicide.

And the pencil wins. Its desires are met. I write I know not what, and yet the words follow, surely, surely, until their trail leads to the core...
We are lost.

Reading over my shoulder, the words accuse you on the page. Had you not realised? Had you not thought? Not dreamt? Not wondered? The question marks break up the anger uninvited.

We are lost.

The words recur, sharpen and blur. The pencil is less angry now. It slows to mourning and the dawn of realisation hovers on the horizon.

I am lost.

But who will find me?

No-one answers. The hall is quiet. Your breathing echoes as the pencil stops. Then a distant voice calls to the page... 'I will find you. I will save you. I will make you whole again'.

A woman's voice has awakened our heart. The pencil writes on... 'Look for your mother'.

Pressing punctuation, the pencil snaps. The heady rush of its woody scent sends us reeling back to reality, pushing tears to our eyes. I stand to face you, but you no longer see me. The mirror of my eyes has become matter for your gaze. The rebirth of your flesh.

I am cast adrift. I cannot see myself in your face. It doesn't reflect me, it reflects somebody else. It reflects a kind of monstrous image of myself. Afraid, I turn away. But I have nowhere to go. I see the hallway shattered into fragments, reflecting into infinity.

One writes in order to be loved, one is read without being able to be loved, it is doubtless this distance which constitutes the writer.

Fiercely isolated, I take the corner of the paper tile and tear it from the floor, crumpling the words into my pocket. Below there is a hole, dark and deep. I put my hand into it. It is warm and damp and I am swallowed up to my shoulder in sticky velvet. Scared, I pull back, examining my arm for signs of damage. It is unchanged. Dry, clean, just as it always had been.

But then a note rides out on the back of silence. Carried from the space, it dances round our heads, refracting the light into schisms of rainbows. Soon, others follow and play amongst themselves, turning us technicolour in their shower of light.
The light and music radiates, it is a slow, sweet, difficult, absolutely unstoppable, painful rising that reaches your senses and fights off your opacity from deep within. Noticing me once again, you pull me to my feet and look into my eyes. This time we see each other and it is your gaze that gives me the desire to not flee the question that filled my throat with dry silence, with inert and deaf silence, when I was lost from me, and my soul was so far away in such a sincerely hopeless retreat that even the music did not reach it.

Regaining you like this, I see the music also; see a building with spaces and columns succeeding each other rising in the empty space; see ourselves and our lives, and the whole of human life advancing under the direction of the music. We feel ourselves enabled and follow the music to the farthest corner of the hall, searching for the answer to our loss.

Here, there is a tiny wooden door. The music slides to minor, the first music of the voice of love, and, kissing us with farewells, the notes disappear through the keyhole. Curious, you push the door and it swings inwards, opening up the darkness.

Coming out of the light of the moment to go into the colour grey is a violent, strange, artless experience, an obligation without directions, yet we feel compelled to step into its arms. Ducking under the doorframe, we slide into the dark as the door closes and the light dies behind us.
Spiral Staircase

But what a spiral man’s being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral! One no longer knows right away whether one is running toward the centre or escaping.

(Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 1994)

In a far off village there lived a girl and her mother. They lived happily together for many years, but one day, shortly after the girl’s sixteenth birthday, her mother became ill. The girl nursed her mother day and night, but it soon became clear that nothing but a miracle would save her.

Desperate for her mother to live, the girl set off in search of the magician who lived deep within the forest. She walked for seven days until she came upon the old man at camp in a clearing. In tears, she told him of her mother’s health and promised to do anything in return for her renewed life.

The magician liked the young girl for she was a pretty child and had a cheerful smile. But, like all conjurers, he had a devious mind. He told the girl that he would make her mother well, if she would build him a magnificent tower in which to live. Only once the tower was built and the steps counted would the girl be allowed to go free.

This did not seem an impossible task and so the girl agreed. Once the first stone was laid, the magician cast his hand across a pool of water and the girl saw her mother at home and in good health. Compelled now to uphold her side of the bargain, she began to build the tower, *winding round and round with the stones in an endless stairway*. Day after day she lay stone after stone, whilst night after night she dreamed of returning to her mother.

At last the tower was finished and the magician was pleased with the girl’s work. As he settled into his new cylindrical home, he told the girl that when she had counted the stairs twice and confirmed their number, then he would let her go. Full of his promise, the girl ran to the bottom of the tower and started to climb, but as she trod upon the first step, the magician cast a spell conjuring the steps never to number the same. Assured that the girl would have to live with him forever, he fell asleep with a crooked smile upon his face.

The girl counted the steps. *Up and up the steep spiral she climbed, energetically at first, then more laboriously, advancing her feet with effort until she
could go no higher and returned with a run to begin at the very bottom again. She counted again. The numbers were different. Blaming herself, she tried again and got a third number. A fourth, fifth and sixth soon followed and the girl began to realise that she had been tricked. For seven days she climbed up and down the staircase, counting again and again. At last, exhausted, she lay down upon one of the stone steps and fell asleep.

She dreamed her eyebrows became two bridges that ran to a bore-hole between her eyes. The hole has no cover and a spiral staircase starts, and runs down and down into the gut. She must follow it if she wants to know the extent of her territory. She must pass through the blood and bones that swill round the bottom step, before she can squat on the top step in the huge space under her skin.

Waking with a start, the girl felt fuelled with a new energy. She tripped down the stairs and, standing before the bottom step, she felt her heart begin to pound. With a deep breath she sprinted up the stairs, two at a time, singing the numbers to echo up the column. At the top she did not pause nor hesitate but turned around and skipped back down, counting aloud, this time in threes. As she jumped from the third step to the ground floor, she called out the same number she had reached at the top.

Landing on the floor, no heavier than a cat, she sent a huge crack splitting across the ground. The magician ran from his room at the top of the tower to see massive fissures running up the staircase. The tower swayed with the wind and the stone ground its teeth, peppering the magician with dust.

As the first stone fell, the magician began to run down the stairs, skidding and sliding between the shifting masonry. He called out to the girl to help him but she was struggling with the iron lock on the heavy front door. She dragged the door open just as the tower started to fall and threw herself onto the grass outside. But the magician was not so lucky and the tower buried him at its heart. Only his hand stretched out of the rubble, still reaching for the girl to save him.

The girl looked about her as the debris settled. She noticed the magician’s hand protruding from the rock, gnarled and mottled. As she watched, his hand began to change. The fingers became long and slender. The nails took on a pinker hue. And the skin blossomed like a rose.

Fear snaked through the girl’s body and she started to excavate the fallen masonry. Tears and sweat poured down her dusty face. Her fingers cracked and bled as she prised the rubble from its resting place. At last she reached flesh as, clawing through the rock, she found the dead body of her mother.
She howled. Screamed. Severed the silence with her sorrow. Cast out and bereft, she held her mother's lifeless body to her, washing away the dust with her tears. With no one to return to, she was lost to the world. Curling up into her mother's arms, her head upon her breast, she pulled the stones back over their bodies and buried them both.

*****

Closed into the darkness, we wait for our eyes to find their sight. Eventually, we see that we are balanced at the top of a narrow staircase. Light creeps in from cracks within the walls, but the way is treacherous and our feet stumble on the steps, rushing away from us, eager to reach their destination.

Fearful of falling, you force your hands out to steady yourself. The dripping walls ooze a salty slime that glistens in the half-light. Touching it gives off a spark that spreads underneath your skin. You are warmed, comforted. In spite of the dark and uneven stone, you have no more fear of falling.

Something must wait at the bottom of these steps, something to which you need to return.

I have never liked spiral staircases. Since a child they have consumed me with an aura of panic. I dread to climb them or descend them. As I place my foot upon the step, I am filled with the fear that it will crumble beneath me, swinging me into space, into oblivion.

A spiral staircase is like being buried alive. Once you've gone a full revolution you are lost to the world. Look up or down and all you can see are steps. You are encased in their existence. Destined to chase yourself round and about, always waiting for that one step to pitch you through space and send you to earth.

As we continue downwards, the steps grow smaller, bending in on themselves. Trapped inside the belly of the house, we must go where it will take us, for the steps are too steep to turn back.

A slight stumble sends my heart to my head and I grasp the cord that winds its way along the staircase. It is wet and warm, and coils around my wrist pulling me towards it, tightening round my pulse. Panicked, I let go, but the weight of iron taints the air as we fall the last few steps to the floor.

Scrambling to our feet, we find ourselves safe but unsettled.

My fingers are sticky with blood.
The desire for union with the mother is a desire for dissolution.


Hearts pounding, we absorb our new surroundings. A dome of rock stands about us, its curved ceiling only inches from our heads. The staircase disappears to a point at its centre, poised like a drill above the cavern's floor. Its contracting descent makes it impossible to climb back to the surface.

But it feels warm and inviting in this room. The walls that protect us are not ragged and rough. Instead, they are spongy to the touch. Yielding gently to the pressure of your fingertips, they coat your fingers in velvet; a royal red.

Salty gems glisten on the walls making new constellations in this heavy night sky. Our breath forms a mist round our faces and melts the stars to brine. One by one, they go out as we search the room for an exit.

Soon there is a pool of water creeping between our toes.

Ankle-deep in the cavern's tears, we circle the room.

*Sometimes I put my hand to the wall, to see whether it's beating like some large organ with nerves and veins under its sleek surface.*

*And sometimes you open your eyes wide, because you think you see it thicken and swell with blood, then sweat large red beads, and beat again, softly thumping, damp beneath your timid fingers.*

Feeling its pulse shudder through our bodies, we caress the walls for signs of a door, stroking the wet warmth, expecting at any moment to sink into the flesh and fall into nothingness.

Unrewarded, we start again. This time we are more careful, but now we hear a distant voice calling from within. Within? Within where? The voice seems hidden in the cave, yet hidden in our hearts. Focusing on it loses it completely, so we ignore its compelling call, refusing to be distracted from our search. There must be an opening here somewhere.

In our blinkered determination, we fail to notice that all the stars have been extinguished. Water is filling the cave.
The waist-high water slows our progress. We grope below the waterline, desperate for the promise of a crack or crevice. Why can't we escape?

The rapid rise of brine threatens to engulf us.

You are going to drown.

The thought runs round your head like a tickertape, preventing you from thinking clearly.

You are going to drown.

You shake your head to knock the worry away. It bounces off your skull, stubborn and cocksure.

The water is lapping excitedly against our chests. Pushing. Prodding. Urging us to fall. We try to steady ourselves but its wishes are too great. We feel our feet being lifted from under us.

With a sudden surge of the swirling surf, you are pulled under.

Your arms thrash in panic. The salt-water hurries into your nose and mouth. You gag. The rush of vomit momentarily halts the water's progress as it pushes onwards to fill your lungs.

Your body's defences kick into action, closing off your trachea. The water pounds against its gate. Churning into a frenzy, it alters course to the less restrictive hollows of the oesophagus. Pours into your stomach. You feel yourself swell with its volume.

The last particles of air are absorbed by your bloodstream. Trying to save you, your trachea has also shut out your lifeline. Your arms grow heavy. Your mind slows. Relaxes. Sleeps.

They have ceased to breathe. So much the better - this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they had lived.

Drowning. Dying. Our world goes black.
Earth, Mother, Goddess – she was no fellow creature in man's eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore outside of that realm.

(de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1952)

At the edge of time stands a beautiful woman, wreathed in white. *To her belong all waters, streams, fountains, ponds and springs, as well as the rain.*

Benign and beautiful, her hands sparked life, casting seven honeyed daughters into the folds of her skirt. Holding her little ones to her, *she had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything.* She held the world in her hands and the sun and the stars shone like diamonds in her hair. She guarded. She supported. *And the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her.*

The sun had not yet risen. *The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it.* Gradually as the sky whitened *a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.*

Her daughters grew up. One by one, they left the safety of their mother's skirts and ventured from her grasp. One by one, they stepped out into her waters and waded to a new life. One by one, they failed to return.

When her first daughter did not come back to her, the mother cried a shower of tears and bathed the world in her sorrow. For her second daughter, she wept a torrent upon its tender soil; whilst the third daughter's betrayal unleashed a flood of despair.

As her daughters left her, the pain intensified until she was taken over with a melancholy that chilled her heart. The night the sixth daughter left her, she almost broke with grief and the tears froze from her eyes and rained daggers upon the earth.

She now had but one daughter left to comfort her. And the need to keep this child sent *all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and want – how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again!*

In the ferocity of her longing, she caught out at her desires and cast them upon her most loved child.
The sun rose higher. Blue waves, green waves swept a quick fan over the beach, circling the spike of sea-holly and leaving shallow pools of light here and there on the sand. A faint black rim was left behind them. The rocks which had been misty and soft hardened and were marked with red clefts.

As the day dawned for her seventh daughter to leave her, the mother called the child to her. Holding her to her breast, she no longer knew where her body ended and her daughter began.

But the daughter pulled away, suffocated by her love.

The mother looked at her beautiful and gentle child. If she forced her to stay, then the child would surely fade to nothing. But if she were to let her go, the pain of such loss could take away her hope and steal the mother's life.

The sun rose. Bars of yellow and green fell on the shore, gilding the ribs of the eaten-out boat and making the sea-holly and its mailed leaves gleam blue as steel. Light almost pierced the thin swift waves as they raced fan-shaped over the beach.

The mother decided upon a solution. Plucking a hair from the head of her daughter, she plaited it with a hair of her own and the infinite thread of life from the sea. Then she bound the line around her heart and fastened the other end to her daughter's. Kissing her child for one last time, she turned her into a kite and sent her off into the sky.

The sun, risen, no longer couched on a green mattress darting a fitful glance through the watery jewels, bared its face and looked straight over the waves. They fell with a regular thud. They fell with the concussion of horses' hooves on the turf. Their spray rose like the tossing of lances and assegais over the riders' heads. They swept the beach with steel blue and diamond-tipped water.

Soaring with the current, the daughter rose and fell beneath the clouds. She danced and twirled in the wind's warm breath and was content with her new life.

The mother watched her take to the skies and marvelled at the colours that were reflected off the kite's iridescent panels. How much more beautiful she would be if the sun's light could kiss her directly instead of fumbling through the blanket of cloud. How splendid she would be if she were free.

Fingering the tiny thread that hung between them, the mother pushed her thoughts aside.
The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their form. The waves were steeped deep-blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping.

Time passed and the daughter grew tired of her view of the waves. She longed for more. She longed for a freedom she could not have.

Sensing her sorrow, the wind took pity on the kite. Falling beneath her, she lifted her upwards into the clouds.

Now the sun had sunk. Sky and sea were indistinguishable. The waves breaking spread their white fans far out over the shore, sent white shadows into the recesses of sonorous caves and then rolled back sighing over the shingle.

Through the night, the wind carried the daughter higher and higher into the sky. But with each push of air, the string to her mother tightened and grew taut. As the daughter strained for a view of the stars, the string around her mother's heart cut ever sharper, spilling tears of blood onto her breast.

Aware of her daughter's treachery, the mother grew angry. Her child had been safe beneath the clouds, but now she pulled away from her grasp. The mother's fury fuelled the sea into a tempest and sent waves crashing to the rocks.

The mother was resolved. Winding the string around her hand, she gave a single wrench. Above the clouds, the daughter swooned with pain as her heart was torn away.

A hunger remains in place of the heart. A spasm that spreads, runs through the blood vessels to the tips of the breasts, to the tips of the fingers. It throbs, pierces the void, erases it and gradually settles in.

For a single moment there shone the most radiant colours as the sun caught the body of the kite before she fell to her grave in the sea.

The sun rose.

The clouds hung a heavy blood red.

The waves broke on the shore.
She stands on the rocks and watches her two new children surrender to the waves. They float. Buoyant in the brine, they circle each other, their weightless limbs reaching for the current. They have lost all consciousness. They lie sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turns them over at the bottom of the sea. As the water wraps them in its warmth, their minds loosen and let in oily patches of colour.


The swirling hues coat their unconscious whisperings and tempt them back to life. She stands on the rocks, ready to save them.

Indeed it was ever thus. For eternity she has stood and waited; waited and watched.

There was a time when God was a woman and Her spaciousness filled the vision and touched the hearts of every man, woman and child.

Now this time is our time and she shall reach for our hearts and touch our vision. She will wait for us – wait and wait until she is no more than a statue here on the rock. She will wait for us to return to her. Her voice breathes life across the waves:

'Return to me lost children and I will give you what you desire.'

For our seas are what we make them, fishy or not, impenetrable or muddied, red or black, high and rough or flat and smooth, narrow straights or shoreless, and we ourselves are sea, sands, corals, seaweeds, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves... seas and mothers.

She can love us in a way that no-one else will.

Lost within the kaleidoscope of your mind, you sense a current take over you. The force pulls you inwards, welcoming you to its breast, enveloping you in its strength. A figure of vision scoops you from the sea and carries you onto the shores.

I too am saved. I too am rescued by this energy that exists on the other side of my consciousness. In the eddies of my mind, I sense her presence and feel myself drawn to her centre.

The buzz, the croon, the smell all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.

Returned to her, nothing separates us. Immersed in her, I share colours and light. I become her, respecting myself. I love her, loving myself. She is within me and
outside of me. Certainly I cannot embrace her, but she is there. She surrounds me, radiates in me, illuminates me, comforts me, without a gift in exchange.

Perhaps, at last, we are home.
Cellar

The earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be derived or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world.

(Rich, Of Woman Born, 1977)

Nursery

It was the light that woke me; light very different to the soft silver and night-red I knew. The light called me out – I remember it as a cry, though you will say that was mine, and perhaps it was, because a baby knows no separation between itself and life. The light was life. And what light is to plants and rivers and animals and seasons and the turning earth, the light was to me.

Feeling the light cast itself across my heavy lids stirs my body back to life. My world glows blood red and then returns to darkness as the light loves and leaves me. Once more in black, I use the time to conjure my surroundings without sight.

I am in bed. Lying on my back, I can feel the narrow mattress threatening to tip me to the musty floor below. As the light casts across my eyes once more, I feel my body waken further. Alive again, the multitude of nerve endings clamour for my attention.

The pounding begins in my head, sending shockwaves down my cheeks and warming my ears with...
pain. Not yet content, the nerves shoot a sharpness to my throat that resonates to the pit of my stomach and echoes down my limbs.

Losing the light is a temporary death and I feel my mind regain control. Too soon, the glare returns and colours the pain with intensity. Nausea swells with the waves outside and I use all my strength to lean over the side of the bed.

The waves massed themselves, curved their backs and crashed. Up spurted stones and shingle. They swept round the rocks, and the spray, leaping high, spattered the walls of a cave that had been dry before...

The sea. The sea. Tasting the salt-water as it leaves the confines of my stomach, I recall flashes of before; of drowning, dying. The shock of memory cramps my stomach to knots and I retch, once again, on the floor.

Falling back against the mattress, my energy deserts me and it is all I can do to control my breathing. Steadily, the air returns to my lungs and I close my eyes to surrender to the dark. But something hovers on the horizon of my unconscious...

Where are you? Where have you gone? I force my heavy lids to rise once more, but, even in the to sandpaper. Clearing your dry throat, your swollen tongue loosens itself and burrows through your lips. Cracked and sore, they part stubbornly, but allow their tender surface to be cleansed of its shackles of salt. Dissolving onto your tastebuds, the perfect crystals comfort and console and you wonder if the salt has come from the sea or from your tears.

The sea. The sea. Like the water before it, memory floods through and saturates your perception. Weren’t you drowning? Didn’t you drown? Didn’t the salt water course through your veins?

You open one eye and check for reality. With relief you find the shushing lives as the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is the blind that knocked as it drew its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out.

Reassured, you return to
darkness I know that you're not here. I feel strangely lost without you, as though you were part of something that should have been. I search around my mind to find you in its alcoves, but you have left no clues to your new hiding place.

You and I, separated by distance, intimate of thought, waited.

Giving way to restless rest brings the darkness back to light. The gentle dawn teases grey then breaks into an angry red as if displeased to be woken from its sleep. But I am glad of its arrival. We are lucky, even the worst of us, because daylight comes.

In the morning light, I feel stronger, strong enough to assess my surroundings. With unsteady limbs and a pounding head, I drag myself to my feet and stumble across the room.

At my window the seagulls cry. Their haunting shrieks fly through my head as they circle over the waves. The waves come almost up to my window, crashing onto the rocks and wetting my face with spray.

I turn back into the room and adjust my eyes to its darkness. The small bed is all it holds; its narrow mattress and woollen blanket monochrome in the damp.

You sit up in bed and pull your knees up to your chin. The white sheets tent themselves about you and you lay your flushed cheek on their cool whiteness.

The wooden bead rattles once again across the floor as the wind claims the blind from outside the casement. The sudden noise startles you and you throw back the sheets and pad over to the window.

Rolling up the blind, you push the windowpane outwards. The quick breath of air tugs the nightgown from your body and rejuvenates your limbs. Even your feet feel a renewed vibrancy as your bare flesh tingles on the sandy floorboards.

Leaning out onto the sill, you can see the garden, several storeys beneath you. Children are busy there tickling the flower-beds with their nets. They skim the butterflies from the nodding tops of flowers.
But then the sun shines through the window. It lights up the straw on the floor and I feel shaky with its splendour.

They brush the surface of the world. Their nets are full of fluttering wings... but they cannot see you.

You look up and out towards the sea. The waves shine in green and blue as they toss the light from crest to crest. You watch the gentle rhythm caress the shore and marvel at its tenderness.

Far out in the distance, a white figure stands proud upon a rock.

A click of the lock calls my attention to the door. My heart starts to race as it judders open, catching on the uneven stone. Paralysed, I lean against the wall in fear... in she came, stood for a moment silent... stood quite motionless...

My eyes meet hers and I am chilled by their blue intensity. She sets a wooden bowl upon the bed and turns to leave.

In a heart-stopping moment I realise that this sharp creature is going to leave me. In a masochistic paradox, I want her to stay – need her to stay – but, when I struggle to call out, no sound comes from my lips. I urge my arms to reach out and stop her but they hang heavy by my side, leaden with desperation. Too late, the woman slips back through the door.

What was she doing? Why was she leaving me here? I started

She turned the handle, firmly, lest it should squeak, and went in, pursing her lips, slightly, as if to remind herself that she must not speak aloud.

Entering the room she looks surprised to see you from your bed. Your eyes meet hers and you gaze into the sapphire blue as though falling back through time.

Moving past you to the table, she draws your flesh to goosebumps. You observe her elegance as she sets down a glass of milk and an orange and then turns to face you.

She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent. She had been admired. She had been loved.
to cry.

As the door falls to rest, I am shot through with movement, falling upon the unfeeling wood. Twisting the handle this way and that, the realisation seeps through that I am locked out of reach.

She had locked the door. She had gone.

Desperation falls all reason and my sobs echo in the unfeeling air. I cannot sustain this enormous weight of sorrow, support these heavy draperies of grief and my knees buckle and send me to the floor.

Curling up upon the floor, I rock with pain as I try to still my tears. At last, deep breaths and choking gulps calm me to hiccoughs, which rise unpredictably to clatter round my tender head. Steadying its heavy weight with my hands, I smell the slow smell of oats. Sweet but with an edge of salt. Thick like a blanket.

On hands and knees I shuffle to the bed and claim the bowl of porridge. Holding its warmth to me, I draw the covers round my shaking body and let its milky scent lull me to sleep.

Loving her, you draw towards her open arms. Holding you, she sends all up your body a satisfaction, a softness, a warmth; such belonging that you wonder what art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored?

Content, you allow the woman to guide you back to bed and draw the covers over you. She moves in silence and you watch her as she busies herself about the room.

It is a pleasure very near to sadness, bringing tears to one's eyes like a beautiful picture or poem. And is not that a Mother's gentle hand that undraws your curtains, and a Mother's sweet voice that summons you to rise?

Sitting up, you take the glass of milk from her delicate hands. Stroking the hair from your eyes, she stoops to kiss you; her lips cool upon your forehead. With a final glance, she leaves the room, letting the tongue of the door slowly lengthen in the lock.

Alone, you raise the glass to your lips. The milk's silky sheen slides down your throat and lines your stomach with love.
Voice: milk that could go on forever. Found again. The lost mother/bitter-lost.

Eternity: is voice mixed with milk.

Scent of milk, dewed greenery, acid and clear, recall of wind, air, seaweed... it slides under the skin, does not remain in the mouth or nose but fondles the veins, detaches skin from bones, inflates me like an ozone balloon, and I hover with feet firmly planted on the ground.

Stretched from the bed, I can see the view from the window; the lighthouse in the distance with the breaking waves in front. An amber light shines from the tower and I watch as it coats the room in acid; rests; and washes over once again.

And then the light goes out. I strain to see as first spindly legs and then a body squeeze out between the glass panels. The orange demon scuttles down the vertices of the lighthouse, clicking its claws against the plaster. I try to follow its journey as it spirals round and down, but I am distracted as I notice that seven ripe oranges have just dropped onto the window sill.

Watching these golden orbs, I suddenly realise that sitting in the middle is the orange demon.

'I'm going to die.'

'Not you, in fact you're recovering, apart from a few minor hallucinations, and remember, you've

Dozing in the warmth of the sun, you watch its rays play overhead, dappling the plaster light and dark. The milk has soothed your senses and you are returned to innocence, tucked up in bed; your childish fascination mesmerized by the patterns of light on the ceiling. Relaxed by their movement, you allow yourself to stumble into thought...

Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, THAT'S the great puzzle!

It is a great puzzle, indeed - for it seems that there are no answers in this protective space. You are home and yet not home, and the tangible trappings of sense hide out of reach. Resolved to find some order in your mind, you go back to the beginning, for at least you have, or might have had, the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order.

You start at A, reciting the letters out in your head. A is for apple, B for banana. Your mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and
made your choice now, there's no going back.'

'What are you talking about? I haven't made any choice.'

The demon winks enigmatically and, tossing the seven oranges up into the air, it juggles itself out of the window.

Alone again, I am aware of myself moving further from the floor, further from my feet. My body swells, tugging at the sinews and buffeting the organs inside their airy casing. I can feel my limbs screaming with the pressure.

_Dark twisting, pain in the back, the arms, the thighs – pincers turned into fibres, internal bursting veins, stones breaking bones: grinders of volumes, expanses, spaces, lines, points._

With a final burst, I burst.

I wake in shock, my heart pounding in its casing. The room and I are as we were but the entering lighthouse beam illuminates an orange orb resting in the wooden bowl. I reach for its tender skin; to hold the precious fruit, to smell its citric scent. Instead, my hand closes around the sticky mass of porridge and I draw back, repulsed.

'What have you in common with women? When your hand no longer even knows anymore how to accurately, until it reaches the letter O. O is for orange.

But after O? What comes next? After O there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance... Here at least was O.

The offending orb glistens beside you. Self-satisfied and orange, it waits for you to realise its presence. But your hand was too lonely, and in such loneliness, your hand no longer had the strength to believe in the orange.

You force yourself onwards. O. Oh. If O is O... then P... P is... what is P? P is out of reach; out of sight, out of taste. The illusive pineapple hides behind the spherical unity of the orange; its name lodged into forgetfulness.

Exasperated, you lie back upon the pillow. Closing your eyes, you sink back into the memory of the woman who has left you here. Her imagined presence warms your body and relaxes your temples.

_From far away, from outside of your history, a voice came to collect the last tear. To save the orange. She put the word in your ear._

Opening your eyes, you regard the orange suspiciously. Holding it, however, brings no
find a near and patient realisable orange, at rest in the bowl?

The orange demon gloats smugly from the window sill. Frustrated, my temper builds and with sudden strength I hurl the bowl towards it. Inevitably, it vanishes before the bowl hits the sill and I watch as the grey oats slide slowly down the wall.

Not forgetting the orange is one thing. Recalling the orange is another thing. Rejoining it is another.

Feeling the loss of the orange overwhelms my senses. I wish that this enormous flood of grief, this insatiable hunger for sympathy will ebb with the tide. Yet, with each stroke of the lighthouse, I grow more alone and more uncertain. The rhythm of the beam takes myself away from me, takes my panic away from me, until I am an empty shell. With nothing left to feel, I shrink, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others.

Lost to myself, I am aware only of the resounding crash of the waves on the rocks and the persistent pulse of brightness that bursts forth from the lighthouse. Preoccupied by this overwhelming illumination, no spark of inspiration. Annoyed by its stubborn assurance, you pitch the globe into space.

Its trajectory arcs the air and slows the movement to silence. Then noise breaks as it strikes the wall and tumbles to the floor, offering a resolute thud of rest.

With a sudden pang of guilt, you scramble out of bed and reclaim the orange. Cupping it gently in your hands, you take the bruised fruit back to bed and lay it on the pillow beside you.

Lying back, you can still see the faint mark of impact on the wall - a small round mark, upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

You watch the tangerine reminder until the darkness falls and takes it from you. Lost in the black, you close your eyes and wait for sleep, but resting next to your face on the pillow, the orange's citric scent makes your eyes water, tempting tears to follow. You feel a surge of loss swell through your body. Just in time the lighthouse beam bathes you
universe of sight and sound, I eventually fall into unconsciousness.

in honey and restores your balance. Content now, you cover the fruit with your hand and drift towards sleep.

They dream. And standing on the rock, she watches them toss and turn beneath their twisted sheets. Her heart yearns to hold their tender souls, but she is Janus-faced and cannot covet both these children. A storm rises as melancholy tempers her vision.

*Never did anybody look so sad.* Bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. *Never did anybody look so sad.*

As the water roars on the sea and the shore, she watches her babes sleeping in their beds. They were complacent. They did not know how much they needed her. Soon they will understand.

I am running.

It is dark and I am running. Scattering my footsteps down the rocky passages, I can feel each step shock fear through my body.

I need to run. I need to escape. Someone is chasing me... someone... no, I can't go any further... just a second... just a breath.

My feet still and I bend forward to ease the pain that squeezes my lungs so intensely. As the noise of my breathing lessens, I sense that I am no longer alone. The hairs on my neck prickle and the sweat on my body chills to ice.

Life pauses. Then at double speed a hand covers my mouth and tips my head skywards. The damp

You are running.

It is dark and you are running. Crawling down your veins, the adrenalin fills your pulse and flares through your blood vessels. The narrow walls jump out at you, bruising hands and elbows, as you stumble through this maze of corridors.

Your heart beats in your ears and your breath comes in rasping gasps, but still you hear the pounding of feet behind you. Louder and closer, the feet raise a pace until your fear of being caught brings you to a halt.

You wait forever in an instant. *Then slowly, a shadowy shape gathers, became detached, darkened, stood out.*
drips from the ceiling, stinging my eyes, but still I see the glint of a blade flash before me. *A Venetian knife, thin and cruel.*

A gasp. A moan. The hand falls from my face as the body drops behind me. Slowly I turn to face my resolution.

*I can feel her the way the sea feels her. She pulls at me like the sea.*

Facing the angel who stands before me, I am at peace. I have beseeched and pleaded and now here she stands as my saviour. Stepping over your body at my feet, I fall into her arms.

You have to be cruel to be kind. They know now that she is what they long for: a vision that can mother our hearts and souls into their truest beings.

I wake in the dark and yearn to call back sleep. Already the loss of the woman colours my consciousness and I feel alone. As my isolation grows, I feel the bed shift beside me and my heart leaps with joy as I feel her presence return.

*She lit the candles and propped me against her body. I laid*

You wake in an instant; hands to your throat to stop the blood from pouring forth, *nearly choked from self-strangling*. Your hurt emotions take over from the pain of death.

*There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it... In her head she was still queen, but not your*
my head on her heart and heard it beating, so steady, as if it had always been there. I had never lain like this with anyone but my mother.

With a restrained passion, she rests her hand over my heart. I can feel it beat against her palm, leaning to her touch, yearning to push through my ribs and return to her. If she should leave me, my heart will turn to water and flood away.

Removing her hand, she strokes my hair, caressing the strands with tenderness. I feel her watching me as my eyes surrender to her touch and close themselves to see infinity.

She began to stroke my head and shoulders. I turned over so that she could reach my back. Her hand crept lower and lower. She bent over me; I could feel her breath on my neck.

Feeling her face only inches from my own mixes my sense to turmoil. With a heavy hand she holds my wrist, but her lips are tender as they touch mine.

I was thinking about porridge.

The kiss lasts too long and I shift for air. But resistance causes restraint and, with renewed force, she pins my hand above my head, her eyes daring me to defy her.

We made love and I hated it

queen any more, not the White Queen any more.

You turn to the orange for consolation, but it has gone. An unexpected panic sweeps behind your eyes as you cast back the bedcovers to look for it. Seeing it lying upon the floor, only inches from the bed, calms you to tears and you reach out for the fruit. Closing your palms around its shape sends waves of warmth through your frozen limbs.

Back in bed, you try to peel it.

The skin hung stubborn, and soon you lay panting, angry and defeated. What about grapes or bananas? You did finally pull away the outer shell and, cupping both hands round, tore open the fruit.

Tearing the flesh in two, juice coats your hands and the room pitches into darkness. With a racing heart you move over to the window.

The lighthouse has gone.

Standing in the light of the moon you feel the warmth of the orange running through your fingers. Looking down you see not juice but blood pouring forth from the broken halves. You drop the fruit too late as the red liquid begins to seep through your nightgown.

My mother had painted the white roses red and now she claimed they grew that way.

Stumbling across the room,
and hated it, but would not stop.

Waking, I feel myself bound hand and foot and unable to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced my own body, my own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness. So listening to the waves, I wait for my identity.

Returning to my self, I find my ties are not of rope or chain. It is the woman who holds me, curved along my spine; hands across wrists, feet across ankles. Her safety is suffocating and I tense to move away.

The twitch of activity alerts her from sleep. Sitting up, her eyes question my motives, but I can no longer deny my claustrophobia and so I pull from her grasp.

I felt a blow that wrapped round my head like a bandage.

Looking up into her face I see her smiling at me. Lovingly, she strokes my throbbing cheek but I flinch from her touch. Her face clouds and in one swift movement she pulls the pillow from beneath my head and presses it to my face.

Beneath the feathers all is death. I feel it coming and welcome its arrival; but then I hear a noise outside the door. For a fraction of a second the pressure lessens and I use all of my strength to push the door at rest in its casing. Taking the handle in both hands, you twist it sharply, expecting resistance; but there is none. The door swings open and you escape into the passage.

You follow the deserted corridor to its end, almost falling now and then in your haste. Soon you come to a narrow spiral staircase winding down and round into black. Standing at the top your heart jumps with paranoid phobia and taps away at reason. What if it's not safe? Supposing you should fall? Catching sight of your blood-stained hands prompts you into action and you venture into the dark.

One no longer knows right away whether one is running toward the centre or escaping.

Twisting down the staircase is not as bad as you thought, for lanterns light the way, set here and there in alcoves in the wall. In their dim light you see other objects resting on ledges: a pen, a book, a jar of marmalade.

Among other strange sights was to be seen a cat suckling its young; a table laid sumptuously for a supper of twenty; a couple in bed; together with an extraordinary number of cooking utensils. You wish to reach out and examine these curious items, but your feet hurry
woman off me.

With no idea where I am going, I run from the room, slamming the door shut behind me.

onward towards their destination.

At the bottom, a passage opens out beside you; but in front of you stands a door. You stop. The door swings open, pauses, slams shut.

Perhaps it was the light on your face, but I thought I recognised you from somewhere a long way down, somewhere at the bottom of the sea. Somewhere in me.
But this cave is already, and ipso facto, a speculum. An inner space of reflection. Polished, and polishing, fake offspring. Opening, enlarging, contriving the scene of representation, the world as representation. All is organised into cavities, spheres, sockets, chambers, enclosures.

(Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1985)

Facing each other outside the door, we are transfixed by each other’s presence. Our shared past tumbles out before us, pulling us together once again. But the red of your nightgown and the white of mine hold the story of the moment; the binary markings of our autonomy.

*We are the result of our relationship to the door.*

We can never be the same; we can only try to understand.

A noise breaks out from behind the door and we are fired with urgency. We must get out, get away, go home.

Turning in to the darkness of the corridor, we are only seconds ahead as the door handle twists and the woman releases herself in our wake.

They can run, but she will find them. They can hide, but she will find them.

They have returned to her and she will not let them go.

Running down the corridor, we are consumed by the darkness. The ragged walls drip with damp, making it slippery underfoot. We skid into each other. The sudden contact of skin makes us jump and our hearts race faster, desperate to burst free from our ribs.

*There is a voice crying in the wilderness... the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is, they say, the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage.*

Just as the passage becomes impossibly tight, it opens out into a vault. Released from our claustrophobia, we breathe more freely and use the burst of newfound energy to push a stack of wooden crates in front of the opening. With the entrance secured, we have precious moments to examine our surroundings.

The vault is like a treasure trove. Lit by the broken flame of guttering candles, it shifts before us like a mirage. Cut into the walls of rock are alcoves holding bottles of milk in
Who I am for You

The Cellar

dusty wine racks. Lined up together, a silent army, they reflect their pearlescent sheen. We hesitate in front of them, panting and dehydrated, but reject their false offer of salvation, knowing that the creamy liquid would wrench us double with cramp.

Tempted but defiant, we turn our backs on their milk bottle eyes.

The centre of the room is littered with boxes. Boxes and boxes stacked and staggered across the floor. Pushing the paper from one of these wooden crates bathes the room in a golden glow as the candlelight dances on the curved surface of the oranges.

A quick glance confirms the contents of the other crates. Surrounded by these amber jewels, we are made uneasy by their unnatural presence. Should we touch one? Peel one? Taste one?

Our questions are deflected as the tower of boxes balanced behind us begins to sway and we realise that we are no longer alone.

Pushing through the orange carpet, we search the walls for a means of escape. At the same time, on opposite sides of the room, we each find a door within an alcove and set off once more into the dark.

The maze. Find your own way through and you shall win your heart's desire. Fail and you will wander for ever in these unforgiving walls.

You are running.

It is dark and you are running down corridors that twist and turn at impossible angles in front of you. Here and there, a discarded bottle rolls beneath your feet, releasing the sour stench of curdled milk. Now and then, a rotten orange catches under your heel, squashing its greenish mould in slimy tendrils up your leg.

You can't see a thing. You can't even walk straight, you can't stay upright, in the total darkness. You lose your balance.

Tired and terrified they will fall into her arms.

They can run, but they will always return to her.

I am running.

It is dark and I am running through an endless labyrinth. The walls laugh at my clumsiness as I buffet against them, tearing my skin. I stumble on glass and retch at the fetid fumes that force themselves upon me.

Swaying with their scent, I lose control and my head spins a sudden fear into view: I am afraid of the dark.
I am afraid of the Dark... The Dark only lets you take one step at a time. Step and the Dark closes round your back. In front, there is no space for you until you take it. Darkness is absolute. Walking in the Dark is like swimming underwater except you can't come up for air.

Drowning in my fear, I slide down the damp wall, crouched in blind terror.

There's no dark like it. It's soft to the touch and heavy in the hands. You can open your mouth and let it sink into you till it makes a close ball in your belly. I am weighted by its presence, pinned against my panic so that it consumes me, burying my reason. Blood seems to pour from my shoes. This is death, death, death. I go dizzy, my ears ring and the darkness comes to meet itself head on.

Crawling down the tunnel, you use your hands and knees to steady yourself against the force of the dark. Upright you were vulnerable, but down here you feel safer, less likely to fall. The corner of your hearing reaches out for sounds of your pursuer, but it is only your fear that hurries you forward.

Crawling faster, ignoring the uneven floor that snags your skin, you do not see the tunnel suck suddenly inwards. Cracking your head against the corner of the wall, you reel, gag and fall into the darkness.

In the haze of our unconscious we see images slide in and out of focus: waves hurling themselves against the rocks; towers of oranges resolute against gravity; naked bodies twisting hot and salty; an old woman slicing a head off with a knife.

With a start, I wake and push the perspiration off my face. My heart hammers in my ears, but somehow the darkness seems less cloying than before. I must learn to see in it... to see through it, and... to see the darkness of my own.

Moving to my feet, I run onwards.

Coming round to a splitting headache, you touch the sticky warmth that is nestled on your forehead. Wincing, you struggle to become vertical and lean heavily against the wall. Resting there a moment, you become aware of footsteps running in your direction; louder and louder, closer and closer. With the image of the woman with the knife freshly minted in your mind, you push the pain aside and run away from the pursuing feet.
She waits for them. And they will come.

*It's a circle going round and round. Pain can begin at any point and turn in either direction.*

At last *the immensely long tunnel in which you seem to have been travelling for hundreds of years* widens. The light pours in; light from the flames of guttering candles. Confused, you stop short. And I, only paces behind you, run up against your body, propelling us both into the vault.

*The passage is but an eternal return to the same.*

We stand before the woman in a vault of milk and oranges. Dishevelled and torn, bloody and out of breath, we are somehow paralysed in the moment. We watch as she breathes in and out, extinguishing the candles one and all.

*The darkness poured down profusely, and left them with scarcely any feeling of life, except that they were standing there together in the darkness.*

In the darkness that becomes *even deeper than before* we succumb to sensations unknown to us. Rigid in our uncertainty, we feel the woman's body move past us, round us, between us.

*I find myself divided, slipping under her skin; part of me identifies too much with her.*

We have been *emptied and the ego obliterated* so that she may consume us entirely; consume and control. Her heavy hand shapes firmly to our shoulders, bending us to her will; but *this antagonism, this threatening aspect* flushes identity back into being and pushes us to violence. Growing accustomed to the dark, you twist out of her grasp and throw her knife towards me, within reach. A Venetian knife, thin and cruel.

*Without hesitating, I slit her throat.*

Blood pours across my hands and pools around our feet. The lifeless body lies on the floor between us, threatening to be borne away on its own red river. What have we done?

*Silence is our answer.*

*The goddess is dead.*
Then through the silence a rumble grows. The shifting of rock and soil rains debris on our heads. There are two principles... the Weight and the Counter-weight. The goddess is dead and now the vault is threatening to become our tomb.

We dodge the rocks as they drop from the ceiling, opening up a chink of light which falls upon the dead body.

The first light caught her and she shone beacon-like across the vault. We pause with a murmur of amazement, for she was more beautiful than ever.

Loss rushes towards us, carrying despair in its arms. So this was the mother, of whom I had so complacently sung before I knew her properly... She was an absence – with no division between night and day.

Struck with grief, we act as in a dream. Stacking boxes against each other, we construct a makeshift tower that will carry us towards the light. Reaching the top, we are inches from the surface as the whole ceiling crashes to the floor. With the force of desperation, we scramble upwards, believing this to be the moment of our death.
The orange is a beginning. Starting out from the orange all voyages are possible. All voices that go their way via her are good.

(Cixous, L'heure de Clarice Lispector, 1989)

'I hear a sound,' I thought, 'cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.'

'I see a globe,' you thought, 'hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.'

'Islands of light are swimming on the grass,' I thought. 'They have fallen through the trees.'

'The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves,' you thought.

'The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,' I thought, 'and drops of water have stuck to them.'

'A caterpillar is curled in a green ring,' you thought, 'notched with blunt feet.'

'Stones are cold to my feet,' I thought. 'I feel each one, round or pointed, separately.'

'The back of my hand burns,' you thought, 'but the palm is clammy and damp with dew.'

Resting back against the soft wet grass, we take in our surroundings as our hearts return to their rhythm and our breathing returns to silence.

They say the sky is the same everywhere, but lying here, watching the clouds caress above us, it radiates a blue that you and I have never seen. Bluer than blue. Brighter than bright. Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different... that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it! – this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing of vast trains of ships and wagons from north to south, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away – this endless activity... has been left to work its will year in year out.

We marvel at its calming hue as the rays of the sun cast lovingly upon our tired bodies. Gradually, we feel the distance lengthen between us and the fear in the cellar.
I dream that I am sailing on a rose petal round a clear blue lake. Other petals float past, catching the light on their upturned rims. *A fleet now swimming from shore to shore.* The white petals dance and dally to the current's will and I am rocked and spun upon my fragile craft. I trail my hand in the water and feel the individual particles teasing through my fingers. What bliss is this, to be lost on a lake?

Time slides away and, turning round in the gentle breeze, I notice another figure sailing on the lake. Who is it? Even with my hand to shade the sun from my eyes, I cannot make out their identity, for the white of their attire reflects the light so that they are almost glowing in the sun. I strain for a closer look, to catch onto the image of this iridescent being, but curiosity makes me careless and I capsize my craft, falling into the water.

Beneath the surface, life is distorted as sound and sight becomes soft at the edges. Floating in amongst the weeds, I catch myself within green streamers, shooting shoals of fish from their hiding place. They look surprised to see such an unwanted guest; but I am content here, gliding between the light and shade of the rose petals overhead.

No sooner have I accepted this watery world than I am taken from it. With a burst of noise, a pair of hands plunge through the surface and grasp my wrists, pulling me back into the world above. The weeds catch at my ankles, reluctant to let me go, but the hands hold firm and haul me back to life, coughing and spluttering as the air reminds me what my lungs are for.

Breathing naturally again, I find that the quality of air is almost perfect, the blue of the sky almost divine. I allow the hands to help me climb upon the tender petal that tips beneath my watery weight. They are strong, elegant hands with long fingers and delicate wrists defined by the bone. I gaze at the shell-like pink of the nails and wonder how it would feel to hold a finger between my lips and taste the curve of the nail on my tongue. Blood rushes to my head and I sway with desire. Drawing myself from temptation, I follow the hands to their owner. You stare into my eyes and *I sense the quiet in my body, the sweetness under my skin. Silence spreads, along with its presence: peaceful, alive. I intuit the arrival of another, nearby and yet distant,*
confused with the tenderness of repose. But in memory exists a mystery. Perhaps more than one lives in me with its veiled secret.

Most women who have awakened remember having slept.

You wake to find me watching you, lying on the grass, only inches from your face. Blinking the sleep from your eyes brings me into focus and colour returns; runs up the stalks of the grass; blows out into tulips and crocuses; solidly stripes the tree trunks; and fills the gauze of the air and the grasses and the pools. The intensity of vision crackles between us as you search my eyes for something lost. Finding memory burns the heart and you pull away from my gaze into peace.

Your silence exists, as does my self-gathering. But so does the almost absolute silence of the world's dawning. In such suspension, before every utterance on earth, there is a cloud, an almost immobile air. The plants already breathe, while we still ask ourselves how to speak, how to speak to each other without taking breath away from them.

These questions lie unanswered as we turn over our hands to find the wounds of the cellar healed. There is no need for bloodshed between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. Blood is familiar, close. You are all red. And I so very white. Puzzled, we turn to each other for an explanation that, lost in silence, neither can give.

We must search for answers.

We must search for ourselves.

Voice!... Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses... She goes away. She goes forward, doesn't turn back to look at her tracks... but she launches forth; she seeks to love.

Together we walk through the forest, uneasy in our not-knowing. The blanks of memory slowly fill themselves from the water table of our unconscious, yet still we are left wondering. Where have we been? Where are we going?

The crack of a twig stabs me with fear and I hurry my panic through the passage of trees. The path seems to spiral in on itself with every plant growing circular-wise like a target. We try to break through their ranks, but the trees moved like a crowd of very tall people who wouldn't speak to me, who alarmed and attracted me. Nevertheless, compelled to the centre, we walk onward.
Reaching the heart of the forest, we are stopped by a tree, proud and bold in front of us. It was an ordinary tree but to us it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world. Dark was the trunk in the middle, and the branches sprang here and there, leaving jagged intervals of light between them as distinctively as if it had but that second risen from the ground.

We watch in awe as the wind blows, sprinkling the ivory blossom like confetti at our feet. The sun shines and, bursting into fiery flame, the tree ignites with balls of yellow among green leaves. Such is their sudden perfume that we feel it as the scent of oranges wafted from a million trees, heavy with the fruit.

Shielding our eyes from the golden halo that shimmers round the tree, we notice a subtle movement nearer to the ground. At the foot of the tree lies a wolf, lean and sleek against the trunk. She sleeps succinctly curled into a ball as if she were cradling her spine in her tail but, alerted to our presence, her head inclines towards us. We freeze as she regards us carefully, her raised eyebrow the only suggestion of her scrutiny. Unperturbed, she relaxes back onto her haunches and stretches her legs out in front of her, easing the muscles out of slumber. With only one glance back, she slinks off into the trees.

Now that she is out of sight, we move forward to get a closer look at the tree. It is impossible not to touch it, not to run the softness of your palm over the ripples of its bark. You put your hand to the trunk and the tree speaks to you, silently. You lean to it, lean into it and feel its life run behind the bark and under your skin.

A gentle thud pulls you from the tree and we look down to see a ripe orange lying in the grass. Picking it up, I dust the pollen from its skin, turning my hands to gold.

I peeled it to comfort myself.

Sitting under the shade of the orange tree, I ease the last piece of peel away from the tender flesh. The rest of the peel shines in the grass like a giant buttercup, casting us both in an orange glow. Carefully, I separate the two halves and offer one to you. You peel a segment from it, the skin tearing from its bed. Offering it back to me, you place it gently between my lips. The fruit is moist and warm and, breaking through the skin, fills my mouth with a juice as strong as alcohol. Savouring its taste, I offer some of my half to you. For what seems like forever, we share the orange with a tender intensity until we want for nothing.

Warm and complete, we observe each other afresh. You seem content and yet a tear slides beneath your lid and travels down your cheek. You move to speak, but you cannot. Finding silence tips your tears to run a river.
My heart reaches out to yours: Don't cry. One day we'll manage to say ourselves. And what we say will be even lovelier than our tears. Wholly fluent.

But my tears prevent speech also and I feel as though my heart will break. We have shared so much and yet shared nothing. Slowly, I reach out and take your hand, sticky with the cloying juice from the orange. Searching your eyes for signs of refusal, I place your index finger between my lips, rubbing the juice delicately away with my tongue. You close your eyes and still your tears. The sensation floods through your body, innumerable twigs stir; hives are brushed; insects sway on grass blades, the spider runs rapidly up a crease in the bark, and the whole air is tremulous with breathing; elastic with filaments.

With my eyes closed, I can feel each whorl of your fingertip imprint itself onto my tastebuds. This is how I shall get to know you; this is how I shall learn who you are. To emerge to another life. To perceive it through the whole of me. To savour it, and thus to find strength, serenity. To reach the end of lacerations and abandonments. To sense life, its tones, its fragrances—true communion.

I allow the taste of experiencing to exist.

Opening our eyes we see a new path through the trees that had so intensely surrounded us. Tearing ourselves back into two, we move towards the clearing. Ahead of us a streak of silver slices between the trees. The wolf comes back onto the path and turns to look at us. She must be only the path, the method, the theory, the mirror, which leads back by a process of repetition. Ears back and tail held high, she turns and we follow her path to the horizon.

The path is easy to tread and we walk freely along the avenue of trees. Birds call out from their treetop balconies and butterflies dance like petals as we continue to the edge of the forest.

Beyond us lies a silvery meadow. The pampas grass raised its feathery spears from the mounds of green at the end of the meadow. A breadth of water gleamed.

Pausing for a moment, we watch the water shining on the horizon. Tentatively, I slide my hand into yours and feel the electric connection of our bodies. You turn and smile, and your warmth seems a laugh which has blossomed and dazzled. In this tender effusion, we walk in happiness, in complete silence: each of us giving ourselves to the other.
River

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests, like dead women.


In a far off kingdom lived a princess. The King and Queen gave her everything she ever wanted, but the Princess had only one love—oranges.

*There was originally an intimacy between the orange and the little girl, almost a kinship, the exchange of essential confidences.*

Every morning the Princess would run down to the kitchens and select the most perfect orange from the cook's supplies. All day, she would carry the orange with her, sometimes holding the pitted sphere in her hand, sometimes sliding it into her pocket, a rounded bump the only clue to its existence. At night, she placed the orange on her pillow and let its citric aroma lull her to sleep.

By morning, however, the fruit was withered and bruised, so the Princess would drop it out of the window before setting off to the kitchens to find a new orange. But one morning, as the orange plopped into the moat, a demon surfaced from beneath the water. Extending its spindly legs, it scuttled up the castle wall and into the Princess' bedroom.

As the Princess got into bed that night, she failed to notice the two orange eyes watching her from the fading embers of the fire.

The sun rose, the Princess woke and the demon blinked from the hearth. Going over to the window, the Princess extended her arm to send yesterday's orange to its fate. Quick as a flash, the demon scurried from the fireplace and along the Princess' arm, leaving ashen footprints on her snow-white nightdress. Frightened, the girl pulled back and sent both the demon and the orange tumbling into the moat.

A splash, then silence. Then a tap, tap, tapping came echoing up the wall. The Princess watched in fear as the demon's wizened body crept over the sill, curled around the orange.

The Princess was afraid, but she listened as the demon explained that it could transform her orange into one everlasting, in return for one thing. Desperate for an eternal orange, the Princess agreed and the demon tipped itself and the orange once more into the moat.
Minutes passed and nothing could be seen from the Princess' window. Then a ripple formed on the surface of the water and, rising from the moat, shone golden rays of light. Blinded by the glare, the Princess covered her eyes. When she finally dared to peer through her fingers, sitting before her was the demon and the most glorious orange ever to be seen.

'It is yours,' said the demon. 'And you are mine.'

Years passed. The demon lived with the Princess by day and slept by her at night, yet it was a small price to pay for the satisfaction of her desire. But in three days time, the Princess was to be eighteen and then everything would change...

_During the three days three thin nights flow, three winks of a day, a blink after each flash of red lightning._

The day dawned on the morning of her birthday and the sun shone through the windows to kiss the Princess awake. Opening her eyes, she saw a woman asleep next to her. The Princess marvelled at her image - _she was like her mother, as the image in a pool on a still summer's day is like the wind flushed face that hangs over it._

The woman smiled in her sleep and reached out for the Princess. Nestled in her arms, the Princess _bathes in passive languor; with closed eyes, anonymous, lost, she feels as if borne by waves, swept away in a storm, shrouded in darkness: darkness of the flesh, of the womb, of the grave._

Lost to sensations of the skin, the Princess did not see the woman's horn-like nails...

_Anihilated she becomes one with the Whole, her ego is abolished. But when the demon moves from her, she finds herself back on earth, on a bed, in the light; she again has a name, a face: she is one vanquished, prey, object._

Opening her eyes, the Princess was horrified. She looked at the woman, so like her mother, yet so like a lover. What had she done? Just then the woman woke and lifted her lids from sleep. Orange eyes stared back at the Princess.

Flushed with fear, thoughts flew through the Princess' head, questioning the woman's appearance. Reading her mind, the woman spoke:

_'Whoever you are dealing with, it is always somebody else.' She reached to the bedside table and picked up the orange. 'Is this not perfect? Was this not worth it?'

Caught up within her desire, the Princess was lost to confusion. 'I love that orange,' she said to herself, _'but even more so I hate it, because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I inbed it in myself, but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself!_'

46
‘Splendid,’ said the demon-woman. ‘Well-reasoned my dear. And see, the window is so near. Just a step. Just a jump.’ She made her way over to the Princess, her hardened toenails clicking on the floor. Standing behind her, she ran a single nail down the Princess’ spine. But as her hand reached the small of her back to push her to her death, the Princess made a sudden move and it was the woman who fell from the window, cracking her head on the sill as she went.

Falling like a stone, the woman turned silently in the air, casting orange light across the kingdom. As the moat welcomed her to its watery grave, the Princess watched as her eternal orange returned to flesh. And in that instant it was a childhood that came running back to pick up the live orange and immediately celebrate it.

Holding the orange in both hands, she became peaceful too, at the same time possessed with a strange exaltation. Life seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at.

*****

We stand at the water’s edge, you and I, and look to the garden beyond. There are people there, further up the bank, and we squint to bring their figures into shape. It would seem that this is the garden of the house from which we have wandered and we feel compelled to return there. As if confirming our thoughts, we see the wolf, made skinny by the river, drag herself up the bank. Shaking off the droplets and restoring her physique, she makes her way, unseen, into the garden.

The desire to follow her makes us reassess our surroundings. The mere look of the water was enough to turn one giddy. All was riot and confusion.

We watch it swirl and curl before us, throwing eddies here and there upon the rocks. The force of the water is almost hypnotic and it is without uncertainty that we take the first step into the river.

The coldness of the water cuts across your feet and claws up your legs. Stepping onto the shingle, you slide and slip, tipped against your weight. You flounder. Flail. Yet feeling the panic flare your face, you manage to hold yourself upright. Knee-deep in the water, the river races beneath us.

It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that is goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by – this unseizable force.

The river carries life from land to sea, but standing in its icy tempest, I fear its power. Isolated, I feel the world shrink inside the noise of its passage. Watching you wade out in front of me, I feel my own solitude swell and magnify. I cannot cross the
river. I cannot take that step. Desperation seizes me and roots me to the spot. I was calling you, but my cry did not reach your ears. You could not hear me and in that moment of silence, identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell.

Reaching out for you as I lose my footing, I feel my fingers snag into your clothes. Caught off balance, you tip, forward and back, but my descent is too strong and the river rushes up to welcome us, closing over our heads in excitement.

_Beneath it is all dark; it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface where pockets of air force themselves into our lungs._ Turning in and amongst the reeds, we become detached from reality as our breath runs away from us _rising like the silver bubbles from the floor of a saucepan; image on top of image_ pushing into view from the recesses of our minds:

You see yourself as a fish in a stream, deflected, held in place; but cannot describe the stream. Instead, you see colours and patterns dance about you, calling you back to a time before birth. You feel them pulling at you against the flow of the river; the ghosts of a time long forgotten.

I see myself falling, twisting through time to another life, another death. Life is rife beneath the water and yet I feel alone in my existence as I turn amongst the weeds. Alone. Apart. I am called into a time before. A time when time meant nothing.

You are in a dazed state, hovering between two worlds, at one with the water and yet yearning for the shore. You feel torn between the elements, searching for an understanding that dances at your fingertips but cannot be held. Taken in by the water you become fluid yourself, no longer beholden to your mass. And in this state you see its truth...

Lost within the never, I am ambushed by a memory: _There was someone once. Someone whose fingers curled and uncurled like a fern as she slept. She slept on the river bank where the water carried her dreams away. I stood at the weir and caught them. I had no dreams of my own._

... _These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility. This life – which will perhaps be called our restlessness, whims, pretences or lies. All this remains very strange to anyone claiming to stand on solid ground._ And yet. And yet to you it is all
good. All natural. You forget your past. And in place of this forgetting? A certain void. A certain space that, held open for you, becomes complete in its emptiness. You have come home.

At best, I will discover myself in the sea. From there I can be reborn, it is true. But I fear losing the way to me, to you. I fear having to restart everything from the beginning again. And this discovery carries its own death. For with my rebirth comes annihilation. My existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable. I fight back against the memory of oblivion.

Coming home, you find her. She, the one coming from forever, doesn’t stand still, she goes all over, she exchanges, she is desire-that-gives.

Taken to the depths of my memory, I see her too. She enters, she betweens – she mes and thees between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me, without fearing ever to reach a limit: sensualist in our be-coming.

Becoming you once more, returns you to the moment. You are reborn into the river, but it’s a matter of slipping between two oblivions, or of leaping from one memory to another memory, and the edges are hazy.

Myopically, we struggle for sight in the underwater darkness. And although we are fast relinquishing the memory of our unconscious voyage, I still see her, her hair down and flowing like the river, her eyes water-blue. She glistened and shone, my hands were wet, empty and wet, with only the skin of her, her dress left behind.

Sight fully restored, I find it is a piece of cotton webbed between my fingers. You turn to look at it but we are caught off-guard by the swiftly ebbing oxygen in our lungs. The bursting of my veins forces me to pull myself out of these waters.

Struggling to the shore with the weight of our wet clothes wrapped around our legs, we feel the warm air rush to dry our faces. The grass is happy to catch us as we collapse, exhausted against the bank. You peel the cotton from my hand and spread it out under the sun. A pocket-handkerchief. We leave it to dry and turn to look about us.

Here is the garden. Here is the hedge.
Recovering from our watery journey, we take in the details of the garden. *Sharp stripes of shadow lay on the grass, and the dew dancing on the tips of the flowers and leaves made the garden like a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole. The birds, whose breasts were specked canary and rose, now sang a strain or two together, wildly, like skaters rollicking arm-in-arm, and were suddenly silent, breaking asunder as the wolf crept beneath their tree-top boughs. Caught by her movement, we watch her passage into the garden, but she is soon lost from sight as she slips between the hedge.*

*Warmed by the sun, we are tempted by sleep. Coming from the garden, women's voices rise and fall in blurred melody. It would be easy to slip into slumber here, here sitting on the world, but our curiosity overcomes our fatigue. We rise from the grass and, taking the dried-out handkerchief with us, we walk up the bank, strolling past the tennis lawn, past the pampas grass, to that break in the hedge, guarded by red hot pokers like brasiers of clear burning coal, between which the wolf had slipped.*

*Peering between the densely packed leaves, we see women, busy or not, talking or not, at ease in their surroundings. Here a woman paints, frowning intensely at her canvas; there a woman sits upon a deckchair as the World Service plays upon her radio.*

*Yearning to belong, this unfettered community tugs at my heart. Sliding through the gap in the hedge, I shield my face to save me from its scratches. But when I reach the other side, the women are all gone. Facing me with curled-back lips and yellow eyes stand half a dozen wolves.*

Fear roots me to the spot. My hands sweat cold and I shift my gaze to look for you. You are not here and yet I sense you are perhaps one wolf among others on the edge of the pack. For, in spite of my fear, I feel strangely drawn to this pack of she-wolves.

*I am on the edge of the crowd, at the periphery; but I belong to it, I am attracted to it by one of my extremities, a hand or foot. I know that the periphery is the only place I can be, that I would die if I let myself be drawn into the centre of the fray, but just as certainly if I let go of the crowd.*
Standing in this fragile state, I bend and break from me to wolf and back again. My canine watchers shift from foot to foot, anticipating my decision, growing restless with my uncertainty.

It is a choice I cannot make. Exhausted by its pressure, I sink to the floor and cover my head with my arms. Let them have me if that is their desire.

Silence holds.

I peel one arm from round my face and see the garden bare.

I am alone; I am alone!

Suddenly, something stirs at the far end of the lawn. A woman, with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets in a shallow basket held under her arm. She pauses. Turns. And smiles the involuntary smile which women smile when their own beauty, which seems not their own, forms like a drop falling or a fountain rising and confronts them all of a sudden in the glass – this smile she smiled and then she tilted her head and I knew I was to follow her.

Reaching her, I find myself on the edge of a flower garden. I am taken aback by the vibrancy of the nature before me. Every flower glows: white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds and the joyous light within the flowers warms the evening air.

Cutting blooms from a yellow rose-tree, stands the woman with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair. I move slowly, so as not to startle her, until I am but inches from her presence. The air becomes electrified. It suddenly gets cold. The sun seems to give less heat. I shiver and she reaches out a hand and lays it on my cheek.

My heart stops. Breath stills. Her cool hand burns in to my memory. I could live this moment forever. But something moved, flashed, turned a silver wing in the air. She was gone. A blue-eyed wolf slipping away between the roses.

Only for a second she touched me and then she was gone and I was left with my heart smashing against my chest. My cheeks flush and in the instant of her parting I know a loss that darkens my heart. All this suddenly gives me another life. A life that is unliveable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty.

Stumbling forward, I wander between the coloured flowerbeds, at odds with my direction, knowing only that I desire the woman who has left me. I have other needs I am sure, but the unknownness of my needs frightens me. I do not know how huge they are, or how high they are, I only know that they are not being met. I am lacking,
lost and broken-hearted. *The earthy garden sweet smell* that had been so remarkable only moments before sharpens to a bitter taste on my tongue. I cannot see as tears make *all the dahlias in the garden undulate in red waves*. I am drowning in a sea of blood as the race of my breathing steals my consciousness.

How long I lodged in darkness I cannot say, but, when the light returned, *I found myself staring into space, forgetting where I was going.*

I know that *what I need is a comfortable armchair, or even a simple garden chair, so that I could sit just for a moment, gathering my knees in my arms and lowering my head to my thighs, burying my nose, gently rocking while I seek to remember the loss that I think I now glimpse again.*

Such luxuries I do not have and an unexpected fury swells in my gut. Where have you gone? Why can I not find you? *With you I am certain of existing beyond all appearances, all disguises, all designations. I am assured of living because you are duplicating my life.* But you have vanished and left me with nothing but myself. I had you so little time ago and now you are nowhere. *How could you leave me?*

The pain of your rejection tears the anger into grief. *You were a clue I tried to follow but I live in a world that has lost the plot.* I have lost you chasing after women who hover on the edge of promise.

*Self-pity carries the hours until the sun is blood-red and sinking rapidly.* In the orange glow of dusk, I sink with it into apathy. *I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted. I shall not seek to save myself.*

*All is lost.*

Staring into the garden, I see the rose-tree at its centre. *The rose does have no why; it blossoms without reason, forgetful of itself, oblivious to our vision.* Shining gold in the evening light, its tender flowers scent the air and entice me towards it until I stand beneath its branches. Up close it seems to be only foliage; the pagan green and red hiding the summer blooms. *I look again. The rose is there, though, static before one’s eyes.*

I step back to bring it into focus and stretch my hand towards its tender neck. Feeling the soft warmth of the peach-skin petals flutter against my palm, I hesitate in plucking it. *But divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless,* for as I slide my hand along its branch, thorns rise, fiercely protecting their flower. I rest my hand around their points, feeling them scratch a warning on my skin. With cold consideration, I clasp their teeth and feel them burst through the tender pads of my palm.
For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob.

The pain sickens me and I draw back. Blood runs thick and dark in narrow rivers down my arm. I watch as it slowly drips in heavy droplets off my elbow to the floor. Now I am real. Now I exist. I have found my internal eternity and can see myself backwards and forwards, past and present.

Who is that me? Where is that me? What you are living through, dwells in the place where you experience it just long enough for it to be embodied. Whose body? Yours? Mine? Ours? Body inherited from a childhood which is always beginning again. Always blooming once again.

As my blood stills so the air around me pauses. Darkness falls. The flowers disappear and the garden fades away.

Morning breaks. I am standing on a manicured lawn facing the stone steps that lead up to a terrace. It would seem that the house has an outside.

Could it be that, this time, I have come home?
With whom do I cultivate the breath? Who will allow me to remain two: the one, the other, and the air between us?

(Irigaray, To Be Two, 2000)

I look up at the terrace and see the open French windows leading me in to the house. I take a step forward but a slight breeze at my ankles makes me pause. From nowhere, the wolf slips around my frozen form and I feel her warm breath catch behind my knees. Never has she been so close to me, so close that I can see the individual hairs of her fur, a medley of silvers and greys.

Standing in front of me, she turns her regal head to catch me in her sight. Her eyes hold mine, blue and sharp and infinite. It is like a silent word, a living mystery, a dialogue beyond words. Union of the soul and body harmoniously linked, it is a gift of innocence, an illumination of shyness, a refolding of the body in its intention. My breath catches in my throat, but I dare not cough and break the moment.

Too soon, she turns away and darts on to the terrace and into the house. She was off like a bird, bullet, or arrow, impelled by what desire, shot by whom, at what directed, who could say?

I am left alone, my longing catching me by surprise.

Following her lead, I mount the steps to the terrace. Here, urns are filled and flowing with flowers. A buzzing warms the air as the bees are drinking crimson until they became crimson; then flitting on to violet; then to a vivid green, and becoming for the moment the thing they saw — red, green, blue, whatever the colour of the flower might be.

In the morning light, all is vibrant and fresh. Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed and finally exhausted me. Tired but content, I feel my face slip into a smile. I am immersed in the spring: quiet, attentive. Gathered but porous, I receive the environment’s jubilation. I do not accumulate, but become, growing in a new life. Joy’s laughter ripples.

And, in this jubilation, I turn to see you sitting upon the drawing-room steps. You are sitting with your knees pulled up to your chest and your triangular shape triggers my curiosity. Are you the wolf?
Moving towards you, I stumble on a loose paving stone and you look up. We hold our gaze and fall through time. But your eyes are brown not blue. Or are they brown and blue? Perhaps it is the morning sun that plays with your appearance? But, although I now know that you are not the wolf, still I feel myself drawn to you.

The wind blows between us. I try to seize it, but the breath separates us. And, the more I long for you, the more the air escapes me.

You seem to sense it too. Rising from the steps, you move towards me. Half way across the terrace, you stop. The urn beside you spills over with yellow roses and you pluck one from its sisters. Stepping forward once again, you offer it silently before me.

Let us examine the rose. We have seen it so often flowering in bowls, connected it so often with beauty in its prime, that we have forgotten how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanour of perfect dignity and self-possession. The suffusion of its petals is of inimitable rightness.

The yellow bud holds its perfection in your hand. Watching it rest there between your thumb and fingers reminds me of my abused palm. Ashamed, I put my hand behind my back, but you reach out and gently take me by the wrist. Holding my reddened flesh before us, you place the rose in my grasp. Instinctively I wince but, closing my fingers round the stem, I find that this flower has no thorns.

Unexpected tears swell beneath my lids and I lower my head as they tip-toe down my cheeks. Slowly, you put out your hand and cup my chin, raising my head to look at you. I see your face, misshapen through the tears, as it moves close to mine. With gentle pressure, I yield to your lips.

Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness. We were within the moment of the kiss and the whole world might have turned upside down. Blood rushes to our heads and makes us unsteady on our feet. I feel myself merging with you, divided and re-divided like mercury then gathered up only at the last moment. In this sublime state, just at the moment of the instant, in what unfurls it, I touch down then let myself slip into the depth of the instant itself.

At last we pull away, separating ourselves once more. Standing in the shadow of the house, we have come a long way and yet no distance at all. Although wherever you are going is always in front of you, there is no such thing as straight ahead.

We have been together and apart.
Lost and found.
You and I.

Everything that we will be calls us to the tireless, intoxicating, tender-costly-search for love. We will never lack ourselves.

* Knowing this. Knowing each other. We re-enter the house.
Part II

First Floor
Who I am for You

First Floor

Drawing Room

I am for you what you want me to be at the moment in which you look at me as if you have never before seen me so: every moment.

(Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, 1986)

A draught rattles the French windows shut behind us, chilling the air. It seems as if we have entered another world: bleak and bare, the drawing room is without time, without colour, without sound.

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what before time was.

Stepping together, stepping into the room, we are glad of the warmth between us and you slip your hand into mine. The furniture is covered with dust sheets, but there is no dust, no indication of life. Only the faded, falling wallpaper offers a clue to the time the room has spent unattended. Toying with the flap of hanging wallpaper, you pull the curling edge in a swift stroke from left to right. The tearing paper catches on the disused airwaves as it spirals off the wall. Beneath, there lies another sheet, the faded yellow rose pattern identical to the first. Catching your nails at its edge, you ease this piece away too, dropping its curling body at our feet. Behind, there is more the same and you pull again and again.

I watch. At first amused and then intrigued, I begin to grow uncomfortable as, sheet after sheet, tear after tear, you come no closer to reaching bare plaster. The many lives of the house begin to pile up around us, pulling us into its history.

Hot and ruddy, you are soon ankle-deep in paper corkscrews. To return to before time, you must keep on tearing. You hook your nails once more into the next unsuspecting sheet. It catches, resists, then peels away and I see that your determination has meted out its punishment: your nails are cracked and bloody, broken to the quick. But still the house will not release the story that has been layered onto its walls.

You shrug my hand away when I try to intervene. I move to you again, holding your arm with gentle pressure. Flaring in temper, you swing out, catching me unguarded
beneath the chin. I stumble. Fall. My teeth meet lip and blood flows to toast their union.

As the pain fades, I expect to see you next to me, your face full of concern and apology. But, looking up, I see you attacking the wallpaper, unrepentant. You are determined to reach a plaster that you know, deep down, cannot be found.

Uninhibited fury rises with me as I clamber to my feet. How dare you reject me in favour of the house? Grasping your wrist, I yank you away from the wall and swing you round to face me. Childhood stubbornness makes you resistant. You set your face and try to prise my fingers away with your free hand, whilst I determinedly cling on.

We struggle thus, fighting for mastery, imagining a rock, and the sea heaving beneath us, until at last I hold you fast against the wall, the yellow roses mocking me from behind your head. Your body strains against my weight as I lean in to hold you still. Now devoid of strength, your fingers curl back to babyhood; their bloodied nails making them seem even more vulnerable.

I ease my pressure and our eyes met for a second, but we did not want to speak to each other. We had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless to go from me to you.

I release my grip and take a step back. I can see that there is more in your heart than can be spoken. More in your eyes than you will tell. More in the mind of you than anyone can know. If I have secrets so do you.

We break our gaze. With guilty conscience, I collect the paper coils and put them in the open fireplace. Soon, there is quite a pyre, although the walls seem the same as when we arrived.

You stand silently, then cross the room to join me by the fireplace. Reaching up to the mantelpiece, you take down a box of matches and ignite the rose-patterned kindling.

We watch the flames take, sitting together on the floor before the hearth. The colours jump and dance, warming us with their spirit as much as their heat. We are glad of each others’ company once more. Throwing paper flowers on the fire, I hold you in my arms as we watch the yellow petals come to life in flames. The yellow rose you picked for me lies by your side: real flowers can never be dispensed with and it will not join its two dimensional cousins.

So loveliness reigned and stillness and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted.
Waking in the grey dawn, you stretch out to ease your cramped limbs. Curled in front of you, I stir as your movement brings cold air to warm flesh. The fire has long since gone out and the air is listless, just swelling the curtains. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there.

Getting to our feet, we feel once more that silence seemed to have fallen upon the world. Looking round, we notice that a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. You run your hand across its milky curves and sense its sorrow through your skin. Catching my gaze, we share a moment's understanding: the yellow rose went there.

With careful touch, I place the single rose into the vase. Its dark green stem rests against the rim, rocking gently. Eventually, it stills and the air goes cold, bringing up the hairs on our arms. We stand and watch as the bud opens before us, blossoming into gold.

The rose's light casts itself into space with a violent trajectory. We see the room, our skin, turn yellow, before the light overcomes our vision and we are lost in golden blindness. Eyes smarting, we stagger out of balance. The room seems to be shifting around us and we hear doors slamming and voices calling all over the house.

Lost without our sight, we are swirled into wonder: How is it that one day life is orderly and you are content, a little cynical perhaps but on the whole just so, and then without warning you find the solid floor is a trapdoor and you are now in another place whose geography is uncertain and whose customs are strange?

Our questions have no answers. But, before madness sets in, the light begins to fade.

Opening our eyes, we find ourselves at the base of a wide oak staircase. It is a broad certain sweep, that moves in confident curves upwards, so that we can barely see the balcony above.

A sudden swirl of fabric whispers past the upper banister and as the woman came downstairs, she noticed that she could now see the moon itself through the staircase window – the yellow harvest moon – and turned, and we saw her standing above us on the stairs.

We are transfixed. A face in profile took me by the eyes, by the heart, it opened up the night with a glance. You feel it too and we hesitate towards the bottom step.

But then a woman's voice calls out and our radiant figure turns to listen. Leaving us, when she had not yet reached us, she returns to the floor above.
Main Staircase

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again.

(Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1985)

A long time ago, before the world was flat, two girls were born in the dead of night. Two mothers died, two owls cried and a charm was laid upon the newborn babes.

The girls grew up, grew tall, grew strong and lived together under the watchful eyes of a wise old sage. The best of friends, they became inseparable. They played together, ate together and even slept together. The whole village knew them as a pair, for one was never seen without the other.

But one night a storm came. Whipping through the village, it tugged at the roof tiles and rattled at the windows. The rain battered the heads off the flowers and put out the fires in their grates.

In the Sage's house, the two girls slept. Wrapped in each other's arms, they did not hear the storm as it hovered at their door. They did not stir as a thread of the wind untangled itself from the rain and twisted through the keyhole. They did not even shiver as it snaked its way between their sleeping bodies.

Waking the next morning, they found themselves divided: their two heads, one blonde, one brown, at rest upon their own pillows. Opening her eyes, the dark-haired girl was unsettled, but then the image of a dream crept back into her mind and, smiling, she flung herself out of bed.

The blonde girl woke to the sound of voices. Stretching out across the bed, she found the emptiness of cold cotton and opened her eyes with a start. Realising that the voices she could hear were those of her friend and the Sage, she decided to listen more carefully. Tiptoeing to the door, she heard talk of dreams and men, of marriage and lovers. Then the door opened and her friend stood facing her.

"I am going to find my prince," she said.

Fear flooded to the blonde girl's heart. She wanted to beg, to plead, to grasp her friend around the knees and prevent her from leaving. But words begin to fail her. She senses that something remains to be said that resists all speech, that can at best be stammered out. All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly... So the best plan is to abstain from all discourse, to keep quiet.
"I am going to find my prince," her friend repeated. They held each other's gaze. "Speak to me. You can't? You no longer want to? You want to hold back? Remain silent? White? Virginal? Keep the inside self to yourself? But it doesn't exist without the other."

The blonde girl turned to the Sage. "Then I shall look for my mother," she said.
Her friend laughed. "Your mother is dead!"
"That may be so," the Sage replied, "but it does not mean that she cannot look for her."

Two months passed and the time came for the girls to leave the village. With the blonde girl still silent, they made their way to the river. Tied to the jetty were two beautiful boats, their sails cracking in the wind. The girls climbed aboard and the Sage cast them loose: one travelling upstream with the wind, the other travelling downstream with the current.


For two years the girls sailed. Two years alone with the sea. Two years alone with their hearts.

Then one day each saw a ship approaching. Halfway round the world, they had met each other.

Realising this, they tried to alter course, but fate had other plans and the sea caught them up in a spiral of waves. Spinning round and round, the boats bobbed unsteadily upon the chopped and tossing waves; up and down, until up was down and the sea was indistinguishable from the sky.

At last all was calm and the two boats bobbed side by side in the dawn's grey light. The two sails hung tattered and torn, flapping gently in the breeze, whilst the two girls slept the sleep of those who have faced death and survived.

Waking under the midday sun, the blonde girl listened with taut eardrum, tearing sound out of muted silence. She listened until it seemed her ears would burst, but then she caught the tiniest noise of the catching of thread. Looking up, she saw her dark-haired friend, halfway up the mast, repairing her sail with the fabric from her own.

The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness.

The blonde girl scrambled to her feet and climbed the mast to join her friend. Taking the needle from her friend's hand, she doesn't 'speak', she throws her
trembling body into the air, she lets herself go, she flies, she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the 'logic' of her discourse with her body, her flesh speaks true.

Together once more, the friends set sail for home; their two boats now joined by one sail. They had been together and they had been apart, but whatever they searched for could only ever lead them to each other.

You are born alone. You die alone. The value of the space in between is trust and love.

Knowing there are people only paces ahead of us, we mount the stairs in anticipation. The image of the woman is an incentive to our ascent, but it is not just the woman that plays upon our curiosity: the bodiless voice has also caught us.

I can adore a voice: I am a woman: the love of the voice: nothing is more powerful than the intimate touch of a veiled voice, profound but reserved coming to awaken my blood; the first ray of a voice that comes to meet the newly-born heart.

Lost in thought, we climb steadily on opposite sides of the staircase. There is distance between us, but we step rhythmically, in tune to the other's momentum. It comes as a shock then, as we reach the second landing, to turn and see the stairs hanging out behind us, quivering in space. The floor is no longer visible, in fact may no longer be there at all, as a thick white mist rises at our feet.

Afraid, your hands fly to your face and your feet falter on their tread. It seems you are about to plunge into the void and a sudden panic batters at my breast.

'Watch out!'

The words sound as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves. Surprised, you turn to face me, clutching the banister for support.

'You were going to fall.'

The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if the waters were clear, they were also so extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of your mind. I pause, uncertain. You look across and hold my gaze.

'Thank you.'
Your quiet voice cuts across the air to join mine. Suddenly, we realise what has been missing between us for so long. Words are the part of our silence that can be spoken, yet we have lived only in silence, existing together without ourselves.

Moving towards each other, we forget the unhinged staircase and its uncertain dynamics, for sitting side by side the divisions disappeared and it seemed as if the world were once more solid and entire, and as if, in some strange way, we had grown larger and stronger.

We sit together, not speaking, but aglow with our new talent. We have so much to say to each other that it must wait to be released. But we are content to wait. Time passes. Eventually, you speak beautifully, each word falling like a disc new cut:

'Shall we go on?'

Rising together, we turn to climb the stairs. But we have not got far to go. We have reached the top step.
Landing

My heart is in the belongingness with a voice fashioned out of shining darkness, a nearness infinitely tender and reserved.

(Cixous, L'heure de Clarice Lispector, 1989)

Taking the final step onto the landing, the staircase falls away behind us. The sheer drop into the empty space fills with mist, dense and white, so that for a moment we feel as if we are above the clouds. Quickly though, the mist changes. It darkens, becomes pearly white, spreads from the corners and begins to solidify. Within seconds, the hole has gone and we are sealed into the space by a stone-white floor.

We lift our feet carefully, to ensure that we too have not been cemented into the flooring. Thankfully, we remain free and are able to see that we are in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked. Try as we might, the handles will not release their tongues.

Not so for us. Just behind my shoulder-blades some dry thing, wide-eyed, gently closes, gradually lulls itself to sleep. This is rapture; this is relief. The bar at the back of my throat lowers itself. Words crowd and cluster and push forth one on top of another. It does not matter which. They jostle and mount on each other's shoulders. The single and the solitary mate, tumble and become many. It does not matter what I say. Crowding, like a fluttering bird, one sentence crosses the empty space between us.

'I love you.'

No sooner have the words left my mouth than more spill out.

'I love your eyes, your smile, your hands. I love the way you walk. I love the way you talk. I love the curve of your spine...'

Suddenly, I panic that I have said too much. My eagerness has pushed me into unchartered territory and I have spoken from the heart. Luckily, I was speaking to you, but you did not hear me, because you were talking too.

'The world is so interesting here. The house seems to be guiding us, taking us on a journey. We are following its footsteps. I wonder where we shall go next...'

We fall silent and look at each other.

'I love you.'

'Where are we going?'
Again we speak together and miss each other's words. Laughing, we sit down next to each other on the floor. Then silence spreads as we wait for each other to speak. I am suddenly shy and cannot speak but you are not inhibited and, as you speak, it is as though your soul itself slipped through the lips in thin silver disks which dissolve in my mind like silver, like moonlight.

'Where have we been? Where are we going? Where were you when I was alone? Where was I when I was alone? I've had the strangest time. It's like a dream; like a story. It's as though the house is in control; it knows where we are going and we are unable to resist. I don't know where we will go next. I don't know if we will ever escape. But it is thrilling; it is enthralling. Don't you think so?'

You turn to me, expecting a response. I look at you and want to answer, but the only words that form on my tongue are 'I love you'. And this I cannot say. Not here. Not now. I do not know why I love you. I certainly do not know whether you love me. But I do know that I need you with me. I smile silently. I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases. Gratefully, I let you tell me of your journey as I push my feelings back into the dark.

Night moves forward to day and the rooms seem to change places along the hallway. As the morning sun thrusts its swords of light underneath the many doors, the oil lamps along the hall go out. Perhaps it is the change in light, or perhaps it is the house's trickery, but we become aware of a new door at the far end of the landing.

As we near the door, we hear voices from inside. Laughter. Shouting. Northern brogue and clipped consonants. The women's voices burst in waves through the keyhole.

'Visit either you like: they're both mad.'

The orange demon sits cross-legged on the door handle. His eyes glint at us.

'We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' we say in unison.

'You must be... or you wouldn't have come here.' Saying this, he flips himself like a coin. 'Heads or tails!' he shrieks. Then disappears.
Paw prints lead us through the room, patterning the carpet with dusty pads. We follow their path, slipping between stacks of paper and piles of books, until we reach a broad dining table. At the table sits the wolf, her canine body reclined upon a chair. *I look at her, she looks at me. She seems to change little by little, although her body remains motionless,* until I am looking into the blue eyes of a woman. Sitting next to her is another woman. They are the same age but from different ages. A generation separates them. This new woman regards us with a stern gaze and you wonder if *she is a witch who lays her guests under a spell.* From the corner of our vision, we can also see the orange demon as he *hides in a butter jar, in a rose, in the sparkling embers.*

We have clearly interrupted a tea party. But what sort of tea party neither of us are sure. For, instead of glass and china, the table is laid with paper and board. Indeed, the whole room is a house of cards: the wallpaper is a literal manifestation and further sheets *hang on the windows, where they serve as curtains, fluttering — or rather, drooping.*

The orange demon scuttles to our heels and tugs us to the table. Pulling out chairs for us, he turns this way and that, caught up in his own momentum.

‘Sit down! Sit down!’ he shouts above the women’s voices. ‘You must have a cup of tea!’ He spins himself into an orange teapot three feet above the table top. But no-one reaches out to catch him and so he shatters *on to the white tablecloth and spreads the tea in a five-point star of plum.*

Shocked by the colour, we pull back as it runs across the paper cloth. With no pause in her conversation, the wolf-woman dabs *at it with the corner of her white handkerchief. She might as well have dipped it in blood.*

Picking up the real teapot, she is *methodical with the tea cups,* pouring us both a deep blue liquid and signalling to us to drink. Putting the unlikely brew to my lips, I find it has an inky taste and watch as it leaves its vivid tide mark on the rim of the paper cup. Dismissing its heady aroma, we put down our cups and listen to the wolf-woman speak:
'Does it ever seem to you, Jeanette, that the world is made up entirely of vast blocks of matter, and that we’re nothing but patches of light’ – she looked at the soft spots of sun wavering over the carpet and up the wall – ‘like that?’

'No,' said the other woman. 'I feel solid, immensely solid; the legs of my chair might be rooted in the bowels of the earth.'

What they mean we are not sure, but they continue like this, discussing the world, discussing life, discussing books, oblivious of our presence. They pause, now and then, to take a bite out of the paper sandwiches or to sip from their tea, but always return immediately to the conversation. They were boastful, triumphant, it seemed to us both that they had read every book in the world; known every sin, passion, and joy.

We listen, enthralled, until eventually the conversation stills. Both women pause. They look at us afresh, making us fidget on our seats. At last, the wolf reignites the conversation.

'You've been sitting here,' she said, 'for almost an hour, and you haven’t noticed my figs, or my flowers, on the way the light comes through, or anything. I haven’t been listening, because I've been looking at you. You look very beautiful; I wish you’d go on sitting forever.'

'But Virginia,' says the other woman. 'They cannot just sit there. They must speak...' she exclaimed, '...in Greek.'

'You do read Greek?' Virginia says, as she offers the cake-stand towards us. 'Have a cake.'

Floundering in the question, you reach for the cakes and choose a block of paper adorned with pencil shavings. Chewing away at the pulp, you leave me no option but to answer.

'I'm afraid I don't read Greek, no. Sorry.'

'But what's the use of reading if you don't read Greek? After all, if you read Greek, you need never read anything else.'

'Pure waste of time,' Jeanette chips in.

'Pure waste of time,' echoes the demon from the sugar bowl.

I regret my answer and resent their opinion. But I find I am battling to redeem myself. I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of these women, the stare of the demon, these staring faces, indifferent faces, or I shall cry.
I look down as I speak about the decline of Greek and the literary canon and focus on the cardboard cake that waits upon my paper plate. And as I speak, the surface of the cake darkens until words stand out. My words. Soon the cake reads the repetition: εγώ κάνω όχι διαβάζω Ελληνικός, εγώ κάνω όχι διαβάζω Ελληνικός, εγώ κάνω όχι διαβάζω Ελληνικός

I cannot eat my words but I do.

You watch me struggle beneath their gaze as you use a pencil to pick stray words from your teeth. You do not feel as off-balance as I, and enjoy this stationery camaraderie. Watching the debate, you consider what table rappers we are, summoning each other across others of common sense. But you feel strangely disconnected from the experience and are unable to contribute your opinion. Instead, your thoughts swirl themselves around in your tea, forming phrases in the cup. The tea. Perhaps it is the tea that has made you tired.

I feel a similar sensation as the two women release me from their grip and take back the conversation, beginning once again to bat it back and forth. Listening to its rhythm, as regular as the waves, I drink my tea and fight the weight of my eyelids.

Then, being tired, our minds still rising and falling with the sea, the taste and smell that places have after long absence possessing us, the candles wavering in our eyes, we have lost ourselves and gone under.

Lost in our unconscious, we are drowned in ink. In the poison of a bitter knowledge.
A writing found me when I was unfindable to myself.

(Cixous, L'heure de Clarice Lispector, 1989)

I fell asleep and dreamed of a door opening.

Doors opening into rooms that opened onto doors that opened into rooms. We burst through, panelled, baize, flush, glazed, steel, reinforced, safe doors, secret doors, double doors, trap doors. The forbidden door that can only be opened with a small silver key. The door that is no door in Rapunzel’s lonely tower.

You are the door in the rock that finally swings free when moonlight shines on it. You are the door at the top of the stairs that only appears in dreams. You are the door that sets the prisoner free.

The door slams. Unconsciousness breaks. I open my eyes and you are gone.

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One never reads except by identification.

(Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, 1986)

You fell asleep and dreamed of a door closing.

Door after door down a huge corridor slammed shut as we ran past them, catching at the handles and rattling the locks. We try in vain to reach the open doors ahead of us, but our feet are stilted in their pace and cannot race each door as it places itself firmly in its frame. But at the end of the corridor is a forbidden door, an open door. It holds itself ajar for us, the light in a chink of promise.

I am the door that tempts you towards it, then slams in your face. I am the door that clicks shut behind your entrance. I am the door that leads you to yourself.

The door shuts. The moment passes. You open your eyes and I am gone.
The morning light creeps through the curtains and plays on the carpet. Watching it dance, I smooth myself into consciousness, until I realise that I am no longer in the dining room. I am alone.

I called your name and there was no answer. I stared at the wall, the wall where the door had been.

Getting up, I reach out to touch the wall. I run my hands across its paper pattern, craving the edge of a door frame. But I find none. You are not here and nor are the women, but I sense that they must be there somewhere, on the other side of the wall, separated from me by an inch or two at the most. I can hear them laughing, the women together, laughing at me uselessly shaking the dead doors. They are all in there and I am here, caught in my house, room by room, unable to find the only room where there is peace.

Frightened; furious; I hammer my fists against the wall, desperate to break through. We had been so long without company that to be without it once again is a sudden death. But anger smothers the grief. I do not feel it yet. You have left so many times — in the past, the present, future — that the event has to pierce through thick layers of time to reach me. And yet it is already there. Once again death, your

Waking, you find yourself in the midst of one of those interminable nights which do not end at twelve, but go on into double figures — thirteen, fourteen, and so on until they reach the twenties and then the thirties, and then the forties.

The sense of time stretching before you unsettles your imagination and conjures life within the shadows. The room is dark. Dark and empty, and you cannot see me or the women from the party. Slices of orange occasionally catch your eye, but you are not sure if this is the demon or just an illusion.

Forcing yourself to stay awake makes you sleepy and you drift reluctantly back into unconsciousness.

You wake next time to rattling keys and the surging drone of a vacuum cleaner. But, as quickly as you hear them, they are gone and you open your eyes to be blinded by fluorescent strip-lighting. Squinting, you try instead to orientate yourself by the dusky smell that pervades your nostrils. An office? A school?

The light becomes tolerable and you focus on the books which are stacked on the table that has been your pillow. A library? Leaning back in the chair confirms your diagnosis as you see the bookshelves towering upwards. But such a library you have
death, reaches me even before I can discern it. Enters me furtively and unpredictably. Was I not still convalescing from your last departure?

My fists slow in their drumming as anger disintegrates into anguish. Meaning has gone. I am as lost as I was in the cellar. Is there no-one here to take care of me?

Looking around through a haze of tears, I see that I am in a study. Books line the walls in glass-fronted cabinets and lie on side tables next to wing-backed chairs. At first I want to sit down in a particular chair under a particular lamp and let the grief that is lodged inside of me shake itself free with my sobs. But then my eyes are caught by a dark-wood desk. There was the ink pot. There was the pen.

I feel the tears still within me as the pen grows into focus. Reaching out, I select its heavy barrel and roll its inky potential between my fingers and thumb. It is worn, used, and I sense the love its owner applied to every atom of its existence. Excited, I pull up the chair and wait before the heavy white paper. But I cannot write.

never seen: its scale magnifies its intentions. Indeed, the works of every writer you have known or heard of and many more stretched from end to end of the long shelves. On tables and chairs more ‘works’ were piled and tumbled, and even the floor was littered with books.

Picking your way past the books, you explore the corridors of shelves that stagger to the ceiling. In spite of being alone, it only briefly crosses your mind about my whereabouts. Instead, you find that the library makes you feel better: words you could trust and look at till you understand them, they couldn’t change halfway through a sentence like the strange dynamics of this house.

Comforted by this thought, you wander with a lighter step past paperback and hefty tome, with an eye to finding the exit. But the bookshelves are maze-like and arrange themselves with intentional frustration, always at cross purposes to your path. Soon you realise that your destiny is not to the outskirts of the room, but to its centre. For, as you progress, you find that the bookshelves shorten until, looking out, you feel like a literary Christian in an amphitheatre of books.

At last you reach the centre of the labyrinth. Here you find a circle of innumerable little volumes, bright, identical, ephemeral, for they seemed bound in
I tip back on the chair and gaze at the ceiling. *I'm in a state close to sleepwalking, which has something to do with the impression I have of not being able to focus my attention on anything for long. At the same time my brain is tremendously active. I have all sorts of ideas and plans in my head and I'm all set to write, or to draw — anything — but physically I'm very tired and calm and feverish.*

I sigh. Lean forward. Pick up the pen. *I begin to draw a figure and the world looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join — so — and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!'

Frustrated by my self-pity, I crush the paper in my fist. Balled into nothing, it loses its power and I let it drop, gently, to the floor.

Passive again, I return to the page as a *neutral, composite oblique space* and allow myself to slip away. Without myself, I write, *not with the fingers, but with the whole person*. *The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of being, threads the heart, pierces the liver.*

cardboard and printed on tissue paper. These jaunty jackets offer themselves with straight-backed spines, but your attention is caught by another book, squarely placed, in the centre.

Picking it up, you realise that you are not the first one to find the book. *There were notes in the margins, stains on the pages, a rose pressed between leaves 186 and 187. You are intrigued by the lives that live upon the pages. The writer's life, but also the readers': the many many readers who have seen themselves on the pages and left themselves on the pages, shedding their skins into the story.*

*A story on the page is like a printed circuit for our lives to flow through. A story told invokes our dim capacity to be alive in bodies not our own and, as you hold the book, a shiver crosses your sensibility. Opening its weight into your lap, you catch your eyes upon the text. Suddenly, it was as if it became altogether intelligible, you have a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to become words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them, to fortell them as if they developed what one is already feeling.*

And so you read yourself upon the pages. Read and read until you become the book. *Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories, we*
Engaging without myself within myself, one thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind... What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice, I do not see her.

The pen stills. The book is finished. Pulling a yellow rose from the vase on the desk, I lay it gently between the pages.

I am content. Stretching my legs, I explore the room more carefully; enjoying the books and the light from outside. Hidden in one corner is a large dumbwaiter. With still no door to be seen, I assume this to be my only means of escape.

*make them what we will.* Turning the last page, however, pulls you back into your body and the air chills itself upon your skin. You are flushed and tired, but completely content. Looking up, you see a narrow wooden ladder supported on the shelves.
Dumbwaiter

I can't get lost but I can hide here if I want, hide from the others and from myself.

(Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1998)

It has long been said that *if you have a secret, you become afraid*. You become afraid of yourself, and what you want, of wanting the wrong thing, even afraid of love.

In a distant land lived a girl. She was young and beautiful and her hair was as black as the night river. She had family and friends, love and laughter, and yet she was lonely. *She had her own sorrow waiting behind her to dip into privately.* In the biggest parties, on the wildest nights, she felt more lonely than the crescent moon all those years away in the sky.

But she could not tell anyone. And so no-one knew.

Ladder

You have one reality and I have another reality.

(Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1998)

*Once a man was telling a story, it was a very good story too, and it made him very happy, but he told it so fast that nobody understood it.* He was very proud of his story and he wanted everyone to hear it. He told the butcher as he ground his mince. He told the baker as he made his bread. He told the candlestick maker as he dipped the newborn wicks into vats of wax. But he rushed. He hurried. The words tumbled out of his mouth, tripping on his tongue into an incomprehensible babble. His audience smiled sympathetically. They murmured their understanding, but did not, could not, understand. And so, although the story made the man very happy, the fact that he could not share it with anyone made him very sad.

It has long been said that *if you have a secret, you become afraid*. You become afraid of yourself, and what you want, of wanting the wrong thing, even afraid
When the girl was eighteen, her father declared that she must be married. Dozens of suitors filed down to their cottage with starched collars and hand-picked flowers. The girl sat patiently as they courted her with stories of shared futures. Wealth. Happiness. Children. She smiled gently as they dropped their kisses upon her milk white cheek. She laughed politely at their jokes. But she did not like their stories.

Three years passed and still no match had been made for marriage. The girl's father had become anxious and irritated, shouting at his wife and cursing his daughter.

Three months passed and men no longer knocked at the cottage.

'No more can be done,' said her father. 'You must enter a convent.'

The girl said nothing. Quietly, she rose and went to her room to pack.

Three days later, with her belongings stowed in a suitcase, the girl was ready. There was a knock at the door. The girl opened it. Standing at the threshold was a young man, as fair as she was dark, as tanned as she was pale. They gazed into each other's eyes.

of love. Unable to tell his tale, the man's story festered inside him. It grew dark and heavy until it lodged itself behind his breastbone. At night, when the man lay sleeping, his worries settled around his story. Night after night, they made layer after layer, until the story was obscured by a wall of fear. Thick and strong, this fear filtered through into his dreams. The man became afraid. But not afraid of monsters or magic. The man became afraid of himself.

Fearing himself, he feared his story. He lay awake night after night until his eyes were red and his hair was wild. He reached out for insanity to be his saviour. Madness deadened his fear.

The seasons changed. Time and again. The man took his madness and retreated into the woods. He lived a solitary life barefoot in the trees. The villagers marvelled at how he stayed alive. 'It's a miracle that old man isn't dead,' they would say to each other when the rest of life was unremarkable. They called him Story Man – Old Story Man, though he was no more than thirty. They watched with fascination as he aged with the months not the years and then remained the same for decades. They watched. Their children watched. And, eventually, their children's children watched.
'I am lonely,' she began. 'I want - ' She did not know what she wanted, so that she could not finish the sentence; but her lip quivered. The young man smiled slightly. 'Love,' he said. 'It seems to me to explain everything.' They were to be married the next day.

Standing outside the chapel, the young man turned to his bride. He looked through her eyes into her loneliness and saw that he could never remove it. He sighed quietly and took her hands in his.

'Remember this,' he said, looking at her intently. 'My sorcery is powerless to evoke, without the help of your sorcery. Everything I evoke depends on you, depends on your trust, on your faith. The girl nodded mutely. He continued. 'This is not a love story, but love is in it. That is, love is just outside it, looking for a way to break in.' The girl frowned as a single tear rolled down the man's cheek. She opened her mouth to speak, but he closed it with a kiss and led her to the altar.

Then, one full moon, a girl rose from the river. The black water ran from her black hair and her silver footprints shone a path to the village. But after a month with the people who lived there, she stood at the edge of the village and looked out into the forest.

'Who lives out there?' she asked the old woman tending her sheep. 'The Old Story Man,' the woman replied. 'Why does he not visit the village? I have not seen him here these last four weeks.'

'Oh, he is mad,' said the old woman. 'It is a miracle that he isn't dead.' 'A miracle indeed,' said the girl as she bade her farewell and set out into the forest.

Walking out into the clearing, she saw the man crouched by a tree. He was ragged and dirty but the girl was not afraid and walked straight up to where he sat. Kneeling down before him, she looked directly into his eyes. 'Tell me,' she whispered.

The man looked at her. Intensity crackled. His wild eyes grew calm. He was talking, telling the whole story from beginning to end, but he heard his voice far off, like
Who I am for You

The service progressed as usual until the girl declared 'I do'. No sooner had she spoken than the sound spread through the chapel as the ring of water spreads from a fallen stone. It sharpened and intensified. The chalices resonated with song. The candles were extinguished. The noise grew and grew in the chapel's stone shell until, with an almighty crack, the windows shattered.

Glass confetti rained down upon the guests. Sunlight burst through the open casings and converged at the place where the man stood. But he was no longer there. Lying on the floor in his place was a book.

The congregation grew still. Nobody moved as the girl bent to pick up the book and ran from the chapel, the broken glass crunching beneath her feet.

Alone by the river, the girl finally stopped running and sat down at the base of a tree. Slowly, she opened the book. Its pages were empty. Blank. But as she stared at the first page, words began to appear:

You can stand anything if you write it down. You must do this to get hold of yourself... All you need is pen and paper. But you must redirect your concentration... words put in connection can open up new relations... a new view of things.

a man in another room. He was overhearing himself. It was himself he was talking to. Himself he needed to tell.

The story ended and the man looked at the girl. 'How did you know about my story?' he asked.

'Because I have already written it.' The girl pulled a leather-bound book from her pocket. She passed it to the man. It began to glow a heavy red.

'I don't understand,' he said. He was illuminated by the light of the book as it turned orange and then yellow.

'I am the awkward sorceress of the invisible,' said the woman. 'I gather words to make a great straw-yellow fire, but if you don't put in your own flame, my fire won't take, my words won't burst into pale yellow sparks. My words will remain dead words.'

The man looked confused. 'Your words have breathed life into mine,' she continued. 'People tell their stories (which they do not know or cannot speak) through others' stories. Through you, my story has life. Through me, your story has been told.'

The man marvelled at the book as it shone its light into the clearing. The book that was not his story, but held his story. The book that revoked his madness. The book that took away his fear.
Tears wet the girl's face. Slowly, she stood up, clasping the book to her. She wandered the riverbank aimlessly, not seeing, not thinking, until she stumbled on a raised root. In front of her was a bush heavy with white berries. She knelt before it and picked the fruit into her skirts. Then she crushed them into a milky liquid in the hollow of a stone. Using the lost feather of a dove, she opened the book and began to write.

She wrote until the book was full and the ink was gone. She closed the book. Smiled to herself. Then, holding the book like a talisman before her, she waded into the river and disappeared.

*****

Crouched in the dark of the dumbwaiter, I pull my knees up to my chin and inhale the scent of dusty wood. My fingers reach out for the waxy cord and, with a two-handed tug, I feel the three-sided crate lift me upwards. It is a strange, stilted sensation of being raised in stages. Up. And stop. Up. And stop. The rhythm required puts my thoughts to rest and I find myself staring into space, forgetting where I was going.

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The light in the clearing shone brighter and whiter, until it was met by the rising full moon. In the village, the people were amazed by the moon's brightness. But in the forest the man was content. He did not see the girl disappear into a pool of light.

*****

Climbing the narrow ladder, you ascend into the books. But your journey is not easy. The rungs have been driven into the sides of the shelves with such ferocity that all the end books are speared in place. You climb them, gripping the shallow wood with your toes and using the strength of your arms to carry you upwards. Sometimes there is not enough ladder to tread on and you have to use the books themselves as steps. The cool leather and glossy card grab your naked feet with texture but, all too easily, they slip away and tumble from the shelf. Free-falling, they open out into wings, their pages turning in descent. Only when you hear them land with a very faint thud, do you see how far you have travelled. You realise then that that was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing.
How far I travelled without thinking, I cannot say, but my legs wake my mind with their cramp and I am forced to stop. Stopping however, does not bring any respite for, try as I might, there is no room to stretch my aching limbs. Instead, the sudden stillness sets my heartbeat racing as claustrophobia sets in. I have no idea how far I have come, or how far I have left to go. I am trapped in the walls of a house that does not play fair. Who knows whether I may be trapped here forever?

These thoughts and more rattle through my brain until I wonder whether it is not one thing nor the other that leads to madness but the space in between them. With the fear of insanity chasing me upwards, I pull again and again on the rope. Its protective waxing rubs off with the heat of my hands, making them at first sticky and then torn and chafed. But I feel no pain, only relief, as a chink of light grows from the top of the dumbwaiter.

Lost in thought, you are taken by surprise as your head hits plaster. The impact reverberates down your vertebrae and it is all you can do to stop yourself from falling. But, now that you have reached the top, where do you go?

To one side of the ladder is an opening, small and dark. With gritted teeth, you crab yourself sideways and pitch yourself into it.
Attic

Wishing to dominate, wishing to interfere, making people do what she wished – that was the charge against her, and she thought it most unjust.

(Woolf, To The Lighthouse, 1927)

I unfold myself from the dumbwaiter and lever my legs into the room. But they have forfeited circulation for too long and collapse beneath me. The fall does not hurt, but tears prick my eyes as pins and needles begin to prick my legs. I rub my calves vigorously to bring the blood back to the surface and finally the feeling returns.

More comfortable, I look about me. The floor is made of rough boards and slanted eaves meet overhead. Boxes and odd pieces of furniture are dotted here and there, but the attic is relatively uncluttered. At first glance, it is also empty but, as my eyes grow accustomed to the dusty air, I see the wolf-woman at the far end. She was playing cards by the light of a candle which stood in the hollow of a newspaper. The sight had something inexplicably sinister about it.

Toilet

She said stories helped you to understand the world.

(Winterson, Oranges are not the only fruit, 1985)

You crawl through the books, the floor ridged with the covers that jut upwards from the pages beneath your knees. It is dark in this tunnel, but the paper yields a warmth that soothes. You shuffle forward, further and further, until you realise that the books have been replaced by concrete. Its cold greyness catches on your skin and you slow down to save your palms and kneecaps. Eventually, you see a grid of light, small and square in the distance. It grows as you move towards it, until it is directly in front of you – a metal vent. Slipping your fingers through the trellis, you press your palms against it and push. The vent gives. Another push and it falls away, almost pulling you with it. You unlace your fingers and drop it the six inches to the floor. Immediately, the scent of bleach crawls up your nostrils. You resist the urge to sneeze.
I watch as she deftly deals the cards into sevens and begins to play again. She has not seen me here and I sit quietly, playing the voyeur.

I could go over to her and make conversation, but I had not fared well when we spoke in the dining room. Besides, that would pale beside this 'rapture', this silent stare, for which I felt intense gratitude; for nothing so solaced me, eased me of the perplexity of life, and miraculously raised its burdens, as this sublime power, this heavenly gift, and one would no more disturb it, while it lasted, then break up the shaft of sunlight, lying level across the floor.

I watch her deal and re-deal the cards and am caught up completely in the moment. As the candle begins to gutter, she returns them to a pack and lights a cigarette. I can see her legs stretched out in front of her, one elbow on the arm of the bamboo chair, blue clouds wavering and drifting from her cigarette. She waves the smoke away with a single stroke of her hand.

'Come over here.'

I scramble to my feet and take a step forward. How long has she known I was here? It had seemed so safe, thinking of her. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you

Carefully, you ease yourself out of the vent to sit upon another concrete floor. This floor is even colder and more dirty. Crisp dead leaves scratch here and there in a micro-cosmos of momentum. Looking to one side, you see the bottom of a wooden door. The gap between the door and floor lets in a rectangle of light and a keen breeze. Turning to look the other way, you see feet.

Feet in boots. Black boots. Sturdy boots. Your eyes rise: from boots to jeans to leather jacket. The bent head of cropped hair suggests that the woman hasn't noticed you enter. She is sitting on the toilet, reading.

You sit in silence, unconsciously holding your breath. The woman is recognisable as Jeanette from the dining room. From your memory of that experience, you are not sure if you want to disturb her. She turns the page of her book and does not look up. Perhaps you are invisible?

Hoping this to be true, you edge across to the door. The latch is high above you and you have no alternative but to stand up to reach it. Quickly, you scramble to your feet in a rush to leave.

'Stop!'
could play with easily and safely at any time of day or night, she had been that, and then suddenly she is real, in front of me, and demanding my presence.

'I cannot see you properly. And I want so much to see you again.' Virginia's voice cuts through the air. 'Come over here.'

And so, not daring to defy her, I brush the dust from my clothes and cross over to where she is sitting. She reaches out and catches hold of my hand. I flinch at her touch as she turns the palm upwards. The skin is layered with stories: shiny scars from the cellar, deep cuts from the rose thorns, and now scarlet burns from the dumbwaiter's rope. Her hands are cool and feel like balm on the tender flesh.

I sit on the floor beside her and lay my head against her knee. She strokes my hair. In this relaxed state, she pounces.

'I love you.' Straight at the heart with her little knife. She looks eagerly for the blood. I must pretend to feel nothing even though I am doubled over with pain.

'Don't you love me?' Virginia's voice is cold and hard. I am afraid to answer. I love. And I don't love. I want. And I don't want. I hesitate too long and the pause lengthens into discomfort. I feel my hand grow sweaty in her lap and wish to withdraw it to the safety of my body. But her hand holds careful pressure at my wrist. I shift

Your hand is at the latch, but suddenly Jeanette is between you and the door. She was like a bird for speed, an arrow for directness. She was wilful, she was commanding.

'Where are you going?'

Her eyes flash with fire and you feel burnt by her tongue. You fall mute, hoping to evade her question, but the tension was too relentless and too rigorous to be endured long without discomfort. You clear your throat.

'I don't know.'

She looks at you, her mind working faster than light.

'If you don't know where you are going,' she says, 'then why are you in such a hurry?'

'I don't know,' you repeat, but you think to yourself: she has such beautiful eyes - yes, beauty, flying through the room, shone there for a second and rested on you.

You feel fear and exhilaration. The woman is so close that you can feel her breath on your face. She is too close, but there is something exciting in this closeness, although it is also disagreeable. You remember to breathe.
uncomfortably.

'Very well. Don't love me.' Decisively, she stubs out her cigarette onto my palm. With an astonished yelp, I pull my hand away and run up the rickety attic steps, over the disused floorboards and out on to the parapet. The fresh air helps me to become calm and I nurse my hand until my tears dry to salt.

Perhaps I would have fallen on my own. As it happened I did not fall on my own. As I stood slightly swaying, completely unafraid, the Woolf pushed me off the roof.

'It seems to me that you don't know anything. Do you know The Bible, or Sappho, or Woolf?' Jeanette takes your silence as ignorance and continues. 'Do you know about art and lies and books? Do you know about love and loss and passion?'

You are stunned by her speed and your brain dawdles behind, trying to catch up.

'Perhaps you should think about those things?' she snorts derisively. 'I thought about all this in the toilet... it was the only place to go.' A thought appears to cross her mind. 'But you have nowhere to go. Nowhere to think about love and loss. Poor you.'

She stands and regards you once again; puts her thumb under your chin and looks into your eyes. Her eyes, those beautiful eyes, dart left and right, looking for something but you are not sure what. At last she takes her hand from your face and tips her head slightly to one side.

'I shall teach you,' she says.

You step back as she turns to open the door. The latch clacks and the door squeaks. She turns and takes both your hands in hers. Without speaking, she leads you into her bedroom.
Who I am for You

Sitting Room

This is not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than this; yet it is also beautiful and necessary.

(Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 1927)

In injured sleep, I dream of you. Dreams of our time together. Nightmares of our time apart. As my body brings me from night into day, I wonder: do you wake up as I do, having forgotten what it is that hurts or where, until you move?

I hope that you don't. Moving to release the stiffness of my neck calls into life other aches and pains that have lain dormant as I slept. My head hurts more than I could have imagined and I keep my eyes shut in a desperate attempt to ward off nausea. Thankfully, the sickness subsides and I ease my hand back to life and touch the chasm of pain on my temple. The pain sharpens and my fingers grow wet. I lower them and squint open my eyes.

Bedroom

In between fear and sex, passion is.

(Winterson, The Passion, 1987)

Consciousness massages your temples and you shift slowly from sleep until you are lying back in a womb-like state which is also a borderline state, on the border between waking and sleeping, light and dark. The dawn light filters through the window and you breathe gently, contentedly, feeling the cotton sheets move against your ribcage. It is a peaceful awakening and your limbs are still heavy as you turn on to your side. On the pillow next to you is a tousled head of hair. You raise yourself on to one elbow to look at the sleeping body: flushed cheeks, dark lashes and the vulnerable flesh of her arm flung over the edge of the bed. Watching Jeanette, you are paralysed by your desires, and are in terror of the desires still to be uncovered. The demands of love are too great and you withdraw back under the covers.

Lying on your back, sheet tucked under your chin, you stare at the ceiling until
My fingers were sticky. Anger. Pain. The words would not fall. I was bleeding.

I rub the words away but they run down my face, across my bruised cheekbone and collect in the hollows of my collarbone. Tears follow, diluting the words but not their meaning. Soon I am nothing but a body of blood and tears and crumbled words and words not fit for human use.

The blood clots. My tears dry. The words smudge into nonsense. At last the physical pain subsides. But what follows is equally painful to deal with: I am lost. And I have lost you. With melancholic revelation, I realise that no one will come to take me home. There is no home. For a little while, at least, there is sleep.

I wake, lying on a sofa by the window. I can sense another person in the room. As I turn my head, she gets up, very slowly from her writing table. A glass of milk and a medicine bottle stood there. There were also piles of novels. Everything was very tidy, bright, and somehow like a dolls' house.

Replacing the lid on her pen, she carefully lays it down parallel to the page. She adjusts the ink well. Smoothes her dress. Then, picking up the milk and the its whiteness brings patches of colour to your eyes. You hold your body taut and still, although you feel that the whole bed might shake with the hammering of your heart.

You close your eyes and replay the night's events. But why repeat this over and over again? Why be always trying to bring up some feeling of shame or abjection? In the intensity of being, you were happy, you were complete. As the winter sun had set into the night; you had felt such fire and such passion that you might have been embracing the sunset.

Now, in the lemon light of morning, you realise that this unique woman, at once carnal and artificial, natural and human, casts the same spell as the equivocal objects dear to the surrealists: she is like the spoon-shoe, the table-wolf, the marble-sugar that the poet finds at the flea market or invents in a dream; she shares in the secret of familiar objects suddenly revealed in their true nature, and in the secret of plants and stones. She is all things.

Loving her in silence, you feel your passion building until you fear you are in danger of being burned by your own flame. With a shaky hand, you reach out and stroke the small of her back. She murmurs and you apply more pressure. Her eyes
medicine, she walks over to me.

"You gave me quite a fright, jumping from the roof."

She hands me the milk.

"But I didn't..."

"Drink." With measured force she tips the 'jump' from my lips and drowns it with milk. I want to cough, to spit it out, but she keeps her hand to the tumbler and I drink all but its shadow, which coats the glass in creamy grey. Satisfied, she places the empty glass on the low table and turns her attention to the medicine bottle.

"You must take this."

She pours a rusty looking liquid onto a silver spoon and holds it to my lips. Its scent makes my eyes water and I am filled with distrust. This woman pushed me from a roof. Rescued me. Who is to say that she may not still want to kill me? I purse my lips together and turn my head from the spoon. Virginia exhales heavily.

"Come now. It will make you better."

I shake my head and for a second see a glimmer of violence threaten in her eyes. Subdued, I do not resist as she pinches my nose until I can no longer hold my breath. As my lips part, she thrusts the spoon into my mouth. The liquid burns my open as she turns towards you and gathers you in her arms. She runs her hands through your hair and the connection of your bodies makes you feel like you are drowning. Light-headed and happy, you close your eyes and submit to narcissuslike touching without eyes, sight dissolving in muscles, hair, deep, smooth, peaceful colours.

You wake and she is gone. The bed is cold and you stretch out into space. Starfish-spread you are content to be alone. But it is a hopeless heart that thrives on paradox, that longs for the beloved and is secretly relieved when the beloved is not there. Soon your thoughts turn to her whereabouts and you sit up in a tangle of panic and bedding.

She has definitely gone. She has cast her upper hand across your destiny and left you to your longing. Perhaps all romance is like that; not a contract between equal parties but an explosion of dreams and desires that can find no other outlet in everyday life. You think about this as you dress yourself in the clothes you find littered across the floor. Walking over to a pair of faded jeans, you stub your toe through the denim. Biting your lip in pain, you pull away the trousers to reveal a saucepan. Shiny and expensive it reflects your feet in its steel. You knit your eyebrows in confusion.
tongue and it is instinct not aggression that makes me spit it back at her.

The medicine must have burnt her too because her hands fly to her face and she runs from the room. Mouth still on fire, I struggle upwards from the sofa in search of water. My head sways with concussion, but luckily my vision holds well enough to see a glass of water on the desk.

Desperate with thirst, I drink it all. The pleasure of its relief is instant but short lived. Looking at the pile of books on the desk, I see that their pages are bent and folded. Derogatory comments litter the margins. An unopened book by Katherine Mansfield lies to one side. I pick it up, intrigued, and dislodge a piece of paper beneath it. Pulling it from its hiding place, I recognise the handwriting as my own. Scrawled across it is a trail of ink: the only writing I have ever been jealous of.

My hand shakes as I read the tiny postscript, blurring the violet letters: *But though I can do this better than she could, where is she, who could do what I can?!*

Silently, a hand is placed on my shoulder. I drop the paper and turn to see Virginia once again beside me. My feelings swell and I am thrown into confusion. *But*

Selecting the remainder of your wardrobe reveals more cookware on the carpet. You gaze at the ceiling for signs of leaks, but there are no damp patches or telltale cracks. You collect the pans together, a collection of Le Creuset, and then turn your attention to the laptop on the dressing table.

The screen blinks its techno light and springs into action as you move the mouse. www.jeanettewinterson.com. Jeanette's face stares at you in black and white. You scroll the cursor across the screen. Read the pages. Navigate the forums. Who is this woman who lives in cyberspace? She is surely not the same spark of sexuality that so recently warmed your skin? You read on and become more disillusioned, more distanced by her voice. You find a link marked 'contact me' and click. A blank message appears. You type.

*Where are you? You left without saying goodbye. I miss you. I am alone.*

what could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you?' No, that was not true... It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant.

She holds a green liquid before me.

'Nettle tea,' she says. 'To bathe your head.'

Tired now, I am her willing accomplice and allow her to lead me back to the sofa where she bathes my head gently. I take refuge in her, waiting to return to the deepest part of myself, and waiting also for the arrival of the memory of another force. And in that instant, I know that I love her. I know that she will hurt me and that her scars will thicken in my heart; but she is jealous of my writing. I love her for her jealousy.

With our rivalry still tangible between us, I lie beside her and wait for sleep.

The house grew bigger and bigger and the room she was in faded further and further away. I saw the outline of her dress, nothing more, and the river pouring into her room. She was drowning, but I did not save her.

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Every moment you steal from the present is a moment you have lost forever. There's only now.

You stare at the words but they remain the same. How dare she avoid the question with contrived conceit? You feel your anger swell within you. There is only now. The urge to destroy creeps down your sinews to your fingertips. Rage red, you wrench the laptop from its wires and hurl it against the wall.
I wake and she is gone. The paradox of our relationship confuses and unsettles me. I can't settle. I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me. And I wonder if, maybe, Virginia can be that person. My stomach turns slightly at the recollection of her violence and yet my heart beats excitedly. She is painful to be with. She is painful to be without. I lie back on the empty sofa and gaze at the ceiling.

She is jealous of my writing. My writing makes her jealous. My heart swells again. I say I am in love with her. What does that mean? It means I renew my future and my past in the light of this feeling. It is as though I wrote in a foreign language that

White. Immense spaces. White, a rush of breath. Be swift, marry this breath. Remain in it. The light pierces through your body and shines out of the tips of your fingers. You fly into the light completely and arrive in another space. A fan whirs gently at the corner of your hearing.

Inside, there is just one, tiny stool. Nobody's around. It is a place to face the fact that there is nothing — nothing to expect. You can sit there, it is not unsafe but it is empty. Nobody can hurt you. You are not even afraid of being hurt. You are afraid of being alone. Why? Because you have chased everybody out. You are alone by your own doing. It is total loneliness.

You take a seat on the tiny stool. It is low to the ground and your legs angle themselves sharply. You are so alone that you cannot see whether the room has
I am suddenly able to read. Wordlessly, she explains me to myself. Like genius, she is ignorant of what she does.

Understanding myself, believing in myself, I rise purposefully from the sofa and see that there is a pile of clothes balanced on the arm. I look down at my blood-stained attire and decide to change. Deftly, I don the white shirt and cord trousers and ease my feet into a pair of brogues. I feel sharper now, more alert, if slightly out of time. Sinking my hands into my pockets, I lean into the clothes and take another look at the desk.

The pile of books is no longer there. Nor is my crumpled piece of writing. All that remains is the ink well, the blotter, yes the blotter with its strange inverted message, 'I am going mad.'

I run my fingers over the words and feel their shape. I wonder whether I am going mad, for surely it is madness to love a creature like Virginia. Still, if she were not so clever she couldn't be so disagreeable.

I sigh. Turning from the desk, I see the oak door that holds me in, that keeps her out. Opening it, I find a narrow corridor. Light shines at one end from a door or a window, and I wander towards it.

walls. The whiteness falls away in front of you, behind you, to each side of you, so that you feel unsteady in the emptiness.

The fan whirs. The subtle buzzing twists into your ears. Grows louder. A black cloud forms on the horizon. Grows bigger. It begins to swarm towards you, a flurry of ones and zeroes. They reach the space above your head and rain down on you, pouring over your body, trickling through your fingers and swelling round your toes. The pool of digits grows at your feet and then silently slides across the floor, drawn by some invisible force. You watch as the numbers grow out of one another, on top of one another, pulling themselves upwards into shape, into a body. Soon, standing before you, is a woman. A binary woman. This woman is the figure at the centre to which the others refer, for she is, at the same time, both loss and cause, the ruin and the reason.

You look on in silence as she tests out her body and extends her spindly fingers. The numbers ripple as she moves towards you. You stand up. Clear your throat.

‘Who are you?’

The woman opens her mouth. A piece of paper curls from her tongue. She
Reaching the light, I find it is both a door and window, opening onto a busy room of paper and ink. In the centre of the room, an inky-fingered Virginia is straightening the typeset in a heavy printing press.

I was about to tap on the window when her husband entered the room, startling her. He kissed her forehead and she smiled. I watched them together and saw more in a moment that I could have pondered in another year. They did not live in the fiery furnace she and I inhabited, but they had a calm and a way that put a knife to my heart.

Watching them together, setting up the press, fetching paper and ink, I realise that this is the real Woolf. This Virginia has a place here, without me. She exists completely and exclusively. She does not need me to be a part of her, the way that I want her to be a part of me.

I stand in silence and feel the embarrassment of my emotions creep through my body and redden my face. What a fool I am to think that she could ever love me. I've found what I want and I can't have it. If I stayed, I would be staying not out of hope but out of fear. Fear of being alone, of being parted from a woman who simply by her

peels it off and hands it to you.

I am jeanettewinterson.com

‘Dot com?’

The woman nods. You look about you once again, shaking your head slightly to dislodge the noise of the unseen fan, persistent in your ears.

‘I'm in the computer?’

The woman nods again. She blinks with numerical eyelashes and computer windows materialise in the space. The screens hang from nowhere, suspended by nothing. Each frame is about one of Jeanette's books. You recognise them from the website you looked at earlier, but a closer look shows that they are mirror images of the ones you saw on the laptop. You go up to one of the screens: perhaps you can see through it into the room you have come from? But the image is opaque. You put your hand to the text. It sinks into the words but does not appear on the other side of the screen. Disturbed, you pull back. Binary prints your finger nails.

The woman appears behind you. Her mouth opens and more paper rolls out:
presence makes the rest of my life seem shadows.

Hot tears pushing to my eyes, I take a step back from the window, suddenly afraid to be seen. But my movement must disturb the light, for Virginia looks up and her sharp eyes pierce me through the glass. Two steps and she is by the door. The handle turns and she steps out in front of me, holding an envelope.

I try to swallow my tears, but angry tears do not like to be suppressed. I am angry with Virginia for making me love her. I am angry with myself for letting me love her. I wanted her because she was a lover and a mother all mixed up into one. I wanted her because she was as beautiful as a warm afternoon with the sun on the rocks. Red-faced, I hold in my sobs. Virginia silently takes a paperknife from her pocket, slits open the envelope and reads the note within:

Sorry not to have answered your note sooner. You ask for advice, dear: I am afraid you overestimate me. I do not feel qualified to give you any – however, you expressed in the past a wish to die and if your wish has remained unchanged I will be glad to help you.

It is possible you don't like me. I can take it. I don't mind if you don't like me. But I would like you to like my work. I am my work. I am not what I am as a person.

You stare at the paper as the words jumble themselves together and run in a flurry off the page as it twists between your fingers and flies away.

'But I don't want your work. I want you.'

You finish speaking and the woman steps towards you and runs her hands through your hair. Her body presses against yours and her digits jab and jostle into your flesh. The gaping zero of her mouth looms towards yours and in a flare of panic you push her away.

'No! I want... I don't want... I need...'

The woman spews out more paper.

You need a mother. I understand but I refuse to be your mother because I need a mother myself.
As her last words lodge in the air, she flicks the paperknife to catch the light. Its narrow blade glints menacingly as her hand shapes itself around the ivory handle. Terrified, I step back. But I step back into the wall as the corridor shortens behind me. She is in league with the house and I have nowhere to turn as the knife draws cold across my neck. *The threat of the cut opens the wound through which the rivers of clichés run.* Blood pours silently as I crumple to the floor.

Perhaps it is the loss of blood, but as she stands before me, her body turns to wood and the shadow of a wolf slinks off into the trees as I sink into my own red river.

The woman begins to cry tears of zeroes. They roll down her cheeks and bounce away on the floor, running off into the whiteness. As more tears fall, you notice her body is beginning to fade, growing transparent as the oval nothings skitter out of sight. She is crying herself away, losing flesh from her eyes. Horrified, you cry out. But it is too late. As the last zero hits the floor, the remaining ones can no longer support themselves. Her skeleton collapses, leaving nothing but a pile of filings scattered on the floor.

Alone in cyberspace, you realise that behind the secret panel lies a valuable, fabulous thing. *We are not always conscious of it, not always aware of what it is we hide from prying eyes or that those prying eyes may sometimes be our own.*

Now that you see your needs so clearly, a sort of grief sets in and twists at your gut. The woman you thought you needed lies fragmented at your feet and you scuff your foot across the needle sticks. Iron marks the whiteness black. Puzzled, you bend to touch it. It coats your fingers thickly, forming webs as you spread them apart. Stretching out on the floor, you wander but lying down. *In dream.* The blackness swells round you and over you. You sink, slipping away into the darkness.
Part III

Second Floor
What changes is not the beloved but our perceptions of her.

(Winterson, *Art Objects*, 1995)

In another land, in another time, in another space, was a magical kingdom. The castle walls sparkled with jewels and the people would sing and dance, night and day. It was a wonderful place to live and everyone was happy.

Inside the castle, however, there was one person who was not happy. The royal artist, try as she might, could not raise a smile for more than a few seconds. But the artist was very talented and, because of her talent, the King took pity on her sadness and allowed her to stay in the castle on the condition that she would paint the Queen’s portrait. Portraits were the artist’s speciality and she spent days in her studio painting the most magnificent portrait ready for the Queen’s birthday party.

On the day of the birthday party, everyone gathered in the ballroom for dancing and entertainment. At one end, behind a golden curtain, waited the Queen’s portrait. As soon as the subjects had toasted their Queen, the royal butler gave a gentle cough and pulled back the curtain.

Long looking at paintings is equivalent to being dropped into a foreign city, where gradually, out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax make a clearing in the silence.

‘Well.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s very…’

‘Red?’

The court jester looked on as the guests tried to make sense of the blood-red image of their queen. *All round her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel, while somewhere above her floated the idea which none of them could grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea; an idea like a butterfly.*

‘What a load of rubbish,’ the jester snorted as, turning on her heel, she left the ballroom.

Luckily, the Queen loved the portrait. *Admire me is the sub-text of so much of our looking; the demand put on art that it should reflect the reality of the viewer.* To the Queen, the portrait was a perfect likeness, capturing her beauty with every brush
Who I am for You

stroke. And this was the artist’s talent: she painted what the subject wanted to see, not what one saw of the subject.

The Queen was happy and so the King was happy. He gave the artist a new studio filled with new brushes and canvases and all the red paint in the kingdom. Then he bade her to paint more portraits for a royal exhibition.

The artist painted. But still she was not happy. She covered canvas after canvas with the dark red paint. As she painted, she was unaware that art opens the heart. All the artist cared about was that if she was to pierce the thick wall of personality, her arrows, however beautifully decorated, must above all, be sharp. As she pierced her subjects onto canvas, she was unaware that her heart was starting to let in the light.

The royal exhibition was a great success. People flocked from miles around to see the paintings. The artist watched them as they wandered through the gallery and a pang of unfulfillment spread through her body.

'It has teeth, art, and a way of cutting through to the soft parts untried,' said the old crone who stood by the artist.

'What do you mean?'

'There's always a woman somewhere, child; a princess, a witch, a stepmother, a mermaid, a fairy godmother, or one as wicked as she is beautiful, or as beautiful as she is good.' The crone gestured to the paintings as she spoke. 'Then there is the woman you love.'

'The woman you love!' scoffed the jester as she back-flipped past them.

'Honestly, what rubbish.'

'But I cannot paint the woman I love,' the artist said. And she shed a single tear.

'Still life is dancing life. The dancing light of life. The dancing light of love,' said the old crone. 'You must paint the woman you love.'

The artist turned back to question her once again, but the woman had vanished. She did not see the jet-black spider scurry between the juggling jester's feet and run under the skirting board.

Back in her studio, the artist set up a blank canvas. In complete silence she stood there, grasping her paint brush. Nothing. No inspiration. No surge of artistic power rushed through her veins. It was futile. She put down her brush and, in sudden frustration, picked up a jar of red paint and hurled it at the canvas.
She watched as it bled onto the white, covering the canvas from top to bottom. Her eyes widened. *Beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in her hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child.*

The artist stood in front of the canvas with her brush in her hand until the feeling went from her legs and she slumped to the floor. Tired, she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, there was a jet-black spider balanced on her knee.

'Art is a sacrifice of life itself. The artist sacrifices life to art not because he wants to but because he can not do anything else.' The spider spoke almost inaudibly. 'If you put down a black and afterward you put a red on top to correct it, your red will not be red.' The spider finished speaking and crawled away from the artist and up the side of her water glass. Reaching the top, the spider dropped into the water and drowned. The water turned black. Blacker than black.

*Colour is stronger than language. It's a subliminal communication* and now the artist knew what she had to do. She dipped her brush into the black and began to paint.

When all the black had gone, she became aware of an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her, as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing scales. *Now her toes tingled; now her marrow. She had the queerest sensations about her thigh bones. Her hairs seemed to erect themselves... but all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands.* She reached for her palette knife and a new brush. Without hesitation, she pierced skin into vein and began to paint herself to death.

Skipping past the studio, the jester heard the clatter and crash of something falling. Curious, she stuck her head round the door. She could have been looking in a mirror: staring back at her in red and black, was a portrait of herself. In black and red on the floor was the artist.

The jester ran up to the artist and scooped her into her arms, tearing up her clothes to stem the bleeding.

'How did you know that I love you?' she asked as the artist regained consciousness.
'It doesn’t matter,’ the artist whispered. ‘You are here now. I have had my vision.’

‘Yes,’ said the jester. ‘It is promised happiness, work of art.’

*****

You fall back, heavily, into matter. You sleep in the dark. Submerged in thick black night. Drowned in a massive abyss.

I am stretched out, thin and red. I sleep in the redness of bright lights on closed lids. Drowned in the thick thin blood of my longing.

Yet we scarcely breathe... spent as we are. We are in that passive and exhausted frame of mind when we only wish to rejoin the body of our mother from who we have been severed.

We are moving upwards. Each wrapped in the viscus colour of our undoing, we sense the flight of our bodies as we rise within the pearl-white room. And from the depths of my memory, I was being reborn. I had a face once more. You could not hear me yet, but you already remembered.

I stretch my fingers out of curl and they part stickily. My face feels masked. I cannot open my eyes or mouth for the viscus membrane that coats my skin. Panicking that I cannot breathe, I claw at my face, puncturing the space of my open mouth. Air rushes in. Swoops through my teeth. Rams into my lungs.

I cough, claw and clean myself back into existence.

Eventually, my red outer skin lies spent on the floor beside me.

And still we are moving upwards.

You lie curled in darkness, heavy with the weight of your black coating. But inside your mind someone is calling you. You think you hear their voice from another place, another time, but it persists, bleakly wailing, dragging you back to your reality.

You are moving upwards.

I watch you stir in your black bubble. You seem to be surrounded by an inky fluid that supports you as you turn within. But, as I watch, you become restless. No longer floating gently with the momentum of the room, you begin to turn, twist and turn, reaching out inside your pod. Your distress increases until I cannot bear your suffering. Desperate to save you, I pull and pinch until, at last, the membrane breaks, the fluid runs, and you lie gasping in the whiteness.
Who I am for You

Second Floor

I pull you to me; hold you close. But you are still arising from a bottomless anguish. Refusing to be consoled. Avidly nurturing grief, a prey to solitude. Hands stretching out in all directions, clutching at empty air.

I am powerless to your emotions, unable to pacify or placate. You are still lost to the darkness. Even your tears are black. They lack the cool candour of liquid, the simplicity of drops of water.

Your tears tiptoe to join the pool of black that rests on the floor around our bodies. As each one spots the clotted darkness, the fluid disperses, shooting out into monochrome rings. We are still moving upwards and sometimes I think I hear voices ooze and trickle from the walls and ceilings, as though dripping on me, but when I turn around and grope, I can see and sense I’m alone save for your grieving figure.

We are moving upwards and I would say we are in a lift, but the room has no evidence of floors or doors. There are no backlit buttons or tinny Musak coming from overhead speakers. It is an empty box. Off white. Grey white. Gritty to the touch, leaving a chalky sheen to my fingers.

I don’t know where we are going. It is difficult to say where we have been. Until this moment my life had still made some kind of sense. Now it was making no sense at all. But we are moving upwards.

Still you cry. You are more desperate now. More in pain. I have given up trying to console you since you only lash out; wounding my skin was well as my pride.

I pass the time in a half-life, half waking, half sleeping. I imagine your tears becoming ink, becoming words, words that are always too distant, too abstract for this underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable spaces. The words run up the walls, writing themselves across, up and down. If only I could put them together, I felt, write them out in some sentence, then I would have got at the truth of things.

Unexpectedly, I feel the floor shift beneath me. My eyes snap open. The walls are covered in words. They are becoming saturated. The floor is beginning to split. Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They’ll vanish and we’ll be lost. Far off, up high.

I have to stop you crying. You have to stop before the ink becomes too much for the floor to absorb. You have to stop. You have to stop.

But it is too late. The floor buckles as the words track up the walls. Quietly, it tears, splitting the room from left to right. The black opens on to more blackness.

And we fall into space.
Falling

The girl is certainly not defined by virginity; she is defined by a relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness, by a combination of atoms, an emission of particles: haecity. She never ceases to roam upon a body without organs. She is an abstract line, or a line of flight.

(Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 1987)

I scream.

The sound is torn from my throat and pulled from my teeth. My body is beaten by the air. Your tears have sentenced us to death.

You are silent.

Your tears run upwards, streaming out behind you. Your face is blown into astonishment. Twisting in the air, you reach out to grab my arm.

We speak in unison.

'Let go!'

'Save me!'

'Get off. Get off me.'

'Help. Help me.'

I prise your fingers from my wrist. I don’t want you here. I don’t want you with me anymore. I don’t want you near me anymore.

You clutch and cling. When one hand is free, you pull at me with the other, tightening your digits into cloth, into flesh; desperate for safety.

And still your tears fly out, spattering me with black. I blink their sting from my eyes but I am determined. Resolute. Resentful. My face hardens as I concentrate. You panic.

'Please... please help me... please save me... I’m begging you... don’t let me fail... don’t let me go... don’t leave me.'

'Don’t leave you? Don’t leave you! How dare you say that? How dare you make me responsible?'

'But...'
This is all your fault. Your tears. Your misery. You've done this. I was fine without you. I don't need you.'

Still we are falling. There is no sign of ever reaching the ground and it occurs to me that we may fall like this for eternity. Perhaps it is this thought that has fired your desperation as you wrap yourself around me, twisting your legs through mine, burying your head in my neck.

'I love you.'

'What?'

'I love you.'

'No you don't. You don't love me.'

'I do... I love you.'

'No. When you say I love you – staying right here, close to you, close to me – you're saying I love myself. You don't need to wait for it to be given back... We don't owe each other anything.'

You fall silent.

Falling silently, you replay my words; replay your time with the woman in the computer; replay your grief. The pain catches in your heart and tears the flesh. No one needs you.

A feeling of emptiness and melancholy came over them; they knew in their hearts that it was over, and that they had parted for ever, and the knowledge filled them with far greater depression than the length of their acquaintance seemed to justify.

You stop crying.

With one sharp movement, you pull away from my body. For a moment, you hung suspended, and then you plummet into the black.
For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge.

(Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 1927)

Losing you from sight, I had a few moments of nakedness when I seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. Stubbornly, I push the feeling aside and tell myself that I am free without you. But still the feeling persists, clawing into my bloodstream and unsettling my nerves. 

I am too preoccupied to see the break in my fall.

Winded, I lie gasping for breath.

My mind is slower than my body and continues to fall, making me dizzy. Eventually, my world stops spinning and I can see that you are already lying next to me. We are sat on a bed, which had two large pillows, with a message between them, “je t’aime”.

You are motionless. Lifeless. Black tears streak your face.

I am alone. I have won. But my victory is not victorious. Instead, I feel your loss deep in my stomach. It is my fault.

I lean over and touch your motionless body. Are you dead? Your skin is warm but your eyes stay closed and a single tear creeps from my eye and rolls off my cheek. Touching your skin, it disperses the black into a ring of rainbows. But this is just the scout and, with a sob, an army of tears rain down upon your face.

Your skin streaks first into colour and then washes clear as I am wracked with grief. Grief and guilt. As my desolation builds inside me, I grow red and hot, my tears burning my face, the mucus clogging my throat. My head pounds, but I cannot stop. Lost to everything, I put my arms beneath your body and pull you to me.

‘What are you doing?’ Your tone is angry as you wrench yourself free. I sit back on my knees and choke out my guilt.

‘I thought you were dead.’

‘Well I’m not.’
Who I am for You

Annoyed, you sit upright and swing your legs over the side of the bed. You move to stand up, but I catch out at your jacket and pull you back. You wrench the leather away from my grasp and turn to face me. Your eyes are black.

‘What now?’
I feel embarrassed.
‘You could have died.’
‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

With a shaking hand, I point to where the floor should be. Empty space stares back. The bed is suspended in the deep space darkness, by four thin ropes, each one tied to a bedpost. Looking upwards, we cannot see to what they are attached. Looking downwards, we cannot see how far we would fall. We cannot tell whether there is a floor there at all.

‘Well, really.’ You fling your feet back on to the bed and slide them under the sheet. With a giant sigh you sink back into the pillows and close your eyes.

I am shocked into silence. You are not the you that I remember. You who were so wild, are now pitiless and wise in your pronouncements. You, who roamed among the stars, now disappear in the uniform light of day. You put out your light to be like all the rest. I have made you into someone else.

Hesitantly, I lie back under the covers, conscious of not touching your body.

There is only a thin sheet between us now and the infinite depths. Yet these depths seem nothing compared to my depth of thought. I lie still, my growing agitation of mind beginning to fight with the gentle heaviness of my body until I kick off the sheet in exasperation.

Where does the black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation.

I turn to look at your sleeping body. Your breath comes slowly, regularly, and a half-smile creases on your face. When you are silent you are again beautiful and I feel my guilt lessen as I trace the line of your collarbone. The skin lies like velvet on the bone and I pause for a moment before I move my hand downwards and place it above your heart. But resting my hand there, I feel nothing. No beat. No thud. No evidence of any heart at all. Drop upon drop... silence falls. It forms on the roof of the mind and falls into pools beneath. You do not need me anymore. You do not love me anymore. And the jealousy I feel for the new owner of your heart spurts like blood from the cut of
terror at the possibility of losing again the intimacy which we had spent so long nurturing.

My hand tenses on your chest but, even in this irrational state, I cannot hurt you. Instead, I put my hand to my mouth and bite down hard. The pressure in my teeth sends relief to my wound-up brain. Like an iron trap, I am relentless in my determination and do not force my jaws apart until my head clears. With brain refreshed, I taste blood, and the pain sets in. The pain. How can one feel nothing and then feel everything only seconds later? As my pulse rushes to the wound and my fingers deaden, I cry out. But I cannot let you hear me, let you know what I have done, or why, and so I pull a pillow over my face and scream into the feathers.

Muffled in the downy darkness, I feel the fabric scratch at my skin. Pulling it back into focus, I see the message 'je t'aime' stitched into the fabric at one corner. Furious, I pull at the appliqué, tearing the words from the cotton, making hole after hole from which feathers begin to escape.

Intent on my task, I do not see you roll over onto your stomach and raise yourself onto your elbows, until you peer at me through bleary eyes and say calmly:

'You confuse the world of emotions, which has a personal logic, with the world of the intellect, which has a universal logic. It is the confusion that drives you to rage. It's crystal clear.'

Perhaps it is the audacity of your comment, or perhaps it is its truth, but I am numbed to tolerance and acquiescence. As you slide back into slumber, I pick the feathers off the bed and let them drift out into the nothingness. I could be one of those feathers, but instead I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink, cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now. Now I spread my body on this frail mattress and hang suspended. I am above the earth now. I am no longer upright; to be knocked against and damaged. All is soft and bending... Out of me now my mind can pour.

Eventually, I sleep.

I do not dream.

I sleep heavily. Jealousy and guilt have made my body tired and it sinks in to the sheets with leaden exhaustion. My mind stills and I have been asleep for no time and for ever when you wake me.

I feel your fingertips at my temple. They stroke the hair from my face, then run down my cheek and along my arm. Here they traverse from limb to spine and gently
rub the vertebrae beneath them. My senses waken and my body melts into your touch. The pressure of your fingertips intensifies and I push my body backwards into yours.

In this way you took me into yourself. You took me back into yourself so that you could get back to that sameness whose origin remains a mystery to you. To get back to that sameness, you took me inside outside yourself. And so you continue to suck me up: my life. You continue to absorb me, inside you, turned inside out, into this cavern where I am still alive. But at the moment when the waves crash on the rock and threaten to drown me, I am thrown back onto dry land.

'Jeanette...'

My blood runs cold. I open my eyes. Lost in rapture, your eyes are closed, your face flushed.

'Jeanette...'

Repetition does more than double the blow and I wrench myself from your grasp. Cut me. You do. You cut me down in heavy trusses, profusion, exhaustion, and soak me in a stream of love meant for someone else. You cut me deeper than I could ever cut myself. It is all I can do not to push you from the bed and let you fall, once more, into space.

Instead, I lie rigid next to you. I have a little dagger of contempt and severity hidden up my sleeve and it shows on my face as you open your eyes to look at me. We stare at each other, my eyes now as cold and black as yours.

We do not speak. We cannot speak. Our hatred is almost indistinguishable from our love but, for the moment, it is hatred that lies on the surface. We turn our backs on each other. Not much touches us, but we long to be touched. We lie awake at night willing the darkness to part and show us a vision.

Suspended in the night, the always night, time seems to pass too slowly. Lying next to you, I fancy I can feel the warmth of your body across the bed. But I am still at odds with you and my anger douses your heat.

You have betrayed me. You have thrown out your loyalty with your old clothes. The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices that merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. Looking at you in your boots and jeans, hearing the leather jacket creak with your slightest movement, I realise that you have covered yourself in her armour. Jeanette has written herself onto you with her clothes.
Thinking this, I reason that you may be returned to me unharmed, if only I can remove your clothing. I put my hand out to touch you but you take that moment to turn and stare at me with those wild black eyes. I am unnerved and pull away, turning onto my back and gazing at the place where the ceiling should be.

I feel too reserved, too pent-up, to make the first move. More and more I know what I want to do, yet more and more I am unable to do it. I swallow nervously and my throat wrestles with my buttoned collar. I raise my hand and undo the top button. Air kisses my neck and impulsively, I undo the one below. My chest expands. I undo another and another until the shirt lies open and the air on my skin floods freshness to my body. Automatically, I pull my arms from the shirt, then remove trousers and shoes, until I lie naked on the white cotton sheet.

The autonomy is sublime.

Possessing now the courage I had lacked before, I lean over and begin to pull the jacket from your shoulders. I make soft shushing sounds as you stir in your sleep and you remain childishly heavy as I pull first one arm and then the other from their sleeves. Pulling the coat from beneath you is a harder task and, with a jolt, you wake. You turn to look at me and I see that your eyes have lost some of their darkness.

I expect resistance and even violence as I unhook the button on your trousers. But my nakedness seems to have placated you and you submit to being undressed. Pulling the vest over your head, I look into your eyes. The black has vanished. You have returned.

Lying naked on the bed, I find the voice to speak.

'Let me sleep with you. Let me hear the things you cannot say.'

You look uneasy. 'Sex?'

I smile. 'No. Haven't I told you? I want friendship; I want to care for some one greater and nobler than I am, and if they fall in love with me it isn't my fault; I don't want it; I positively hate it.'

You look relieved, but then... 'I don't understand.'

'Sleep with me. Sleeping in this night-covered world, with you, I hope to find what I long for; a clue, a map, a bird flying south, and when the light comes we will get dressed together and go.

'We have found each other again. Only here, only now, what is between us is true. You and I, this honesty we make.

'Sleep with me.'
Reaching under the pillows, we find newly pressed nightwear. I help you slide into your pyjamas and tuck the sheet around you. Within seconds you are lost in your unconscious. Now I tie my pyjamas loosely round me, and lie under this thin sheet afloat in the shallow light which is like a film of water drawn over my eyes by a wave. Morning is coming. And when the light comes we will get dressed and go. But until then we will sleep.
I fling words in fans like those the sower throws over the ploughed fields when the earth is bare. I desired always to stretch the night and fit it fuller and fuller with dreams.

(Woolf, *The Waves*, 1931)

There was once an old seaside town with a very busy port. In the centre of the town lived a wealthy couple. The husband was a respected tradesmen and his wife kept as good a house as any family in the area. There was food on the table, coal in the grate and silver on the mantelpiece, but the couple were not happy. For five years they had tried to extend their family, but still no baby blessed their home. Bravely they faced the sad reality that they had everything and yet felt that they had nothing.

One day, the wife went into the market to do her shopping. She wandered up and down the rows of stalls, buying fruit and vegetables, bread and meat. Coming to the end of a row, the wife noticed a stall she had not seen before. Rolls of silken fabrics spilled over one another in an explosion of colour. The wife was enthralled by their beauty and stopped to touch the delicate cloth. A wizened old woman moved behind the stall. Leaning forward, she spoke to the wife.

'Beautiful, aren't they? So delicate. So perfect.'

The wife agreed and caressed the fabric. It was as soft as a baby's skin. Suddenly moved to tears, she leant her face against a roll of the palest pink and began to cry. Her tears dripped onto the silk, turning it from pink to red. The stall-holder hopped up and down in anger.

'You're ruining my silk! You're ruining my silk!'

The tears stopped as soon as they had started. Filled with apologies, the wife reached for her purse and took out a gold coin to pay for the damage. The woman took the coin and tentatively licked its diameter. She grimaced slightly and handed the coin back to its owner.

'I don't want your money.'

'But the damaged silk...'

'It's red now. I'll sell it as red silk.'

Sure enough, the pink fabric was now a dark red.

'You have felt great sorrow,' said the woman, looking into the wife's eyes. 'But now your tears can stop. I have a gift for you.'
Slowly bending down behind the mountain of silk, the stall-holder brought out a wicker basket. Inside, something moved. She passed the basket to the wife who peered inside. Under a fold of golden silk, was a tiny baby.

'Beautiful, isn't she?' said the woman. 'So delicate. So perfect. She is yours now. Raise her well.'

The wife could not believe her good fortune. So pleased was she to have a child of her own, that she did not question the wizened stall-holder. Nor did she notice that the silk stall never returned to the market.

The couple raised the baby as their own and were the proudest parents ever to be seen. The baby grew into a toddler; the toddler grew into a child; the child grew into a girl, and the girl grew into a beautiful young woman. On the eve of her twenty-first birthday, the parents threw a huge party for their adopted daughter. Every eligible bachelor from the town attended: bankers, merchants, even a ship's captain came to ask for the girl's hand in marriage. It was a wonderful party and the girl danced and danced until the night broke into day.

When the party ended and all the guests had gone home to their beds, the couple took their daughter into the sitting room. In front of the fire was a golden harp.

'Our present to you,' said her mother.

'For our golden child,' said her father.

The daughter was thrilled with the gift and flung her arms around her parents, thanking them with tears of love. Then the three of them sat down to decide which of the evening's guests would be the best husband.

The couple wanted their daughter to marry for love, but the girl had felt nothing for any of the men she had danced with that night. Her love for her parents was so strong, however, that she felt obliged to choose a fiancé. After much consideration, she chose the ship's captain - a kind, caring young man who would give the girl as much love and support as anyone could wish for.

Three months later, the couple were married and the girl moved into the stately town-house by the docks.

Three years passed and the girl lived a comfortable life. With her husband away at sea for months at a time, she was often alone and liked it better so. When her husband was home, she was a good wife, caring and attentive, but she did not smile. Shut away in the attic, the golden harp remained untouched and unplayed.
The next time her husband was at sea, the girl went for a walk along the nearby beach. Crunching along the shingle, she thought she heard women's voices. Climbing over an outcrop of rock, she found a small cavern occupied by three wizened old women grouped round a smouldering fire. They were singing ballads as they spun the finest silk cloth and the girl remembered the story her mother used to tell her about the Three Fates: \textit{she who cards, she who spins, she who stitches}. It was possible the girl had stumbled upon a legend. But before she could decide what to do, one of the women looked up. She grinned a toothless grin.

'Come here, my child. Come and have a seat by the fire.'

The other women beckoned their agreement and the girl edged forward.

'Something troubles you.'

'Your heart is lost.'

'You have love yet still you look for it.'

The three women spoke in turn, then nodded sagely at each other. The young girl waited silently.

'We can help you.'

'We can guide you.'

'We can set you free.'

One of the women took a stick and stirred up the fire. Then she reached for a handful of silk from her lap and threw it onto the embers. The women stared into the glowing ashes as the silk caught into flame.

'I can see you in a blue boat on the ocean's waves.'

'I can hear the sweetest music of a golden harp.'

'I can feel the finest thread, finer than spider's silk.'

The girl looked into the fire, but could sense none of these things. The final piece of silk shrivelled to a single flame.

'Can you tell me more?' the girl asked.

'No more, child,' the first woman replied.

'That is all you need,' said the second.

\textit{When the thread breaks, the story's over}, said the third.

With the women's words echoing in her ears, the girl left the cavern. She stood on the cliff until the tide came in and the sea filled the cavern where the old women had been. She did not see them leave but not for one minute did she think that they had drowned.

By the time the girl arrived home, she knew what she needed to do. She climbed the steps to the top floor and opened the door to the attic. Standing in the dusty light that
crept through the eaves, was the harp. The girl crossed the creaking floorboards and sat down at the instrument. Hesitantly, she put her hands to the strings and plucked the first note. Its purity of sound sent inspiration to her sinews and her fingers danced on the strings. As she played, a smile began to form on her face, and something strange began to happen. From beneath her fingernails, silk began to spin. The silk spun up and down, back and forth, across the harp's strings, in and out, forming a musical tapestry. The girl played until there was no space left for more thread to rest. Then the thread broke and the music was over.

Stepping back from the harp, the girl saw the tapestry she had woven. It was a blue ship with billowing white sails in an ocean sea.

The girl waited for her husband to return home from his latest voyage. After a few days together, she plucked up the courage to ask him a question:

'Can I come with you on your next trip?'

Her husband was amazed. Although he loved the girl more than his life, he knew that she felt no passion for him and thought that she relished his time at sea. Thrilled by her apparent change of heart, he eagerly agreed to her request, promising her the best cabin on the best ship in his fleet.

A month later, they boarded the ship. Like the tapestry, it was blue with billowing white sails. As the days passed, the girl began to feel more and more at ease; more contented in her skin.

One day there was a knock at her door and the ship's laundry-woman entered the cabin.

'How ever we're going to get through this voyage... I really can't tell,' she began with a shake of her head. 'There's just enough sheets to go round, and the master's has a rotten place you could put your finger through. And the counterpanes. Did you notice the counterpanes?'

But the girl had not noticed the counterpanes. All she could notice was the woman who stood before her. At first it seemed that the woman had her hair in rags, but at a second glance, the girl saw the truth. Instead of hair, the woman had strips of fabric growing from her scalp. But the woman seemed oblivious to the girl's gaze and continued her speech:

'Why, if one sewed one's fingers to the bone, one would have one's work undone the next time they went to the laundry.'
The girl looked at her fingers and the silk that lay beneath her nails. Realising that she could help, she offered her services to the laundry-woman and together they went to the linen store.

From that day on, the two women worked together repairing the ship’s laundry. The girl would sew with the thread from her fingers and the woman would patch with the rags from her head. They shared stories as they worked and it was not long before their friendship intensified into love. Still, every night, the girl returned to her husband and was a dutiful wife.

Some weeks later, the girl began to see a swelling in her belly. It was tiny at first, but the bump grew until her husband could see that she was with child. He was ecstatic that he was going to be a father and he threw his arms around his wife, but she pushed him away, sobbing. Having held the truth inside for so long, she was unable to keep her secret any longer.

‘But I don’t love you,’ she said through her tears. ‘I’m in love with...’

‘Who?’ said her husband. ‘The first mate? The chef? The cabin boy!’

‘No,’ said the girl. ‘I’m in love with the laundry-woman.’

Now the ship’s captain was a good man, but at the news of his wife’s betrayal, he became bitter and angry. Sending her from his quarters, he vowed never to look upon her face again.

The girl went straight to the linen store.

Late that night, the two women crept to one of the ship’s rowing boats and cast themselves off into the sea. They rowed and rowed until they reached a rocky beach. There they found a small cavern and made a living spinning, stitching and making beautiful fabrics for the local townsfolk.

When the girl gave birth to her tiny daughter, they wrapped her in gold and took her with them to the market.

The tide comes in and the tide goes out, but legend says the women will live there forever.

*****

I dream I am home; in my house, in my bed. Dreaming, I wake up and fling back the duvet. The omniscient alarm clock blinks 3:15 with its all-seeing eyes.
I pad through the darkened house to my study. Sitting at my desk, I take up my favourite pencil and sharpen it to a point. The initial pressure on the page makes the point snap and I am relaxed by the scratch of words on paper.

As I write, it seemed to me that the house itself was craning inwards to listen. Then I knew it was the house speaking. Its control over me is so great that I cannot stop writing. My hand speeds across the page and the words come without thought. The house leans in further, pushing me to fill pages and pages with words. I am tired, but I cannot stop. My hand aches, but I cannot stop. The pencil writes and writes, getting smaller and smaller, until it is so tiny that I can no longer hold it. The rising sun peers red through the blind. I put my head on the desk. On a pillow of pages, I sleep.

You dream you are home; in your house, in your bed. Dreaming, you wake up and, reaching out, snap on the light. Its bedside glow illuminates the ticking clock: a quarter past three.

You prop yourself up on your pillows and take up the book by your bed. You open its cover carefully, trying not to paralyse its virgin spine. You flick past the issue number and publisher, but your eye pauses at the dedication. Will anyone ever dedicate a book to you, you wonder. You dismiss the thought with a turn of the page. Here the story starts.

You read voraciously, savouring the words, tasting their sound. And, as you read, it seems that the house is craning inwards to listen. You realise that it is the house speaking. It is taking you from page to page, pressing you to read faster and faster. The house leans in further and reads over your shoulder. You turn the pages, not able to care whether you have crumpled them or broken the book’s spine. You eyes are tired but you cannot sleep. You cannot stop until you turn the final page and close the cover. You lean back into the pillows and allow the pink glow of dawn from behind the curtains to lull you back to sleep.

We wake. But morning has not come. This is an invented world and it has reinvented itself whilst we slept. We are in a kind of half-light and from the bed we can see a web of ropes, at all angles, in all directions. What may have put these ropes here, what kind of industrious arachnid, neither of us care to think about.

Comfortable once again in each other’s company, we stand up on the bed and look around us. The mattress is unsteady beneath our feet and the web makes us dizzy if we look down into it. We stand on a ledge here, but if we look down, we turn giddy. It makes sense then to climb upwards, at least to begin with.
You move to put your clothes on but, remembering our argument, I put my
hand out to stop you. Instead, I suggest that we should remain as we are. It is not
cold here and the journey we are about to undertake will doubtless be easier without
heavy clothes and shoes. Compliant now, you agree and we reach out for the nearest
rope.

It is not an easy task. Balancing from one rope to the next, the line between life and
death is a couple of inches at most. The potential for disaster is great and my fear
unnerves me. You seem more trusting in your actions and swing from rope to rope
with effortless grace. I lose my balance easily and I can hear voices calling me,
taunting me in the shadows.

I fall.

And having released you into the void earlier, I know that you have no reason
to save me now. I know that I am lost. I know that after all these callings hither and
thither, these pluckings and searchings, I shall fall alone through this thin sheet into
gulfs of fire. And you will not help me. More cruel than old torturers, you will let me
fall, and will tear me to pieces when I am fallen.

But I am wrong. No sooner is the wind in my hair than your hand is clasped
round my ankle. Hanging upside down, the blood rushes to my head and I hear your
voice from a long way off.

'I can't go on without you. You can do it, I believe in you, I expect it of you.'

Humbled by your faith, I stretch out to grab the rope and you let go, letting me
swing beneath it. My feet feel for the rope beneath them and I am balanced once
more.

We continue to climb and, in spite of my fall, I am less cautious than before. Instead, I
emulate your carefree movements. I haul myself up, slither down. What keeps the
tension is the tension itself — the pull between what I am and what I can become. The
tug of war between the world I inherit and the world I invent.

We climb up and down, back and forth, left and right until the bed is no longer visible.
The web of rope spins out around us.

That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or
what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared
and amazed and knowing nothing; but one thing led to another and by degrees
something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty that we are heading towards something, not away from it.

Then I saw her. She was climbing down from her window on a thin rope which she cut and re-knotted a number of times during the descent. I strained my eyes to follow her, but she was gone.

I call out to you and point at the window. The woman is so far from our sight that it would be impossible to follow her, but surely the window must lead somewhere?

We swing across the web until we are directly above the window. From here, a single rope hangs down, parallel to the frame. We slide down it until we are opposite the glass. It is not a window.

Gently the rope swings back and forth through the mirror.
Books are mirrors of the soul.

(Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941)

Instead of a window, we see that there is a tall mirror hinged into a case. The woman in the mirror has an unknown face. There is a sadness about her but at the side of her body, a bright light, as though the skin will burst and something alive tumble out. You turn to look for the light, but there is only darkness beside you.

Turning back to the mirror, you feel for the catch that will open the casing and show us where the woman came from. But I can see that the mirror has no depth behind it. You scoff as I wonder aloud that maybe we are to pass through the mirror itself, but when I put out my hand to touch the mirror it is as warm and thin as a membrane of skin.

Brushing me aside, you put your hand to the glass. Your fingers indent themselves on its surface and it gives slightly beneath the pressure. You press harder and harder, your fingers splayed, as the mirror continues to cave inwards. You claw your hand to dig deeper, to catch a nail and open the space, but it will not tear. Frustrated, you push yourself away from the glass and the rope we are clinging to swings wildly.

I struggle to hold on, but as the rope swings back to the mirror, I can see my face loom towards me in the glass. My reflection seems surprised, shocked even, as our faces collide and the 'o' of my mouth sucks me through the glass.

Without me, all goes dark. The air conjures up a bitter chill and you sway gently in the breeze, aware of the hairs rising on the back of your neck. The mirror stands in front of you. It is porous. It allows passage. But it will not let you through.

You hang in emptiness, inside and out, and wait for me to return.

*The moon and mirrors have this much in common: you cannot see behind them.* In this space behind the mirror, I know why.

*The room was a cube of cross-bars, paned with glass... A few panes were broken, others had frosted glass, or were maybe just dusty, still others were blue like the sky.* But all of them are mirrors. Whatever colour, however dusty, they reflect me onto myself into infinity.
Standing up makes me nauseous. All my selves rise as one, crowding the space with their non-existence. Gingerly, I shuffle towards the nearest glass and peer into it. *It doesn't reflect me, it reflects somebody else.* I draw my hand across my eyes and look again.

It reflects you.

Surprised, I spin around to find you. But you are not here. And yet you are here. Caught within the mirrors are hundreds, thousands of you, spreading out into space. I panic that you are *trapped in the looking glass* and I cannot reach you. Then my thoughts reverse and I panic that I am trapped in the looking glass and you cannot reach me.

On the other side of the glass, you wait. The mirror shows no reflection now. It is but a glass darkly and gives nothing away. No explanation. No reason. You empty yourself of thought. You do not exist.

My mind fragments. *I get one part of the picture and the rest lies in pieces, scattered around me. I am splintered by great waves. I am coloured glass from a church window long since shattered. I find pieces of myself everywhere, and I cut myself holding them.*

Kneeling down, I lean my head against the glass. You face comes close to meet me: I think you want to speak to me, but you remain silent. I think you want to touch me, but your hands remain in your lap. *I have no face* and so I remain on my knees, staring at yours.

*I'm looking for something, it's true.
I'm looking for the meaning inside the data.*

*That's why I trawl my screen like a beachcomber – looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise. I guess I've been looking for us both all my life.*

You wait and your body relaxes. Your breath deepens. Your eyes close. Slowly, your fingers bend away from the rope.

You fall, head back, arms outstretched, into nothing.

Maybe I fell asleep or maybe I just closed my eyes, but when I open them again, I can see my face showing over your shoulder. We are both in the mirror but you are where I should be. Confused, I turn back into the room and come face to face with myself.

Both of me scream.
I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face, but here is my face and my body physically real in front of me. It is an unsettling presence and the madness brought on by no reflection is not abated by this three-dimensional mirroring. In front of me is a caught image of who I am. In all of that who am I?

I focus past you onto the mirrors beyond. The mirrors superimpose on one another. They interact, giving a multiple view of the world. Yet in their reflections are two figures. You are still there. Suddenly, the insanity clears as I look through the silver mirror, into the white room, a looking-glass fantasy, a reversed image of reversing rules. You are not there for me, you are there as me. You are me. And I am you.

I turn back to me, to you, to the you that is me, and can see you hiding behind my eyes. You are a looking-glass world. You are the hidden place that opens to me on the other side of the glass... You are what the mirror reflects and invents. I see myself, I see you, two, one, none. I don't know. Maybe I don't need to know. Kiss me.

We lean towards each other and our bodies become living mirrors. Sense mirrors where the outline of the other is profiled through touch. Gently, we trace the contours of our face but feel each other beneath the skin. I can feel your muscle. I can feel your blood. And as our mouths touch, I feel you more intensely than I have ever felt you before. We now have a single side, a single face, a single sense. On a single plane. Always on the same side of the looking glass.

The mirrors shatter. The glass is falling. Shards scatter in their descent. My blood runs on but my body stands still. The room reels past my eyes. It stops.
Glass Tower

I should come together on the further side, being one, being indivisible.

(Woolf, The Waves, 1931)

Parting from this kiss, I feel that I am made and remade continually. We squint at each other in the bright light and see that we have returned to our original bodies. We fall into each other's arms, content to discover the peace of the body, the harmony of the living. To leave the breath to its rhythm, like waves which come and go, in and out, out and in. The world resembles a single breath and we relax back into our selves.

The room we are now in is glass-sided and circular. From our position at the centre, all we can see is the bluest blue of the sky. You move over to the edge and over broken tiles and splinters of glass I pick my way to join you.

We both smiled standing there. We felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailing boat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails down; and then, with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of us looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over us some sadness — because the thing was completed partly, and partly because we are so insignificant, far up, here, together.

Silently, you slip your arm around my waist and pull my hip to yours. But now the circle breaks. Now the current flows. Now we rush faster than before. Now passions that lay in wait down in the dark weeds which grow at the bottom rise and pound us with their waves. Pain and jealousy, envy and desire, and something deeper than they are, stronger than love and more subterranean. The voice of action speaks. You pull me closer against your body and thread your hands around me, pressing into the small of my back and cupping the nape of my neck.

Kiss me. Two lips kissing two lips: openness is ours again. Our 'world'. And the passage from the inside out, from the outside in, the passage between us, is limitless. Without end. No knot or loop, no mouth ever stops our exchanges. Between us the house has no wall, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. When you kiss me, I need nothing else to exist.
Eventually, we pull ourselves apart and look back into the room. The floor is littered with *fragments of looking glass, radiating fanwise*. The glass reflects the blue of the sky so that the floor becomes like the sea that surrounds us. Cast off in the centre of the space is an oil-lamp, unlit, its brass vessel shining in the light.

Clearing a space to sit in, we watch the sun set and the sea turn orange and then red. Within the glass house, the mirrors catch the colour so that our world becomes colour. We are saturated by the light and, when darkness comes, we crunch over the glass and light the lamp.

We watch the flame flicker and hold, turning blue and then yellow. Within the light house, the mirrors catch the light and send it out into the darkness.

*We held hands until the wick burnt out and then we were in the dark.*

You wake the next morning from the warmth of the sun through the glass. I lie curled up next to you and you shake me gently from sleep. Rested, we are ready to leave the tower and return to the world. We begin to search for an exit.

The walls are sheets of glass with no windows to disturb their perfection. So we put our faith in the floor and carefully move the rest of the broken glass into a pile. Nothing. The walls are just glass and the floor is just floorboards.

With a sigh, you return to the window and look out over the sea. I start to move over to where you stand and knock a piece of mirror from the pile. Without thinking, I pick it up. It cuts across my fingers and the blood flows quickly. Hearing me cry out, you rush to my side and examine the cut, pulling me to the window to see it better. It is not deep, but the scarlet blood still runs down my fingers and onto the floor. Here it trickles into the grooves, marking out a small square among the floorboards.

Concern forgotten, you push me aside and kneel down to eagerly run your fingers around the square and dig them under its edges. The wood creaks, resists and then gives as you lever it out of the floor. Daylight peers up at us.

Beneath the trapdoor is an iron ladder that runs down the outside of the tower.
Escape Ladder

In real life, I identify with the victim... In my art, I am the murderer.

(Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1998)

There was once a girl who lived with her mother. They lived happily together for sixteen years until the mother grew ill and the daughter became desperate to save her. Finding a magician deep in the forest, she made a pact with him to save her mother: he would make her mother well if the girl would build him a tower in which to live. However, the magician was not true to his word and he cast a spell on the tower so that the girl would never be able to leave him and return to her mother.

Luckily, the girl was clever enough to break the magician's spell and the tower collapsed, leaving the magician trapped inside. But as the rubble began to crush him to death, he summoned enough magic to swap his body for that of the girl's mother.

The magician watched from the safety of the woods as the girl saw a woman's hand protruding from the wreckage. He covered his ears at the sound of her screams as she clawed the masonry away from her body. He covered his eyes as the girl buried herself in the ruins with her mother.

The magician stood behind the trees till sunset, watching the tower's ruins, unable to leave. As the first star awoke in the sky, he stepped out from his hiding place and went over to the rubble. Heaving a sigh, he began to pull at the stone. His hands were red and bleeding when, finally, he reached her body. Gathering all his strength, he lifted up the girl and carried her into the woods.

He laid her on the forest floor, wiped the hair from her face and waited for her to revive. When she opened her eyes and coughed the dust from her lungs, she took one look at the magician and her memory flooded back. Tears rushed into life and she sobbed with grief.

A hunger remains in place of the heart. A spasm that spreads, runs through the blood vessels to the tips of the breasts, to the tips of the fingers. It throbs, pierces the void, erases it and gradually settles in.

Try as he might, the magician was unable to stop the girl's tears. Nothing he could say or do would ease her pain. Watching her suffer, he began to feel guilty. The consequences of his actions were so great that he was mortified with shame. Curling up in the grass, he turned himself into a spider and scuttled away.
Eventually, the girl slept. And when she woke, hours later, silence had come to replace her tears. Without speaking, she wandered the land, lost in her grief.


Then one day she came to the edge. In front of her spread the sea. Beneath her lay rocks. With cold determination, she began to build.

At last she was finished. Out in the sea she had built a tall tower. And at the top of the tower was a room. A room in which she could play, read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary. Without looking back, the girl climbed the tower and locked herself in.

The girl lived alone in the tower for a long time. Then one day, pulses of rainbows came dancing through the window, patterning the floor. The girl wanted to see where they were coming from. Outside the window flew a beautiful kite. It swooped and soared with the wind, catching the sun and lighting the air. As it came closer to the window, the kite spoke to the girl:

'Set yourself free. Set yourself free of your tower and dance and play as I do. My string will hold me to my destiny, but you can be truly free. You can do the things that I can only dream of.'

The kite hovered at the girl's window but, just as she was about to speak, the string tightened and pulled the kite away.

'Set yourself free,' called the kite as it disappeared beneath the clouds.

Later that day, the girl heard a tap, tap tapping coming up the wall. Turning to the window, she saw a spindly demon tip over the window sill. It was curled around a perfect orange and it rolled the fruit across the floor to land at the girl's feet. Bending down, she picked up the orange.

'Perfect, isn't it?' called the demon from the window. 'Would you like to keep it? Would you like it to be yours for ever?'

The girl stared mutely. The demon scratched its way across the floor and climbed up the girl's body. Resting on her shoulder, it pulled back her hair with a thickened claw and whispered in her ear:

'Promise to be mine and you can keep it.' The demon traced its claw along her face. 'I will love you for ever.'

Terrified, the girl hurled the orange at the wall. It burst with a splay of colour and the demon disappeared.
That night, the girl could not sleep. Tossing and turning in her bed, she could not calm herself with the sound of the sea. The waves rolled back and forth, but she was straining for another sound. Lying on her back, eyes open wide, she listened.

As night moved into dawn, she heard music. She closed her eyes. From far off, she heard the distant sound of a harp. Its music called across the sea and into the tower. The girl went to the window but could not see where it was coming from.

As dawn moved into day, she saw a small sailing boat getting bigger on the horizon. She watched. She waited.

As day moved back into night, the boat arrived at the tower. It fastened itself to an outcrop of rock and took down its sail. The girl leaned further out of the window, but could still not see clearly. Suddenly, a coil of golden rope came through the air and the girl ducked to avoid it as it pitched through the window. Without thinking, she secured it to the bedpost. She waited.

Two heads appeared at the window. One blonde. One dark. The women climbed into the tower and embraced the girl.

'We're so happy to find you,' said one.

'We've been looking for ever,' said the other.

The girl looked on in confusion. Words begin to fail her. She senses that something remains to be said that resists all speech, that can at best be stammered out. All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly... So the best plan is to abstain from all discourse, to keep quiet.

'It is time for you to go,' said the women. 'It is time for you to finish your story.'

They took the end of the rope and tied it around the girl's waist. Carefully, they lowered her out of the window and down to the boat below. As she abseiled down the tower, she passed the counterweight going up. It was a golden harp.

The two women stayed in the tower and the girl sailed away in the boat. Riding the seas, she spent her time painting. At first she just painted colour. Then she painted shapes. One day, she painted words.

That night there was a terrible storm. The rain lashed down and the wind raged at the little boat. The girl did all she could, but the gale was too strong. With an almighty crack, the mast broke and the girl was tipped into the sea.

Far away, a river ran through a forest. Emerging from the river, the girl shook the water from her hair and stepped up the bank. She made her way into a clearing and there, at the centre, sat a dishevelled old man.

'Tell me your story,' she said.
'I cannot,' he whispered.

'But you must. *If you have a secret, you become afraid. You become afraid of yourself, and what you want, of wanting the wrong thing, even afraid of love.*' The man knew that she was right. With a deep breath, he told her his story. He told it from start to finish, leaving nothing out. When he was finished, he looked at her.

'But how did you know about my story?'

'Because I have already written it.'

The girl pulled out a large book and handed it to the man. As he reached out to take it from her, it began to glow. First red. Then orange. Then yellow. Finally, it cast a bright white light into the clearing.

When the light faded, sitting in front of the girl was her mother.

*****

We climb down the ladder, slowly, carefully, feeling the rust rough under our skin. We are silent, cautious, watching our step, tightening our grip. It is a long way down to the sea and we can hear the waves crash on the rocks beneath us. We have not come this far together to fall to our deaths.

And so we climb. Down and down. The ladder runs ahead with rungs thin and narrow. The tower wall curves away from us.

Day passes. Night falls. The moon is new and gives no light. We twist our limbs around the ladder and rest. Here in the darkness, I feel that *my face shall be cut against the black of infinite space.* You feel it too. And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, *the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularise itself at such moments as these, when we released faculties that had been on the strain, stood over us, paused over us, darkened over us.* Where are we? Where are we going?

In the darkness, trying to rest, unable to sleep, we are afraid of this question. We can recall entering the house. We remember reaching out for the door. But neither of us imagined the journey that would follow. Perhaps we will wake up, safe in our beds?

Dawn begins to rise on the horizon. Sleep has not saved us. We have not returned to reality, and so we untangle ourselves and continue our descent. The morning air is blue and clean. It catches in my hair and makes it fly. I laugh, thrilled by the
sensation. A few rungs below, you look up and laugh too, caught up in my exuberance.

The wind joins in the game and butts and tugs me, this way and that. It does not matter where we are. It does not matter where we are going. I put my trust in the story and release the rung.

I tip out into the air, backwards, arms outstretched. The wind soars beneath me and holds me safe. I fly. I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth; I move; I dance; I never cease to move and to dance. I move like the leaf that moved in the hedge as a child and frightened me. I dance over these streaked, these impersonal, distempered walls... as firelight dances over teapots. I catch fire even from women’s cold eyes.

I am exhilarated. I am possessed. Passion is shot through me and runs inside my veins. The wind tips me back into place and I look down to see your face. Amazement rests there. You are bewildered by my faith. Looking at me, your eyes burn like the eyes of animals brushing through leaves on the scent of prey. You will not be outdone. You let go of the ladder.

But the wind does not catch you. You fall, arms flailing like moth’s wings moving so quickly that they do not seem to move at all. You are nearly out of sight when I scream.

A gust of wind. An air of salvation. Your body halts in its fall and you are buffeted in mid-air. Your heart slows its race. Your sweat cools. But you cannot enjoy the flight. You cannot turn your thoughts away from death.

The wind tips you back to the ladder as I hurry down to meet you. I am white with worry. You are red with anger.

‘You let me fall!’
‘What do you mean?’
‘You knew I would fall.’
‘I didn’t. How could I know?’
You are silent; stubborn in your accusations. I feel the need to fight back.
‘You were the one who let go.’
‘You did it first!’
‘That doesn’t mean anything.’
‘You don’t care. You knew I would fall.’
‘I do care. I do.’
‘Rubbish. There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it.’
I open my mouth to reply, but hurt strangles my voice. Your face is set. Bitter. Resentful. I cannot reach you when you are like this. I am not sure if I want to. The air hangs still between us and we climb down in silence until we are but six feet from the sea.

The ladder runs down into the water, but cut into the wall beside us is a small window. You give it a tug and the force of your anger makes it open easily. Without asking me to follow, you slide through headfirst, waving goodbye with your feet.
Part IV

Ground Floor
Who I am for You

Ground Floor

Bathroom

I know what I think but words in the head are like voices under water. They are distorted. Hearing the words as they hit the surface is sensitive work.

(Winterson, Oranges are not the only fruit, 1985)

I stand on the ladder and watch the window swing shut behind your feet. It slams with finality, setting us apart once again.

Dropping down a couple of rungs, I am level with the glass. It is frosted. Translucent. I can see your shadow growing smaller. You are leaving me. You do not care if I disappear for ever.

I grit my teeth against the tears that prick behind my eyes and try to open the window. This is a difficult task because I need one hand to hold on to the ladder. Too many times, my fingers and thumb lose their grip and snap together, scuffing the skin. Finally, in desperation, I find the courage to let go of the ladder and use both hands to tug at the frame. I dig my nails into the wood and pull.

The window flies open, knocking me off my feet. I scrabble frantically to keep hold of the ladder, the window; anything that may stop me from falling. But I am too slow. Too quickly, I see the sea rise to meet me. Just before the water closes over my head, I hear the window slam shut once more above me.

Under water what you see is not what you think you see. The murky colours temper my vision as the sunlight fades in the depth. Losing oxygen; losing life; I wonder, should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave?

It seems that this may indeed be my fate. You have rejected me because, you say, I have rejected you. Without you, I am irrelevant. I serve no purpose. I have no story. Without you.

But suddenly, the water clears. Turns blue. Vibrant. The light strikes through to touch me. My thoughts regenerate: but if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning?

Bursting through the waves, I take in new breath. Treading water, I let consciousness greet my thoughts.

I am a story.

I am the story.
Inside the house, you are lonely. The end of every game is an anti-climax. What you thought you would feel you don't feel, what you thought was so important isn't any more. It's the game that's exciting.

With no one left to play with, you wander aimlessly. Part broken part whole, you begin again.

Swimming back to the ladder, I pull myself from the sea and onto the bottom rung. The water makes me heavy and it is an effort to stand upright. As the sun begins to dry my pyjamas, I am able to climb back up to the window.

But the same problem exists. Shut again, the window will be almost impossible to open. With careful manoeuvring, I step out of my trousers and wrap the fabric thickly round my hand. I tuck my head deep into my chest and close my eyes. I put my hand through the window.

The glass rains down inside and out. Shaking the shards from my hair, I look through the jagged hole. Behind the window is a bathroom. Carefully, I break the rest of the glass from its putty to leave an open frame. Then, slowly, I slide through, letting my trousers drop onto the floor to protect my feet.

The fabric does its best to save me, but some angry fragments tear through the material and stab at my soles. I curse as the tender flesh gives way and wince as I pull the shards out. Once more, I bleed.

Looking round the room, I see that this bathroom is not used for washing. Instead, it is littered with artist's materials. Dirty brushes splay like flowers in the sink. Fresh canvases stand soaking in the bath. Old pots of paint and bottles of ink are balanced on top of each other waiting to be washed clean. It was once a hive of some activity, but how recently is hard to tell, since the paint has crusted over, the ink has separated and the bath taps have seized with rust.

The only sign of new life is an overturned bottle of ink and black footprints leading to the door. Knowing that these must belong to you, I follow them: leaving my own red footprints to accompany your black ones.
The way you see it now is no more real than the way you'll see it then.

(Winterson, *The Passion*, 1987)

You stand, in silence, in the middle of the room. It is huge. White. The light is pure and clean, cast down from the skylights that lodge between the rafters.

It feels like a new beginning, here in these virginal surroundings. Yet already you have muddied the waters, bringing in your history with your inky, blackened feet. You are ashamed of contaminating the atmosphere. You regret your inability to start again. But *in the deepest hidden depths, and beyond the horizon, you seek me still. Opening up the limits of what is possible. The scars of the beginning and the end of a story.*

I stand, in silence, in the middle of the room. It is huge. Empty. Bare canvases stand in the space, on easels or leant against the walls. Sheets of paper curl blankly on drawing boards, yet to be consummated with ink. Around the room, shelves of books shine their spines whitely into the space. But you are not here. *Always you escape me. The nearer I come to you the further off you seem. The more I know of you the more enigmatical you are.*

Looking down, I see your black footprints kissing my red ones. You too have wandered the room. Were you looking for me? Were you trying to find me hidden in this space?

On a table by a bookcase is a cascade of books, hurriedly pulled from the shelves. Your footprints pattern themselves beneath it and I pick up a book with curiosity. Flicking through its pages, I find the book is blank. Empty. I pick up the next book. This is empty also. And the next. And the next. Without words, I feel that *little bits of ourselves are crumbling.* Panic knocks at my chest. Dizzy with adrenalin, my thoughts run wild. I fear for our existence. *We have sunk to ashes, leaving no relics, no unburnt bones, no wisps of hair to be kept in lockets such as your intimacies leave behind them.*

What if we were never real to start with?
It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow limits, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done.

(Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 1922)

A distant crash breaks me from my reverie. The noise echoes metallically and sets my teeth on edge. I put down the book I have been holding and look again at your footprints. They lead off towards an open door. I follow.

You are standing in a kitchen. Stainless steel surfaces reflect the fluorescent strip-light, casting an eerie glow over the room and making your skin look sallow. You are holding a wooden spoon and, rocking to rest on the floor, is the saucepan that has just vomited its contents all over your feet.

I enter the room to find you still staring at the mess. The milk and oats that coat your feet are cold and gritty and you move your toes slowly, feeling the mixture slip between them.

I click the kitchen door shut. It seems as if we are face to face at last and the busy world has disappeared. You look up at me. Your face darkens.

‘What do you want?’
I bend to pick up the saucepan and put it on the worktop.
‘What are you making?’
‘Why do you care?’
‘What are you making?’
You pause and turn the spoon in your hand. When you speak again, your voice is softer, less angry.

‘Do you ever think of your childhood? I think of it when I smell porridge.’
You look up at me again, embarrassed. It is my turn to speak softly.
‘My mother made porridge.’
‘She did?’
‘Yes. I hated it.’

I pick up a knife and score it angrily across the counter. The steel shrieks with the pressure and a curl of metal twists beneath the blade. You step back, alarmed, as I swing round, the knife narrowly missing your flesh. My eyes are wild. I flick the knife back and forth in the light. Fearlessly, I run my finger along the blade. I do not bleed.
You tremble speech.
‘I don’t understand.’
‘Of course you don’t understand. I cannot assume that you will understand me. It is just as likely that as I invent what I want to say, you will invent what you want to hear. Some story we must have.’

Bitterly, I throw the knife into the sink. It clatters round the bowl, making you jump. I push past you to the fruit bowl.
‘The only fruit,’ I say, picking up an orange. ‘Oranges are the only fruit and you want porridge?’

‘I like porridge,’ you say quietly. ‘I like the slow smell of oats. Sweet but with an edge of salt. Thick like a blanket.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything. It’s only words,’ I say. ‘It’s all secondhand, borrowed, stolen. That’s the real story.’

‘No. You’re wrong. Every story is an inside story,’ you say. ‘I’m still waiting for you to tell me yours.’

I am shocked by this revelation. It breaks... the thread I try to spin; your laughter breaks it, your indifference, also your beauty. All at once, my anger dissolves and I am exhausted. Leaning back against the worktop, I slide slowly to the floor and begin to cry. To protect both you and me, to remain two, I must learn love. I must descend into the heart, keep the breath there, not exhaust it in work, not paralyse it in the mind. I must harmonise it between the shoulders. Until wings grow? Folded around me they help me to remain in myself, to keep me from leaving myself for any reason, to resist seduction, violence.

You kneel down in front of me and gently prise the orange from my hand. You begin to peel it and its scent is a silent word, a living mystery, a dialogue beyond words. Union of the soul and body harmoniously linked, it is a gift of innocence, an illumination of shyness, a refolding of the body in its intentions. Carefully, you break it into two and ease a segment from its sisters. My tears are easing now and I allow you to push the tender flesh into my mouth. The juice rejuvenates and I begin to feel better. As we share the final piece, I feel able to speak once more.

‘I’m sorry.’
‘So am I.’
‘I didn’t betray you.’
‘I know.’
‘Then why did you...’
"I was angry. I thought you didn’t want me."

"I thought you didn’t want me."

"Maybe we don’t know what we want."

"I want to be held. I don’t want you to come too close. I want you to scoop me up and bring me home at nights. I don’t want to tell you where I am. I want to keep a place among the rocks where no one can find me. I want to be with you."

You look at me and pause.

"I want freedom for a night," you say. "Just for one night the freedom to be somebody else."
Lie beside me and let the seeing be the healing. No need to hide. No need for either darkness or light. Let me see you as you are.


We leave the kitchen with its pool of milk and oats and orange peel congealing on the floor and step back into the studio. It is dark now and the skylights show us the night sky patterned with stars.

From the other side of the room comes a flickering glow. As our eyes become accustomed to the dark, we negotiate the tables and the easels until we are in front of the open door.

Inside the bedroom, a fire burns in the hearth, warming the old four-poster bed with its light. A rose-patterned wallpaper seems faded in the half-light and on the mantelpiece a single yellow rose stands in a glass jar. It is a quiet room. A comfortable room. And we do not hesitate in crossing the threshold. Heavy velvet curtains hang across the window and, closing the door, we are enveloped in the room's redness.

*All time is eternally present and so all time is ours. There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming.*

Standing side by side, we feel the air come alive between us. But we do not lie down. Standing face to face, we lean in to each other. Pulses racing, we kiss.

*Look how the light becomes richer, second by second, and bloom and ripeness lie everywhere; and our eyes, as they range round this room... seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, umber and queer ambiguous tints, which yield like veils and close behind them, and one thing melts into another.*

Melting into you, I touch your body. Our hands touch, our bodies burst into fire. You push me gently down onto the bed. This is what we have dreamt of. This is what we have been waiting for. Our shared intimacy will complete our story.

I kiss you. Tongue, teeth, language. My words forming in bubbles under your fingers. You breathe heavily, warm and responsive. You kiss me. Tongue, teeth, words. Struggling with sensation, I manage to speak.

'Read me. Read me now. Words in your mouth that will modify your gut. Words that will become you.'
Who I am for You

Silently, you answer.

The internal and external horizon of my skin interpenetrating with yours wears away their edges, their limits, their solidarity. Creating another space — outside any framework. An opening of openness. Together we become each other.

The story is reading you now, line by line.

Do you know what happens next?

A beginning, a middle and an end is the proper way to tell a story. But I have difficulty with that method. Lying next to you, tangled in your limbs, I feel myself telling the whole story, all at once. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. And lying next to me, you feel that I alone spoke the truth; to you alone could I speak it.

Hours pass and the story is coming to its end.

Waking in the early hours, the fire glows a sultry red from the hearth. You lie asleep next to me, a hand tucked beneath your cheek. Carefully, so as not to disturb you, I slide from beneath the covers and pad over to the table by the window. Pulling the curtain back a fraction, the white of the full moon illuminates the room. You murmur and pull the covers up around your head. Once I know that you have sunk back into slumber, I pull the chair out from the desk and sit down.

In front of me is a crisp pile of paper. To one side rests a gold-tipped fountain pen. I pick up the pen and feel its weight in my hand. There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made.

Taking a single sheet from the stack, I smooth it out in front of me and lay the tip of the pen on the whiteness. The pen began to curve and caracole with the smoothest possible fluency. I write.

Waking next morning, the fire has burnt to ashes. I lie asleep next to you, a hand covering my eyes. Quietly, so as not to disturb me, you slip from the bed and walk over to the window. Moving the curtain slightly allows the dawn light to filter into the room and you turn to make sure that I do not wake. With me still sleeping heavily, you pull out the desk chair and sit down.

In front of you is an uneven stack of paper. To one side rests an inky fountain pen. You flick through the sheets of paper and see that they are all covered in writing. You read.

But instead of being a book it seemed as if what you read was laid upon the landscape not printed, bound or sewn up, but somehow the product of trees and fields
and the hot summer sky, like the air which swam, on fine mornings, round the outlines of things.

As you turn the final page, I wake.

I leave the bed and come over to the desk. You put down the last piece of paper and look up at me. Now, it seems, we have shared everything.

Taking my hand, you get up from the chair. Leaving our story at rest on the desk, we leave the room passing the fireplace and the rose in the jar, which, by the way, has dropped its petals.
But there's an extraordinary satisfaction in writing, even in the attempt to write what you said just now is true: one doesn't want to be things; one wants merely to be allowed to see them.

(Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 1915)

Opening the door, we are blinded with colour. Where once the studio was white and calm, it is now a riotous explosion of hues. Each and every canvas has been covered with paint. We are *impregnated with their colours, with their smells. I open myself to the warmth of the air, to the light of the day, to the contemplation of what surrounds me.* Blinking in the glare, you follow me into the room.

The canvases are painted beautifully. We stand before a blue boat on the ocean’s waves. Next to it is a picture of a kite flying high above the clouds. Its radiance bathes us in colour and you can almost feel the wind in your hair before I drag you over to another painting.

‘What do you suppose that is?’ I say, pointing to the orange image.

You shrug uncertainly. ‘A dragon? A demon?’

‘What do they all mean?’

But you do not answer. Instead, you have picked up a book from the table in front of you. You flick through it and then discard it for another. You flick through this too and pick up one more.

‘Look.’

You thrust a book into my hands. I open it carelessly, knowing already that the books in this room are blank. But *beneath my eyes opens – a book; I see to the bottom; the heart – I see to the depths. I know what loves are trembling into fire; how jealousy shoots its green flashes hither and thither, how intricately love crosses love; love makes knots; love brutally tears them apart. I have been knotted; I have been torn apart.* Tears push to my eyes and I force the book shut. You look up at me.

‘They’re all like that. They’re not blank anymore.’

‘But who wrote them?’

You put down the book you are holding and look at me. You consider for a minute.

‘I think we did.’

‘But we haven’t...’
'I know.'
'Then how...'
You think once again, then speak slowly.
'You touch me all over at the same time. In all sense. Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time?'
It does not make sense, but this house does not make sense and so, in some strange way, your argument rings true. Perhaps we have been telling our story all the time.

Leaving you to look at the books, I wander round the studio and re-examine the paintings. Coming to the far end of the room, I reach a tall, narrow canvas. A sudden sadness sweeps over me.
It is a painting of a door.
Epilogue

Exi(s)t
Did I write this story, or was it you, writing through me, the way sun sparks the fire through a piece of glass.


I stand outside a door, inside a house. The door is paint and canvas, standing tall in front of me. I call you from your books and you come over to join me.

Slowly, we turn to face each other. You hold my gaze and I see you more in this moment than I have ever before seen you so. I have not gone forward or backward in time, but across in time, to something I might have been, playing itself out.

The air stills.

I reach out and touch your face. A single tear slides down your cheek.

We've never been dealing with more than one, after all. A unity divided in halves. More, or less. Identifiable, or not. Whose possibilities of pleasure have not ever been exhausted. There are still remainders. Left behind. For another time.

You are struggling to breathe and my pulse ebbs with yours. Death frees us from the torment of parting. I cannot part with you. I am you.

But something stirs on the other side of the door. A whisper of being shivers through the canvas and shadows up our spine. Our hand reaches for the door.

And here, the journey starts.
The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million — a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.

(James, The Portrait of a Lady, 1881)

I'm familiar with that body, I've lived in it. It has several storeys. I believe you enter it through a large abdominal mouth, a little like the middle of an octopus — a spout descends, step-like, and gently gathers you up. The danger doesn't exactly reside in being eaten. You may be nibbled, cradled, kissed, dolled up, disembowelled; or sheared, swathed, shrouded, stitched together, trimmed, ripped apart. You can move in every direction, head upstairs or down, climb the scaffolding, swing from the ceiling, hang by your feet, hover, tight-rope walk along a beam, curl up between the sheets — you can do whatever you want as long as you stay in the body.

(Darrieussecq, Louise's house, 1998)
The references below refer to the epigraphs and italicised text in the order they appear in the main body of work. Where quotations have split across the page, the reference refers to the page where the text ends. After the first reference, subsequent references of primary texts are abbreviated as follows:

**Work by Virginia Woolf**: The Voyage Out (VO), Jacob’s Room (JR), Mrs Dalloway (MrsD), To the Lighthouse (TTL), Orlando (Orl), The Waves (TW), Between the Acts (BA), Moments of Being (MB).

**Work by Jeanette Winterson**: Oranges are not the only fruit (OF), The Passion (TP), Sexing the Cherry (SC), Written on the Body (WB), Art and Lies (AL), Gut Symmetries (GS), The PowerBook (Pbk), Lighthousekeeping (Lkg), Art Objects (AO), The World and Other Places (TWAOP).

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**Preface**


**Prologue: Foundations**

Page 2
D. W. Winnicott, *Home is where we start from* (London: Norton & Company Ltd, 1986; repr. 1990), p.112

Page 3

**Part I: The Cellar**

**Threshold**

Page 6

Page 7

**Hallway**

Page 8
Pbk, p.4
MB, p.93

Page 9
JR, p.29

Page 10
Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, p.40
Who I am for You


Ibid.


Cixous, *Clarice Lispector*, p.22

**Spiral Staircase**

Page 12


SC, p.38

Page 13

VO, p.275

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges are not the only fruit* (London: Pandora, 1985; repr. 1990), pp.159-60

**Cave**

Page 15


Page 16

VO, p.234

**Sea**

Page 17


Ibid.


**TTL, p.194**

**References**

**Page 18**

TW, p.20

TW, p.54

TW, p.81

**Page 19**

TW, p.112

TW, p.181


TW, p.228

**Page 20**

VO, p.322


MB, p.80

**Page 21**

Irigaray, *To be two*, p.5

**Cellar**

Nb. Central quotations are also referenced in "Nursery"

**Page 22**


Lkg, p.24

**Page 23**

TW, pp.125-6

**Page 24**

Pbk, p.26

Lkg, p.9

TP, p.153

**Page 25**

TP, p.152

**Page 26**

TTL, p.18

**Page 27**

Cixous & Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, p.93

Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.241

**Page 28**

OF, p.131

**Page 29**

Cixous, *Clarice Lispector*, p.14

Cixous, *Clarice Lispector*, p.18

TTL, p.165

TTL, p.69
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>TTL, p.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Cixous &amp; Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carlson, In Her Image, p.xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP, p.147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>OF, p.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OF, p.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OF, p.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Bachelard, Poetics of Space, p.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Lkg, p.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gilbert in Cixous &amp; Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cixous &amp; Clément, Newly Born Woman, pp.137-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>WB, p.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>TP, p.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP, p.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VO, p.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lkg, p.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bourgeois, Deconstruction of the father, p.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orl, p.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VO, p.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orl, p.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Rich, Of Woman Born, p.223-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bourgeois, Deconstruction of the father, p.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP, p.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bourgeois, Deconstruction of the father, p.140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nursery**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rich, Of Woman Born, p.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>TW, pp.125-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MB, p.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MB, p.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>MB, p.78-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pbk, p.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>TW, p.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TTL, p.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TTL, p.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>TTL, p.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TTL, p.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TTL, p.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>TTL, p.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ibid.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>TTL, p.26</td>
</tr>
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Who I am for You

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Irigaray, To be two, p.118
Kristeva, Black Sun, p.3
Irigaray, Forgetting of Air, p.112

Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.99
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.99-100
Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.22
TWAOP, p.124
TW, p.19
TW, p.12

Garden

Page 50
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TW, p.20
TTL, p.210
TTL, p.24
Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p.32
Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p.29

Page 51
Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (London: Penguin, 1925; repr. 1992), p.28
TTL, p.16
Orl, p.131
Who I am for You

MrsD, p.14
TTL, p.18
TTL, p.24
Ibid.
TP, p.59
Kristeva, Black Sun, p.4
OF, p.170

Page 52
MrsD, p.13
TP, p.62
Darrieussecq, Louise’s House, p.8
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.216
TWAOP, p.115
Ofl, p.35
TW, p.9
Irigaray, Forgetting of Air, p.145
Woolf, Crowded Dance, p.47

Page 53
TW, p.115
Irigaray, Elemental Passions, p.69
Darrieussecq, Louise’s House, p.11

Terrace
Page 54
Irigaray, To be two, p.11
Irigaray, To be two, p.8
TTL, p.60
Woolf, ‘Walter Sickert’ The Captain’s Death Bed, p.174
Irigaray, To be two, p.2

Page 55
Irigaray, To be two, p.118
Woolf, Crowded Dance, pp.47-8
TTL, p.194
MrsD, p.38
TP, p.59
TP p.49

Page 56
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.100

Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.100
BA, p.24
TTL, p.138

Page 59
VO, p.281
TTL, p.129
TWAOP, p.122-3
JR, p.80
TTL, p.141

Page 60
JR, p.37
VO, p.257
BA, p.24
Ibid.
TTL, p.160
TP, p.60
AL, p.41
TTL, p.126
Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.48

Main Staircase
Page 61
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.205
Irigaray, Speculum of the other woman, p.193

Page 62
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.211
Irigaray, Elemental Passions, p.70
TW, p.161
Kristeva, Tales of Love, p.240
Louise Bourgeois in Bernadac, Louise Bourgeois, p.144

Page 63
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.92
Bourgeois, Deconstruction of the father, p.132
Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.8
TTL, p.120
TTL, p.61

Page 64
Lkg, p.136
VO, p.286
JR, p.114

Landing
Page 65
Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.8
Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, p.15
TW, p.77
Irigaray, Elemental Passions, p.96

Page 66
JR, p.38
TW, p.10

Part II: First Floor

Drawing Room
Page 58

References
Darrieussecq, Louise’s House, p.4
Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, p.43

Ibid.
Ibid.

Dining Room
Page 67
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.148
Darrieussecq, Louise’s House, p.11
JR, p.140
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.51
Darrieussecq, p.4 Louise’s House
AL, p.46
AL, p.47
TTL, p.2.12

Page 68
VO, p.276
JR, p.73
VO, p.292
VO, p.157
TW, p.21

Page 69
AL, p.55
TTL, p.168
Irigaray, Elemental Passions, p.23

Study
Page 70
Cixous, Clarice Lispector, p.12
Lkg, pp.218-9

Page 71
TWAOP, p.114
TWAOP, p.130

Page 72
Irigaray, Elemental Passions, p.49
TW, p.14
TTL, p.127
Orl, p.186
TW, p.14

Page 73
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.42
TW, pp.14-5
Barthes, Image, Music, Text, p.142
Orl, p.71

Page 74
MB, pp.92-3

Library
Page 70
Cixous & Clément, Newly Born Woman, p.148
Page 71
VO, p.312
Page 72

References


Dumbwaiter
Page 75
Bourgeois, p.264
Bourgeois, p.54
MB, p.94

Page 77
VO, p.52
VO, p.295
Cixous, Coming to Writing, p.107
Lkg, p.133

Page 78
VO, p.214
Bourgeois, p.49

Page 79
TP, p.62

Page 80
OF, p.162

Ladder
Page 75
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.55
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.46

Page 76
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.54

Page 78
Lkg, p.165
Cixous, Coming to Writing, p.107
Ibid.

Page 79
AL, p.4
VO, p.297

Attic
Page 81
TTL, p.64
VO, p.312

Page 82
TTL, p.51
JR, p.148

Page 83
TTL, p.194
AL, p.154

Page 84
AL, p.157
AL, p.158
Toilet
Page 81
OF, p.29
Page 83
TTL, p.55
JR, p.112
VO, p.236
Page 84
OF, pp.16-7

Sitting Room
Page 85
TTL, p.112
GS, p.42
Page 86
GS, p.32
Ibid.
GS, p.41
Page 88
Woolf, *Diary 2*, p.227
Woolf, *Diary 2*, p.226
Page 89
TTL, p.24
Irigaray, *To be two*, p.6
TWAOP, p.129

Bedroom
Page 85
TP, p.76
Hanson, *Virginia Woolf*, p.24
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.85
Page 86
TTL, p.164
de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.234
OF, p.9
Page 87
Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.240
TP, p.76
TP, p.13
Page 89
TW, p.29

Printing Press
Page 90
Cixous & Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, p.67
OF, p.176
Page 91
TP, p.122
TWAOP, p.28
Woolf, *Diary 2*, p.138
Page 92
TP, p.75
Page 93
TP, p.122
Pbk, p.51

Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.49
Page 94

Mainframe
Page 90
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.206
Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, p.7
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.143
Page 91
Page 93
TP, p.94
Cixous & Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, p.66

Part III: Second Floor

Lift
Page 96
AO, p.4
VO, p.215
AO, p.10
Page 97
AO, p.7
AO, p.91
AO, p.37
Lkg, p.73
Ibid.
SC, p.92
TTL, p.167
Page 98
TTL, p.23
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.222
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.41
Bourgeois, *Destruction of the father*, p.173
Orf, pp.168-9
Page 99
TW, p.226
de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.619
Part IV: Ground Floor

Bathroom
Page 129
OF, p.161
GS, p.81
TW, p.205
Ibid.
TW, p.27
Pbk, p.5
Page 130
TP, p.133
Lkg, p.227

Studio
Page 131
TP, p.28
Irigaray, Elementary Passions, p.97
GS, p.206
TW, p.180
TW, p.170

Kitchen
Page 132

References

Irigaray, To be two, p.6
TW, p.188
TW, p.107
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.210
Page 121
GS, p.185
TP, p.34

Escape Ladder
Page 122
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.227
Kristeva, Tales of Love, p.249
Page 123
VO, p.112
Page 124
Irigaray, Speculum of the other woman, p.193
Page 125
Bourgeois, Destruction of the father, p.54
TW, p.174
TTL, p.175
Page 126
TW, p.30
TW, p.107
TW, p.105
OF, p.112

Bedroom
Page 135
AL, p.130
TP, p.62
TW, p.101
TW, p.105
GS, p.173
Ibid.
AL, p.144
Page 136
Irigaray, Elementary Passions, p.59
Pbk, p.84
Lkg, p.23
TTL, p.209
TTL, p.203
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.19
Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p.4
Orl, p.168
Page 137
Woolf, 'Reading' The Captain's Death Bed, p.141
Woolf, 'Reading' The Captain's Death Bed, p.165

Studio
Page 138
VO, p.204
Irigaray, To be two, p.6
TW, p.164
Page 139
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.209

Epilogue: Exi(s)t

Page 141
Pbk, p.209
OF, p.169
Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, p.19
Lkg, p.182
Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*  
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Who I am for You

Bachelard, Gaston 12
Barthes, Roland preface, 6, 10, 73
Bayuk Rosenman, Ellen 15
Bernadac, Marie-Laure 48, 62
Bourgeois, Louise 10, 38, 63, 75-6, 78, 85, 90, 93, 98, 118, 122, 125
Carlson, Kathie 20, 31
Carroll, Lewis 26-7, 65, 66
Carter, Angela 38, 43, 117
Cixous, Hélène: Coming to Writing 55, 77-8; L’Heure de Clarice 11, 20, 27, 31, 35, 41-2, 45, 49, 56, 58, 63, 67, 70, 90, 91, 94
Darrieussecq, Marie 15, 42, 52-3, 66-7, 100, 103, 111, 117, 142
de Beauvoir, Simone 17, 46, 86, 99
Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix 8, 50, 101, 136
Doctorow, E. L. 73
Felman, Shoshana 78
Gibbs, Anna 94, 133
Hanson, Clare 38, 85
Hutcheon, Linda 118
Irigaray, Luce: Elemental Passions 9-10, 48, 53, 62, 65, 69, 72, 90, 99-100, 104, 106, 117, 119, 131, 136; The Forgetting of Air 38, 49, 52, 119; Speculum of the Other Woman 35, 44, 61-2, 124; This Sex Which Is Not One 36, 42, 44, 48, 52, 61, 100, 102, 120, 136, 139, 141; To be two 8, 21, 42, 44, 49, 54-5, 89, 120, 133, 138
James, Henry 142
Kristeva, Julia: Black Sun 46, 49, 51, 104; Tales of Love 19, 27-8, 30, 62, 87, 100, 122
Neumann, Erich 17
Rich, Adrienne 22, 38
Roberts, Michèle 39
Rose, Jacqueline 9, 46
Shakespeare, William 50
Silesius, Angelus 52
Stimpson, Catharine 105
Winnicott, D. W. 2

Index

Winterson, Jeanette: Art & Lies 59-60, 67, 69, 73, 79, 83-4, 106, 119, 135; Art Objects 96-7, 132; Gut Symmetries 69, 85-6, 115, 117-9, 121, 129, 131, 133, 135; Lighthousekeeping 2, 22, 24, 31, 34, 37, 64, 70-1, 78, 97, 111, 118, 130-1, 134, 136, 141; Oranges are not the only fruit 13, 26-8, 32, 33, 39, 42-3, 51, 72, 74, 80-1, 84, 86, 90, 100, 126, 129, 133, 141; The Passion 2, 24-6, 31, 32, 37-8, 51-2, 55, 60, 79, 85, 87, 91-4, 106, 121, 130, 132-3, 135; The PowerBook 7-8, 24, 93, 104, 114-116, 118-9, 129, 134, 136, 141; Sexing the Cherry 9, 12, 97, 116; The World and Other Places 48-9, 52, 59, 71, 89, 91, 107, 114-5; Written on the Body 6, 36

Woolf, Virginia: Between the Acts 37, 58, 60, 117, 119; Captain’s Death Bed 54, 137; Crowded Dance 40, 52, 55; Mrs Dalloway 51-2, 55; Diary 2 (1920-24) 86, 88, 91; Diary 5 (1936-41) 48; Jacob’s Room 3, 9, 40, 42-4, 47, 52, 59-60, 64, 66-8, 82-3; Moments of Being 8, 20, 23-4, 48, 74-5; Orlando 33, 38, 43, 47, 51-2, 72-3, 98, 106, 136; Selected Short Stories 29; To the Lighthouse 17, 25-30, 33, 48, 50-1, 54-5, 58-60, 63, 67, 69, 72, 81-3, 85-6, 89, 97-8, 100, 102-3, 115, 120, 125, 136; The Voyage Out 11, 13, 16, 20, 37-8, 43, 46-7, 59-60, 64, 68, 71, 77-8, 81, 83, 102, 107, 112, 116, 123, 138; The Waves 17-19, 23, 25, 40-1, 47-50, 52-3, 62, 65-6, 68, 72-3, 89, 99, 104-6, 108-9, 114-5, 118-9, 120, 125-6, 129, 131, 133, 135, 138