

***Else, and The Female Time Traveller:  
Shadows, Spotlights and Otherness***

by

**Jess Maree Miller**

*Thesis*

*Submitted to Flinders University*

*for the degree of*

**Doctor of Philosophy**

College of Education, Humanities & Law

17 June 2021

---

## Table of Contents

Summary	<i>iii</i>
Declaration of Originality	<i>iv</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>v</i>
<i>Else</i>	1
Introduction	132
Chapter One: Time Travel and Otherness	142
Chapter Two: Backwards— <i>Kindred</i> and Shadow Histories	163
Chapter Three: Forwards— <i>Woman on the Edge of Time</i> and Spotlight Futures	185
Conclusion	208
Bibliography	212

## Summary

Time travel narratives are a literary space for challenging and dismantling structures of history, linearity, and cause and effect. The protagonists of these narratives have a responsibility not only as manipulator of time, but as a narrator of history; their perspective is the reader's window into familiar narratives of the past, as well as imagined narratives of the future. The identity of that time traveller—gendered, racial, sexual, and otherwise—has enormous influence over the parts of history they will engage with, and the type of future they will strive for.

This thesis looks at the time travel novel within the science fiction genre, as a space for the recovery and foregrounding of identities that have been routinely excluded from the narrative of history. It draws from Simone de Beauvoir's *Other*, outlined in *The Second Sex* (1949), and examines two key novels: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). To frame my analysis of these texts, I introduce my own terms of "shadow history" and "spotlight history". Visualising the past as a stage, I define spotlight history as the dominant narrative of the past, and shadow history as the perspective, or perspectives, which are often underrepresented in contemporary retellings of that history. The thesis proposes that an Othered identity, within the subversive capabilities of a time travel narrative, is capable of shifting the spotlight to shine on those shadow histories, and can project those histories into narratives of the future. As the exegesis concludes, shifting this spotlight is a painful but necessary process for author and reader, as well as narrator.

The accompanying novel, *Else*, follows the eponymous narrator Else in 2019 Adelaide, who learns that she was actually born in 2051 and sent back in time by her scientist mother, as part of a government-funded project to combat inconsistencies in the timeline. The novel explores cause and effect, Otherness, the misrepresentation of scientific women, and how narrative voice contributes to the direction of the spotlight, on the stages of both past and future narratives.

## Declaration of Originality

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and
2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Jerrylle', written in a cursive style.

Date: 17/06/2021

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my supervisors, Dr Lisa Bennett and Dr Tully Barnett, for their academic guidance, and for cheering me on when I needed it most.

Thanks to my friends and family for their unconditional support, and for knowing when not to ask the question, 'How's your thesis going?'

Thanks to John Wheeler for his proposal of the one-electron universe, which is one of the coolest theories ever.

Thanks to Dr Nick Prescott for his friendship.

And finally, all my thanks to Dr Patrick Lang, who has seen me through the five messiest years of my life and somehow still wants to marry me. I love the heck out of you.

*Else*

‘What did time smell like? Like dust and people.’

Ray Bradbury, ‘Night Meeting’

**Law One:** The technology I.R.I.S. and subsequent technology developed in Section Twelve may be used only in conjunction with pre-approved objectives, i.e. to close temporal loops for the wellbeing of the present.

**Law Two:** Only an employee of Section Twelve, having undergone the correct training and briefings, may operate I.R.I.S. and any similar technology.

**Law Three:** Only the EO in question, which has been crafted to the exact specifications of the algorithm and has been established to bring no harm to the present, may be sent back in time.

## Sunday

So Lace and I are stuck in traffic on Donald Bradman, held hostage by construction workers with luminous red signs, and the sun is going down and she'll be on the plane in an hour and a half and suddenly I'm blabbing. *Hurling* this story at her. The one we all have a version of somewhere, buried deep like turtle eggs in the sand. The one you hope will eventually dig itself up and scuttle to the ocean, swim far away from you.

This is the one, I tell her, where I'm eighteen and my date's name is Brad—*Brady? Brodie?*—and we're driving in the middle of nowhere and suddenly he says, 'Hear that? It sounds like the engine', and I'm like, well, we are driving, I *hope* that's the engine, but by then he's already pulled over. I look at him and think how odd, how fucking *peculiar* it is that this tall man was once upon a time a lanky boy, a toddler, a newborn. That maybe what's really peculiar is the fact that I hadn't expected it, the lines and the facial hair and the coarseness. The masculinity. There's no-one around except the crickets and the cow in the field beside us, who looks up every now and again and stares straight at me, like it's accusing me of something. And I know I'm supposed to admire the guy, out there prodding the engine like a "real man", but instead I'm staring hard at the iPod menu screen in the cupholder, the only light source within reach, and all I can think about is how disappointing the movie was earlier, this movie that now I can only really remember through the smell of popcorned, salt-sodden oxygen and the sting of adolescence, *let's go see this kid's thing*, we are too old for this and just young enough. And Brad or Brady or Brodie slams the bonnet down and gets back in the car and pushes the key into the ignition but doesn't turn it, because he's twenty-three, he's not clueless anymore, he knows exactly what he's doing.

'I don't want to know.'

'What?'

'Stop talking.'

It takes thirteen milliseconds for the human brain to interpret an image. Mum told me this once; she's a pitiful hoarder of fun facts. Knows way more than a vet should about the nature of the universe. But I don't agree with her on this one. It can't possibly be true. Because it takes a lot longer than thirteen milliseconds for me to come back to myself, to the beige 80s interior of my car, the dusty windscreen, the cobweb clinging to the right-hand-side mirror. To Lace, who has manually wound down the window and now stretches sideways, her arms reaching away, her hips close—so close—to mine. She's dipped to the elbows in night-coloured paint, two different paintings at once. But what a stupid thing to tell someone. We



sink into an uneasy quiet, broken only when the car ahead of us gains a few more inches, and my headlights illuminate one of the construction workers.

‘Sorry for the holdup, ladies,’ he says, tipping his helmet to us.

Still half out the window, Lace turns her face towards him, sizes him up, then smiles. Slow, unfurling, perfect. ‘That’s alright,’ she tells him. ‘We’re early anyway.’

Even in the failing light you can see his sunburn, the pinkness of new skin on a recently-peeled nose. He’s probably been here all day; the roadworks have naturally been going on for weeks. When he smiles his mouth curls upwards, teeth leering as abrasively as if they too were high-vis—which, considering I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him down Hindley Street, might have retrospectively been an appreciated danger warning for quite a few women. Failing at stealth, he looks through the back window, at our hard-fought game of luggage Tetris, and after a long silence finally hits on the question: ‘Going to the airport?’

‘We sure are,’ Lace says, as though she’s proud of his observation skills.

‘Going anywhere exotic?’

‘Just visiting my grandparents in Seoul.’

‘Seoul? That’s India, right?’

I fiddle with a stubborn button on my shirt.

‘Oh, you’re so close. It’s in South Korea.’

‘Korea, hey?’ I don’t have to look to see the smirk. He’s found his footing again. You can feel the joke rising through him, that dangerously common confidence of having watched just enough news. I can also feel him turning towards me, *how about you, love, where are you from?* But suddenly, mercifully, another of the construction workers yells over to him, and he’s forced to flip his sign around. Before he can say anything else, we edge past him. Lace gives him a wave, and then, as he fades to a shadow in a vest, winds the window back up. I can feel her looking at me and concentrate instead on changing lanes. I don’t want to find out what sort of look it is. But you don’t need to know what something is to know how it hurts.

‘What? He was nice.’

When I don’t reply to that either, the glove compartment clicks open, the cassette tapes clatter.

‘Man, you have no good music.’

‘I didn’t lose it in a car, you know.’

‘What?’

It bubbles up, it won’t stay in. ‘He didn’t fuck me. Brad Brady Brodie. He just drove me home.’

‘Oh.’ She stops, considers. ‘Then I don’t get...’

‘I don’t get it either. Sorry.’

I don’t know what part I’m saying sorry for. I have no idea why I started telling the story in the first place.

The lights of the airport loom up ahead, billboards shining down above the freeway. Lace is flying to Seoul for four days, for her grandmother’s eightieth birthday party, and then to Melbourne to start her new accounting job. Pencil skirts, nine to five, proper adult income. I will fly over next weekend to help her settle in, and from then on I will visit her using handfuls of saved money and time, and I will know her from now on in memories framed by airports and uncertainty and the sense of being pulled away, incredibly slowly, like parts of Pangaea billions of years ago, the earth quaking irreversibly into pieces, becoming continents, countries, islands.

‘I’m so shitty about this night flight, man,’ she sighs.

I pause to judge the mood, then reply, ‘And there’ll be a baby on the plane too, of course.’

She groans. ‘Oh, of course.’

‘And it’ll be teething.’

‘*Stop.*’

We spend the rest of the drive joking about Lace’s flight, pretending that everything is fine, and by the time I pull into the carpark it almost feels true. The engine whines as it dies, like it understands how I feel. Like it, too, wants to start driving again, get far away from here. But no. We pull the luggage out into the night; I lock the door. We spent weeks bracing for this, I subconsciously tell the car. We do this. And, like me, it’s too tired to argue.

Lace has picked the largest luggage allowance possible—her life, or at least the pieces she wants to keep, is encapsulated by these suitcases. She weighs them, she tags them and checks them in with care, with slow, sure hands which curl into strained fists when one of them hits an odd angle of the carousel and flips loudly on its side. Even as we wind our way around the line for the security check, as our jewellery rattles around plastic tubs in x-ray machines, she keeps glancing back over her shoulder as if any second one of her bags is going to call out to her for help.

It’s past seven by now, but we buy coffees because the habit is ingrained, because coffee fixes all.

‘Where are you off to?’ asks the barista.

‘Seoul,’ says Lace, smiling, although it’s not quite as bright an answer as the construction worker received.

‘Ah, nice.’ The barista wipes down the steaming wand, her right hand expertly swirling the jug. ‘I hope you both have a lovely time.’

‘Oh, no,’ I say hurriedly, although the sentiment has caught me by the gut, turned me to paste, oh Christ, if only it were *true*...

‘She’s here to drop me off,’ finishes Lace, shooting me a look.

I smile, dedicating all the muscles in my face to keeping it there, and when that fails I add, ‘I’m not going anywhere, I’m afraid.’

The barista pushes the two cups across the counter and smiles at me, one eye shielded by a thin curtain of dark brown hair. I wonder how long she’s spent here, watching people leave for somewhere better.

‘Ah,’ she tells me, ‘It’s probably only a matter of time, you know.’

Lace and I sit at cheap wooden tables to pass the time. She plugs her phone charger into the nearest socket, and fumbles to connect her phone.

‘Fuck,’ she murmurs to herself. Gets it after a couple more seconds, then pushes it forcefully away from her and wraps both hands around her cup, as if the caffeine were a cure for jitters rather than the other way around.

‘Lace, are you okay?’

She shakes her head and takes a rushed gulp from the cup.

She would have convinced almost anyone else that she was fine. She almost definitely would have convinced the construction worker. But I’ve known her for a couple of years now, and the signs flicker to life in front of me like Christmas lights in the dark. International Departures is thirty metres behind her, and from where I’m sitting the English/Chinese sign hovers like a devil on her shoulder. I will probably remember this image for a while.

Eventually, we look down and our coffee has shrunk to dregs. So have all our excuses.

‘I need to go now,’ she tells me, as if she’s just realised.

‘I know.’

‘I’m really nervous.’ She tries to laugh it off, but it doesn’t work.

‘It’s just a flight, yeah? Just one thing at a time. And then your family will be there.’

‘Yeah, but...God, I can’t even speak Korean.’

‘You’ll be fine. It’s just a flight,’ I repeat. ‘You’ll be in Melbourne by this time on Thursday.’

She pulls herself all together, like a black hole pulling gravity. And she looks at me, and we both know that she's not nervous about the flight, but about everything that comes afterwards, the kinds of things we grow up thinking are never really going to happen to us, but will always be a few years ahead. But newborns do become toddlers become lanky boys become tall men. Too young becomes just old enough. Lace from Adelaide becomes Lace from Melbourne and I become another, slightly worse off version of myself now. Still living with my Mum, still working at an antiques store, still no idea what I want to do with my life.

*Brandon*, it occurs to me suddenly. The guy's name was Brandon.

'Let's take a photo,' she says out of nowhere, and it feels like the most important thing in the world, so I stand up and drag my chair around to her side of the table. We huddle together, and she holds her phone in front of us so we can see ourselves. Online, it will be nothing special. Two friends at an airport, saying goodbye. But cameras cannot capture everything—for instance, the fact that Lace smells like lavender shampoo and the nachos we ate earlier, hunched over a tiny window table in the CBD, her bags stacked around us like a makeshift city. The camera does not capture the way she holds her breath while the photo is being taken. Or the way my hand trembles, ever so slightly, on the small of her back, one thin layer of material away from skin. The disbelief, the complete rejection of the idea that Brandon knew what he was doing that night—that anyone, anyone at all, knows what the fuck they're doing at twenty-three.

And then...and then. There is nothing more to do. We walk the thirty metres. We hug, mechanically, tightly.

'Don't go,' I say suddenly, buoyed by the adrenaline, by the cold reassurance of no more chances, of the *lastness* of this.

'What?'

She pulls back from my shoulder. I kiss her, in the middle of the airport, like a fucking personified romantic comedy, feeling half-elated, half-horrified at myself.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Do you remember Henry's party in January?' I'm talking so fast that my words are tripping over themselves. 'Do you remember what happened at the end?'

'Not really, I was pretty drunk.' She takes a step back, her eyes changing as she looks at me. I can feel myself getting smaller, dying slowly. 'Elsie, I'm—I'm not...I'm straight. You know that. You met Fraser, and Jay, and...'

'Sure! And Gus! Remember Gus?' My voice, rising to a ludicrous high pitch. 'You scunged all that free pasta from him after his shifts. Of course I know! It's fine! Fine.'

‘We’re okay?’

‘We’re wonderful!’ I grin with as many teeth as possible. ‘You shouldn’t miss your flight. Go conquer the world for me. Don’t worry!’

‘Elsie...’

‘*Go, Lace.*’

I am a clown in a horror film, colours and delight and darkness. She doesn’t touch me again. She turns and winds through the line, does that last panicked search for her passport, even though she knows she hasn’t moved it. She shows her boarding pass to the security guard and walks through the detector. She turns, one last time, and waves at me, but doesn’t smile. And then she is gone.

I can feel the barista’s gaze burning through the back of my head, and I turn with the intention of burning through the front of hers, even though it hurts to keep my eyes open. But she doesn’t look away, only smiles sadly. For a moment, I am certain that she knows my entire life: that somewhere behind that coffee machine is a list of all my darkest secrets, my most extravagant hopes. Too much power for one person, too much understanding for me. I turn my back on her.

I hover at International Departures for a few minutes, and then I am gone too, flushed back out into the carpark, standing dumbly beside the car, feeling like all the most important parts of me have died.

It’s a warm night, and it’s a small car, this one. So small that sometimes, when I get out of it, I half-expect several clowns to come tumbling out after me, red noses and horns and jokes. But they never have. I guess I’m the joke instead. Because it turns out that instead of a clown car all I’ve bought is a rolling crate of dust I can take on the freeway. It’s been a breeding ground for shopping bags, coffee cups, old knitted jumpers which now, in late November, are more makeshift backseat covers than anything, in the absence of the chilly morning. Here and now they are still flattened in odd places from the weight of the suitcases. I reach back and ruffle them up again until they find their own natural chaos. Putting the car into reverse, but leaving the handbrake on for now, I lean back in my seat and close my eyes, trying desperately to stop crying, waiting for the engine to settle down.

I’m going to spend the summer inhaling warm air from useless vents. I’m going to navigate shoppers, pedestrians, cyclists, parents who never fucking look where they’re going, all of them important but fragile, like aortas. Like frantic, Christmas-crazed wires rigged up to explosives, triggering at the slightest brush of a finger, a misspoken word. I’m going to begin dreading the blind spots in carpark, sandwiched between four-wheel drives, barely able to

move. Adding items daily like groceries to the list of things I already dread, i.e. the chasm of time between ‘Read’ and ‘Typing, or the day, which knowing me will come very soon, where the idiot who carries words from my brain to my mouth is really—and I mean *really*—going to fuck up.

The engine has settled into its baritone purr, and I can’t put off leaving any longer. Mum’s waiting for me at home, and it’s a half hour drive back through the city.

I open my eyes and reach reluctantly to disable the handbrake, trying to calculate what time it will be here when Lace lands in Seoul.

But it takes the brain thirteen milliseconds to interpret an image.

And at the end of those thirteen milliseconds, the car isn’t there anymore.

#

Senses. Okay. I feel a wooden seat, hard like bone beneath me; I feel air-conditioning, welcomed with relief by my skin. I hear the sharp clicks of typing, but not nearby, in the next room perhaps. I smell...nothing. If I’d come to this place blind, I would have guessed it to be a hospital ward, sterilised, safe. And I would have felt confident in that decision. But this is not a ward, not even a doctor’s office; at least, not the office of a medical doctor, judging by the physics books, lining walls which feel so far away that they almost don’t exist. Similarly, the floor is light years away from my feet—there is, surely, more space in this room than there is outside of it. I am in the centre of the universe.

I look down at myself, to make sure that I’m still me, and thankfully I see my own clothes, my own skin and bones, layered and filled out in exactly the way that they should be. My arms dangle loosely, but correctly, from my shoulders. One of the arms pinches the other, hard. I blink, seven, eight, nine times, and on the tenth I leave my eyes closed, willing the chair to soften back into my car seat, willing the air to turn dense again, infuse itself with petrol and old leather and sweat. I can still feel the burn in my throat, the ache in my tear ducts. But when I open my eyes, the office is still there, and my face is dry. I swallow. If this is an hallucination, it’s a pretty decent one.

Something rustles near me, and with irrational terror I finally notice the woman sitting on the other side of the desk. She’s been so still that my mind has looked through her, classified her as part of the furniture. She’s dressed in a white lab coat, her skin pale and her hair shoulder-length and thick, fanning over her face as she looks down at the desk. A scientist. At a scientist’s desk, in a scientist’s office. I scan the stark white surface for any more information,

but the only point of interest is a white piece of paper the woman is holding. Upside-down text, too small to read. A document? A letter?

‘Excuse me,’ I say gently. But she doesn’t look up, and her hair stays fanned around her face, a pre-show curtain waiting for its audience. Carefully I add, ‘Are you okay?’

The woman sits up straight, and her hair finally pulls back in the middle. Show time. But there is nothing to see; her features are angular and devoid of anything resembling expression, as though all potential feeling has lost its grip and slid right off her cheekbones. Her eyes, boring straight through me, show no response to my question, no recognition at all.

‘You can’t see me,’ I realise out loud, and of course she doesn’t answer. In slight desperation, I yell, ‘Hey!’ and clap my hands as loudly as I can, but she doesn’t so much as twitch a muscle.

So I’m not in my car, and I’m not really here either. Brilliant. Lace is en route to her adult life, Mum’s waiting for me, and today is the day I’ve decided to go mental.

There’s a knock on the door behind me, and I turn to see another scientist, a man with brown skin and black hair just long enough to curl over the collar of his lab coat. Under the coat, he is wearing an immaculate purple suit, but in the second that passes before he speaks, I also notice the bags under his dark eyes, the blotched cheeks, the ex-tracks of recent sorrow.

And I notice the effort it takes him, the weight of the breath he draws before he can say, ‘Your driver is here.’

‘Thank you,’ says the woman, and I wait for a *how are you going*, or a *what’s wrong*, but her mouth is closed. She already knows—I must be in media res—but I miss the man as he exits the doorway, his departure soaking the already scarce warmth from the room, and I find myself wanting to follow him. *What happened to you? Why are you sad?*

The woman stands up, and I do the same, skirting around the desk to quickly read the piece of paper, suddenly in need of an explanation, a clue, anything.

*August 5, 2054*

*Dr A. Ross,*

*A Movement has been commenced against you by representatives of the POHS Bill of 2046, regarding your violation of Law 3 which has been outlined in the Complaint served with this Summons. In order to defend against this lawsuit, you must provide a response to the Complaint via the appropriate channels and present yourself at Scientific Affairs on the day of August 8th, at 12:00pm.*

*If you do not comply, further consequences may apply. A default judgement may be entered against you in your absence.*

*Regards,*

*Scientific Affairs*

A court summons of some kind. Not particularly helpful, but my stomach lurches at the numbers at the beginning of the document. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that it looked like a calendar date. But before I can read further, the woman—Dr Ross—circumnavigates her desk and heads for the open doorway. I hastily follow her, caught by the sudden notion that without her the room will cease to exist.

The room we enter is somehow even larger than the one we left. The walls are tainted glass, swirling silver and white, as though this office were up in the clouds. The room itself is lined with long metallic desks which are all angled towards us, all designed to grant their owners the quickest reaction time when we appear—when she, the boss, I decide, needs something. And boy, are those reaction times formidable. The room, bustling with at least fifty people, slows to a halt and watches us in the manner of falling dominoes, one blank expression cascading onto the next, until the soft click of her heels, and the clumsy trudge of my shoes, are the only noise apart from a faintly humming air conditioner and a beeping sound that is rather hurriedly silenced from a corner. I try to analyse the expressions as we pass them. Fear? Worry? One woman even looks angry, and the feeling is so overwhelming that when we are closest she is forced to look down at her hands. Dr Ross doesn't meet anyone's eyes. One shaking employee has been shed like snakeskin and left draped over the back of her office chair. The man from before, now seated in front of an extremely slim computer, is the only person who doesn't watch her go, even though we pass close enough by him that I can see, in the reflection of his screen, moisture returning to his eyes.

It's only when we're halfway across the room that I realise the glass isn't tainted: that the colours of it are moving, swirling so slowly that I move a little closer to make sure I'm not imagining it. The glass is clear; the effect is coming from whatever's behind it. Are we actually up in the clouds, conducting strange science from the heavens? Are we all dead? Am *I* dead? Was I hit by a car on the way back to mine; did my poor old engine give out and poison me with the fumes? Are policeman talking sadly at the side of the road, thumbing through my wallet in search of someone to call?

I watch the straightness of Dr Ross' shoulders, I feel the cold clinging to the air like invisible stalactites, and for a moment my rampant inner question is not:



*where am I?*

or even: *who is she?*

but rather, the sudden, infinite, burning mystery: *what did she do?*

I forget myself entirely; I become invisible in all ways, lost in the wake of these single footsteps, these accusing gazes. She is tall, at least a foot taller than me, perhaps the tallest person in the room with her heels on. She would stand out even if no-one were looking at her, with her sharp contours, her sure gait, the sense that she is comfortable controlling the entire universe, its ins and its outs, its sublime and its mundane, stars and seas and dust and people. It's the impression of *power*, I realise. Complete, unchallenged power.

We reach the other end of the room, where a fancy looking elevator slides open as though it's been waiting for us. The man inside looks lazily up from a handheld device and interprets the scene with commendable speed, hightailing it out of there, giving us as wide a berth as possible. She doesn't look at him, only steps inside the elevator. I follow, because I don't know where else I would go—and, surprisingly, I'm not the only one.

A scientist steps in after me, the woman who looked down at her hands before. She is still angry; her finger trembles as she presses the button for the ground floor. The door closes; we lurch downwards. Dr Ross watches the woman openly, watches her balled fists open and close, watches her face redden and harden until she breaks, until she steps forward and punches the emergency stop. We grind to a halt.

'Say what you need to say, June.' Dr Ross waits, and when she's met with charged silence, something unspoken in the way, she adds: 'You won't get into any trouble. It's obviously important to you.'

'*Important?!*' June's face contorts, and her voice rises in a terrible rush. 'Of course it's important! How could you do this to Dr Nasser! How could you make him come to *work* like everything is normal?! You didn't even warn him. He had to find out afterwards, with everyone else!'

'What I did was part of the work,' she responds, unnervingly passive. 'He's here because he knows that very well. So do you. This EO meets every regulation, and it only makes the rest of the work more important...'

'*This EO. God.*' The shaking has spread violently into June's voice. 'You are cold, Dr Ross. I don't care if I get fired for saying so. The POHS bill isn't perfect, Dr Nasser told me that on my first day, but it does require us to have morals. It works because we are *good people*. Because we are trying to do something *good* with powerful technology, and that means that there are lines we don't ever cross. But you—you're a psychopath. And you're not going to get

away with it. The government might see your side, but the public are going to destroy you. I hope you never work again. I hope you're haunted by guilt for the rest of your life.'

Dr Ross' eyes do a long, methodical scan of June, from her shoes up to her face. Lets her get her breathing back, and only then, after June is relatively calm, does she answer her.

But all she gives back is a question.

'Has that made you feel better?'

And just like that, I'm afraid of her. And now the elevator feels small, far too small, and far too inescapable; in desperation I try to release the emergency stop, but no matter what I do I can't get my hand to take to the button. Something is very, very wrong.

'Let me out of here,' I say, and of course no-one hears me, but I keep going, 'Please let me out. I don't care what any of this is. Just let me go.' I can hear my voice rising in waves of panic, and I'm beyond controlling it. I've never been claustrophobic; I've hidden in toy boxes for hours on end playing hide and seek, I've slept with my head entirely under the covers, I've been in the middle of mosh pits during gigs and never once felt panic.

From very far away, I hear a dull knocking, and I turn desperately towards the sound. Has someone discovered the stopped elevator? Will June press the button, get us moving again? I whip my gaze around—but she and Dr Ross have blended together, their shapes run like bleeding watercolours. I reach for a surface I will never find and close my eyes, trying to steady myself.

When I open my eyes, I'm back in my car and a policeman is rapping shortly on the doorframe. A few dazed seconds of staring go by, and he raps again, urgently enough to snap me back to life. I wind down the window.

'How are you tonight, ma'am?' he asks. He is white, blonde, mid-twenties. He could have been the construction worker's brother.

'I'm fine.'

'You have had your reverse lights on for almost ten minutes.' His voice is slow, over-pronounced. 'We had a report from a concerned citizen who thought you had fallen asleep.'

I dig out my driver's license even before he asks; I have been through this before. The caution. The confusion, when he reads my last name, when my appearance doesn't clock with his idea of what my last name should be.

'Elsie *Wright*.'

'My Mum is from Iran.' It's not true, but it's easier than *I was adopted and I don't know who my real parents are, yes probably one of them isn't white but no, I don't know where I'm from, can I go now please*.

I see him visibly relax then, calmed by my Australian accent. He will not struggle to make me understand. We are the same.

‘Had anything to drink tonight?’

‘No, sir. Just helping a friend catch her flight.’

‘Okay, ma’am. Get home safe.’

I wind my way out of the carpark as quickly as possible without bordering on suspicious. I take in the roundabout, the faint outlines of Ikea and Harbour Town, asleep for the night. I accelerate. I brake. I change lanes. I accelerate. I brake. I go through three intersections, hovering each time behind the express bus bound for Glenelg, full, of late-night travellers with suitcases. I pass the roadworks on Donald Bradman, the workers now too shrouded in darkness to identify from the other side of the highway.

It’s only when I’m back in the CBD, surrounded by taxis, last-chance clubbers, slightly subdued Sunday night routines, that I feel normal enough to ask myself, ask the city, the other cars:

*What the fuck was that?*

But nobody knows.

#

My Mum is predictable, in the way that the ground is predictable after a jump or a fall. On the way up, something to get away from—on the way down, the calm, absolute reassurance of an end. Done now, done now. I see her from the doorway, horizontal on the couch, her laptop screen resting against a sleeping Mikes, looking like they’ve been there for a very long time, and like if they got up now their shapes would be carved like hieroglyphs into the couch cushions. I look at Mum and I think, you are my ground. But I can’t fucking tell her this, because I’m twenty-three and it might get around.

So instead I say, ‘You’re gonna drop that thing on your face.’

‘Oh, hey,’ she says, twisting her neck to look at me. ‘Thank God you’re here. I just boiled the kettle and then got a bit—’ she gestures carefully to Mikes.

‘Inconvenienced?’ I suggest.

‘Yeah, pretty much.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘Ten minutes, I swear.’

I walk into the kitchen, where a chamomile teabag waits patiently in a mug. The kettle, when I press the back of my hand to it, is stone cold.

‘Liar,’ I call.

‘Shut up.’

I flick the kettle back on, and as it starts up its characteristic whine I lose myself in its shiny metallic surface. For a moment, the silver reminds me of the phones-but-not-phones in my—dream? Hallucination? It felt extremely real, I know this much.

‘Did you see Lace off okay?’ Mum calls from the lounge.

I come back to myself. ‘Yeah, her plane’s in the air now.’

‘Are you okay?’

It feels weird, somehow, to be talking about Lace. Almost as if she’d been gone for weeks, not hours—almost as if, by asking about her, Mum is dragging up feelings I’ve already managed to bury. A miniscule part of me has the balls to congratulate itself on an excellent recovery time. The rest knows what’s up. Faced with dealing with Lace’s absence or dealing with the hallucination, my brain has decidedly gone with the latter. Honestly, I don’t blame it.

‘Hey.’

Mum’s appeared in the doorway without me noticing. Even in pyjamas and smelling of dog, you can tell that despite being in her forties she could still knock a room out cold if she ever felt so inclined—and it’s infuriating not because she shows me up, but because she’ll never pass it on, because I was adopted when I was three. It’s just the two of us and Mikes, now that my sister Rachel—also adopted, but somehow still the heir of the charisma—has moved out. This quaint little brick house, three rooms, two bathrooms, one unusable but fashionable fireplace. And Mum has built herself up to fill the space, to pay the rent, to be enough. She gives and gives and gives—because what else is there to expect of a woman who decides completely on her own to adopt two little girls whilst running a veterinary practice? She gives to the air. She gives to the bedroom and the bathroom and the space between the fridge and the wall and the slight scuffs on the coffee table where we used to put our feet up and binge *M\*A\*S\*H* on Sundays, under the warmth of blankets and childhood.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘I asked if you were okay.’ She watches me like a true vet, analytical, gathering clues for the diagnosis. I hate being analysed. I’m not a fucking animal, Mum.

‘I’m fine.’ It comes out irritable. The drive has made me feel clammy. The kettle clicks off and I turn to pour the water; a tremor surfaces in my right index finger, and I watch the water ripple from it. Mum inhales loudly, like she’s bracing herself for the incoming

conversation, and I want no part in it. ‘I’m *fine*,’ I repeat. ‘You can do the rest from here, right?’

She closes her mouth, looks concerned, but lets me get past her and doesn’t try again when I head for my room. Mikes slips in right before I close it, but that’s okay. She doesn’t ask questions. Apart from never paying rent or doing the dishes, she is the perfect housemate. She’s been with us for seven months, technically as a foster dog, but no-one has called her that since the paperwork was filled out and everyone around here knows better than to think of her as temporary.

She waits patiently while I exchange my jeans for pyjama shorts, while my hair falls out of its ponytail and my bra is unhooked, catapulted into a far corner. I turn off the light, switch on the ceiling fan and pull the doona cover off the bed, flopping on top of the sheets. I’ll likely have to discard them in the night as well—it has been a disgusting November—but I have infinite hope in each night to be more merciful than the last.

I lay flat against the mattress, watching as the ceiling fan slowly speeds up, the paddles blurring smoothly together. The fan won’t be of much use, but appearance is everything. Only when I hear the low whine do I flip on my side and scoop Mikes up onto the bed with me. She’s too small to make it up on her own.

‘I’ve had a weird fucking night, man,’ I say to her.

She licks my face in response, then curls up along my side, breathing in soft spurts that make the side of my stomach tingle. She adores being close to people, feeling their warmth, knowing they’re nearby. When she was abandoned at Mum’s practice, it seemed like she didn’t know what warmth was. I shudder, now, to conjure up the sight of her—haggard, flea-ridden, shivering at the back of the cage. She’d had no collar and no microchip. The stranger who’d brought her in said they’d found her lying across a drain at the side of Greenhill Road. *Greenhill Road*. Tens, hundreds, maybe thousands of cars would have passed her, their drivers bound in thoughts of work or home, ignorant to anyone but themselves. We tried to find the stranger again, to say thank you and to let them know that she was okay. Mum had considered transporting her to the RSPCA in Stepney, but fate stepped in. I visited the practice to take her coffee and, standing in the doorway, I’d noticed in the corner of my eye this small, white Boxer with a love heart for a nose, and the Stepney plan had lasted about ten more minutes. But the stranger had paid the vet fees with cash, left no contact details, and the only concrete thing we knew about them was that they drove a Nissan Micra.

I run my fingers across soft belly, and one of her ears flicks up in response. She has a surgery scar, which has faded to a pink line but will never quite disappear. She wants for nothing now; she has a long, happy, fearless life ahead of her. I hope she’s realised this on

some level. I hope she knows how much I love her, how together and useful and un-alone she makes me feel.

A few rooms away, Mum drops something into the sink. The clatter echoes throughout the house, disrupting the equilibrium we have here, me and Micra and the peaceful hum of the fan above us. And suddenly, the pain of Lace's leaving returns. It starts in my heart and sinks into the pit of my stomach, so swiftly and heavily that I start to feel nauseous, trapped by the lack of her, stuck in this place where she is not. I clamp my eyes shut, feeling the salt and the wetness building within, and count to ten; eventually, I trust myself not to cry, and only then do I reach for my phone on the bedside table.

It's just past nine. Lace will be in Melbourne by now, at the beginning of her three hour wait. She will fly to Hong Kong just after midnight and be in Seoul early tomorrow afternoon, Adelaide time. I log on to Facebook and my stomach lurches; she's online. Her small green "Active" light leers up at me. My thumbs begin typing of their own accord—'*Hope you weren't right next to the screaming baby*'—but I force myself to slow down, and soon I'm just staring at the half-finished message. Letter by letter, I delete it. She'll be tired. I don't want to bother her. And besides, if she wants company, she'll spare no time messaging me.

Mikes sneezes, then pushes her nose further between my stomach and the mattress.

'Bless you,' I say.

We lay there in silence for a few beats, and then, slowly, I return to my phone and bring up Google. Carefully, just in case the universe realises I'm taking it seriously, I search the acronym "POHS".

The search produces four possible answers, but one refers to some sort of Norwegian prohibition, so I feel safe ruling that out. The second is a type of syndrome, which I also ignore. This leaves two possible explanations for the acronym—another prohibition on hazardous substances, and the Periodic Occupational Health Survey.

*'The POHS Bill isn't perfect—'*

There's a soft, sudden knock on the door. Mum pokes her head in, backlit by the hallway light, her face in shadow. Mikes lifts her head, but doesn't move. She likes me the most.

'You had dinner?'

'Yeah, I'm good,' I say.

She hesitates, and I stiffen in preparation. 'Do you want to talk?'

'About what?'

'About...Lace leaving. How you're feeling. She's your closest friend, after all.'

‘I’m feeling fine, Mum. I told you.’ I don’t mean the words to come out as harsh as they do. Like barbed wire.

She swallows hard, I can see it from the bed, and nods. ‘Mikes sleeping with you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Okay. See you tomorrow.’

She closes the door, and almost instantly I feel that common rush of regret, that burn of shame. I go into every single conversation fully intending to not lose my temper. But she has a way of worming into places I don’t want her to, and I don’t know how else to stop her.

I look back down at my phone. A crack like a cob web stretches across the screen, the POHS search result straining to be seen underneath. And I feel silly now. Of course the search hasn’t returned anything relevant. For God’s sake. I was under emotional stress, my brain was having a hard time coping, and probably picked those four letters up from random corners of the airport. It may have tried to cope in a slightly more creative way than it usually does, but nevertheless. For a second or two I consider adding the year 2046 to the search, or starting a new search for “EO”, but then I think of a much better idea: shove my phone under my pillow, resolve not to think about it, and snuggle Mikes.

I wonder for a moment if the policeman was right, if somehow, I had accidentally made myself high. Whatever it was, it doesn’t matter. I’m too busy trying not to fall apart for other reasons.

#

Ten months ago. Imagine it: a party for the early twenties crowd, those in transition between thinking that they know everything and discovering that they know nothing. Hard drugs in the form of unidentified white pills pressed hurriedly into palms, washed back with spirits or beer, whatever’s your poison; a few notable absences, a few bodies having disappeared into cars and dark corners, taken by impulses and broken New Year’s Resolutions and the desperate need to feel someone else’s skin. The morning on its impatient way, stealing pieces of the sky. Sunday almost here. The next week after that. The rest of our lives, spread out before us like a tapestry, already woven, even ten years from now already out of our hands. Me, sitting on a chair on the verandah, the last of my ciders downed hours ago but still just enough in my system to make me feel like a prospector in the Old West, sitting out here, smoking an imaginary pipe and surveying my land. A yard of brown, drought-ridden grass, and a black cat that won’t fucking stop staring at me. My phone on the arm of the chair, a message sent, Rachel on her way to get me, up early for work anyway. We are in the deep abyss between buses and I can’t afford

anything else. Lace, next to me. Her head on my shoulder, heavy and important, the insides recovering from wine and night. She doesn't know what she's doing yet, but she's probably going to come home with me. Our arms, breaths apart. All I know at that moment, apart from the earlier observation that I know nothing, is that she is beautiful, and I am not. I can be cute, sometimes, according to my grandparents and the weird guy at the bus stop, but beautiful is a nightclub and no-one's put my name on the door. Lace groans, shifts, her arm on top of mine. Electricity through my groin. I turn to make sure she's still conscious, she turns to say something, who knows what, it's lost in the rushed, frantic press of my lips, chapped from dehydration, hands trembling at the side of her face, almost touching, not quite, and we are not at the party anymore, we are somewhere new and good but we are yet to put the flag down in the earth. A boy, someone we don't know, stumbles in front of us and empties his stomach, tips it like a trashcan, feeds the dying grass, and at the end of the driveway, Rachel's car, out of fucking nowhere, and my heart seizes, my arms lunge back to their starting positions, too quickly, too harshly, and the phone has fallen, the phone has crashed against ground, the damage is done, the land is lost, the flag is folded neatly in preparation, in hope of a next time.

#

20:19

Sender: Elsie Wright

Recipient: Larissa Jeong

Hey Lace, hope you weren't next to the screaming baby! Look, I know you've got a lot going on, but something really fucking weird just happened to me and if I pour it out here then maybe I'll feel silly afterwards, and I'll be able to pull myself together. You know like if you have issues with a person and you go to a psychiatrist, and they tell you to write a big honest letter to the person and then burn the letter, and then it's all out of you, that kind of thing. Doesn't really work online, but whatever.

Listen, I know I sound mental but I swear to God, I just up and went somewhere else for a few minutes. It was some office building, I don't know where, I couldn't see outside, and I just followed this woman around and then she got yelled at by this other woman. And the other people in the building, they just all fucking *loathed* her, like they wanted to throw her out the window. I don't know why, it felt very "scene missing". Like if it was the beginning of a movie it would have been *in media res* and then the rest of the movie would have been the flashbacks leading up to that.



And obviously I wasn't there, because that's impossible, but I can't seem to shake it off. Are you supposed to be able to smell things in an hallucination? Also, can you use dream logic on one? Am I supposed to be the woman, and everyone hating me represents a fear of failure or getting older or something? I don't fucking know. But I'm kind of hoping that you just went through something similar, so we can blame it on something slipped into our airport coffee.

I'm going to delete this (just like the psychiatrist would want!), so I guess I can say what I want. Come back. I love you.

Message Unsent

## Monday

‘It’s from the eighteenth century, I swear,’ cries a tall, stooped man, gesturing wildly. ‘For fuck’s sake, my Nan’s not a liar!’

‘Are you sure she’s even your Nan?’ asks Jack. ‘Because, honestly, if she’s managed to pull the wool over your eyes with this—’

Sitting innocently on the counter is a pale blue teacup and saucer, yellow daisies creeping up the side of the china. A beautiful little child in a custody battle. For a split second, my mind flashes to the courtroom from my hallucination, but I expel it just as quickly. I am a few more days from the point of convincing myself it never happened at all.

‘Look,’ Jack says, and raises a finger to the computer’s touch screen. ‘I’d pay for it, absolutely. I’ll give you thirty. It’s a gorgeous little thing. I’m just telling you that it’s not officially an “antique”.’

The two men stare at each other. It’s clear that the thing isn’t even ten years old, let alone a hundred, so after a few seconds of awkward deadlock I clear my throat and butt in with: ‘Would you like that in cash or card today?’

The man turns to me, startled, and grows impossibly red. A moment later, the balloon inside him bursts and he mutters, ‘Cash.’

‘This is quite a pretty thing,’ says Jack after the man has stormed out. The teacup rotates delicately beneath his fingers, glinting even in the dim shop light.

‘I think you paid too much for it,’ I tell him.

‘Oh yeah?’ He replies, absent-mindedly. ‘You think it’s only worth twenty?’

‘I think it’s worth fourteen ninety-nine at House & Garden.’

He pauses, like he hasn’t heard me, and then laughter unfolds from him like warm honey. Jack radiates self-contentment: you look at him, at the sum of parts like greying hair, bristled jaw, but also smooth, careful hands, and eyes full of infinite curiosity, and you, like all of us, reach the only conclusion: this is a man who is exactly where he wants to be. I don’t know all that much about his life, how he ended up here with his odd half-English accent in what I’d guess is his late forties, running this little antiques store, this building of the past. Surely things happen to you in life to bring you here. Surely this isn’t what he dreamed of as a little boy. I’ve worked here for almost two years now, and I’ve asked him a few times about his life before this. Once, he revealed that he’d lived in Melbourne, although I have no idea at

what point, or for how long. It was a very deliberate telling. A peace offering, in exchange for letting the matter rest.

He now picks up the teacup and saucer, turning to deliver it to the back room. It will sit silently with other recent arrivals until the end of the week, and then on Saturday morning it will be processed and priced, ready for Monday, for its new, indefinite life on a shelf. The shop is empty, free of the four or five people who wandered in on their lunch breaks. The air is heavy, saturated, and will be until next March. I stare blankly ahead, swallow to wet my tongue, and wonder, as I sometimes do, whether the secrets of Jack's earlier years centre not around a something, but a *someone*. He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who's always been on his own. If so, it's been a sad loss for someone.

It's now that my phone vibrates from under the counter. Moving slowly, just in case it's a false alarm—there have been several—I reach under the counter and bring the phone up to behind the till, where it's invisible in the case of customers. I'm greeted with a photo from an unfamiliar number, no caption attached, showing a vibrant, bustling city street, crates lining footpaths beside shops, signs painted with various Korean characters. Stretched out in front of the camera is a hand, a familiar one, making a thumbs up sign.

I zoom in on the photo and consume it for longer than necessary—trying, I think, to find more of Lace in the picture. Searching for the hint of a shadow on the ground, a sliver of a finger accidentally blurring the lens, the barest sense of what she's thinking, what possessed her to take the photo on *this* street in particular: what made her feel like this was a place worthy of capture.

But of course, I am overthinking, and it's just a photo. And moments later, a message accompanies that drives the point home: *sorry for the delay, using my cousin's phone. This place is sweet.*

Before I can reply, Jack returns from the back room. There's no strict policy about phones being out, but I never want to push this trust too far, so I slide it back under the counter, making a very large and red mental note to reply to Lace as soon as Jack leaves for his late lunch.

'My friend got to South Korea in one piece,' I tell him, partly as an explanation for the phone and partly to let out some of the adrenaline.

'That's good news,' he says. 'This is the girl you gave a lift to?'

'Yeah. Her name's Lace.'

'That's right.'

‘She’s been in here a couple of times.’ As I say this, my phone vibrates again. Jack nods his consent and I reach for it again, but it isn’t her. It’s an event invite, which I don’t respond to. As I turn the screen off, Jack raises an eyebrow and I say hurriedly, ‘My sister wants to do a thing.’

‘Sounds fun,’ he replies, and walks over to greet a customer in the doorway.

I fidget while he’s gone, rearranging the objects on the counter, not quite sure why I’m doing it. The invite is from Rachel. Jared is in a band now, joining the cliché twenty-something musician club that it would be hypocritical of me to judge, given the fucking wild success story I’ve turned out to be. The usual place. Tonight. No part of me wants to go. I wish I’d been the only one to see it, so I could click ‘ignore’ and let it fold itself into nonexistence without anyone knows. And maybe it’s the residue energy from Lace’s photo, but after the customer has left under the guise of coming back later, I feel compelled to tell Jack, ‘I probably won’t go though.’

‘Huh?’ He presses a button on the till screen.

‘To the family thing.’

‘Oh. Sure.’

‘It’ll be weird.’

‘Works for me.’

I feel silly, but I can’t stop talking. ‘It’s already been cancelled a couple of times.’

‘Okay.’

‘So it probably won’t even happen.’

He stops, then, and looks directly at me. ‘Are you doing okay, kid?’

I nod, to stop myself from talking any more. He frowns at me, and the frown deepens when he glances back towards the screen. ‘Fuck, it’s been a quiet day. I have no idea why I keep you around.’

But there’s a smile playing on his lips, and I smile back. It’s a recurring jab that is not without reason; most of the time it really is too quiet for two people to run a store like this. There’s enough reasonable work for perhaps three quarters of person; the other person and a quarter is paid essentially to exist in a certain space. And I’ve offered to leave early a couple of times, to save him some money in wages, but he won’t hear it.

So: either money isn’t a problem, or loneliness is.

#

Through a series of annoying events, none of which are my fault, I find myself pulled in Rachel and Jared's direction six hours later. The streets are dotted with late-working nine to fivers, wearily joining the lines at bus stops, having thankfully evaded the overwhelming claustrophobia of rush hour a few hours earlier. It is a day winding down, a night at half-mast. I'm only here because Mum would kill me if she heard otherwise, and because you can get five-dollar pints here on Monday nights. But I'm going home the second Jared's band finishes playing and there's an available bus.

'Hey, you made it!' I hear, barely a step inside, as though Rachel has been staring at the door for a while. She's perched on a stool at a high table near the window, exquisitely dressed in a white jumpsuit—who wears *white* around alcohol?—and heels that tap incessantly against the table leg. For an odd, vivid moment, she reminds me of my hallucination, of the blonde woman in the lab coat. Was Rachel the original translation? Had I mentally moulded this image into—but no, that didn't make any sense.

'Excuse me,' says a voice at my back, and I realise I'm still in the doorway.

'Sorry.' I step forward and the man, bearded and hollow, makes a beeline for the pool tables at the back of the room.

Jared is sitting beside Rachel, dressed like he's just clocked off. The two of them together are out of place here, a teacher and a banker, looking exceptionally white and middle-class amid a jungle of jeans and hair dye. She gets down from the stool to hug me, smelling of something delicate, something curated to smell like barely anything.

'It's so good to see you,' she grins.

I notice the ring on her finger, as I always do. As it's impossible not to. It's amazing how it doesn't weigh her entire hand down. I smile at Jared and offer a handshake, which he accepts with wariness and a curt nod before returning to his beer and his phone. Despite that it's his gig, he has all the enthusiasm of someone who has been coerced into being here. Perhaps nonchalance is key to fame. Perhaps the engagement ring weighs Rachel down in other ways.

'Nice weather we're having,' I say to them both, which seems like the thing to say.

Jared snorts. 'That's one way of putting it.'

'Sweetheart, I think they need you for sound check,' she tells him, pointing to the doorway next to the bar, where a girl in a green dress is waving to him. She is familiar, I realise, but I'm not sure why. From within, there's the occasional disjointed burst of music, and the clash of voices. 'But anyway,' Rachel says to me, as Jared drains his beer and walks off, 'they don't start for another forty-five minutes, so get yourself a drink.'

'Wait,' I frown. 'I thought they started at eight thirty?'

‘No, it’s nine, it got pushed back, they were having problems with the tech. So we have some time to catch up!’

She smiles warmly, obliviously, and I try to suppress the stiffening of my stomach. I had planned my arrival for just late enough to avoid this exact situation. Forcing myself to smile back, I head to the bar and slide heavily onto a stool; from the other side of the room, a couple of pool players roar in celebration.

‘What can I get you?’ asks the bartender.

‘Anything,’ I say. When he raises his eyebrows, I amend my order to a beer.

The last time I was here, Lace and I came to celebrate the results of the postal vote—the bartenders that day had been wearing Pride t-shirts pulled down by badges, but they were bouncing around the bar as if they weighed less than nothing, as if they were as light as the balloons existing in various sizes on both the floor and the ceiling. Who knows where the helium had come from. The people already there when we walked in had been there since the announcement, had been drinking for hours and hours already, and they cheered when we came in, their faces unrecognisable under the glitter, the colours, the relief. There was a time to be angry at the statistics—*sixty one point six percent!*—but that day was not the time, that day was the time for drinking with Lace, and looking at her and wondering if she knew how much it all meant to me, how much marriage equality really meant, whether it too meant more to her than she let on. Whether she remembered the party, whether she was thinking about it like I was when the newswoman appeared from Channel Nine, clutching a microphone, asking us did we want to be on TV, and of course we did, the whole bar did. We were given streamers and the remnants of the balloons and we formed a backdrop for the woman’s spiel to camera, ready to launch our streamers at the scripted time, squished together to get a sliver of our faces onto the news, and Lace was tight against me, laughing, and I remember closing my eyes at the crucial moment, hearing the practised cheer, knowing that the staff would never get all the glitter off the floor, and wishing desperately that it could always be like this, that there could always be someone telling me when I would be happy.

‘You coming?’ Rachel calls.

Another cheer detonates in the corner, another ball sunk. Something folksy weaves out of the PA system, a playlist likely argued for by one of the staff. Beneath my shoes, the floorboards are marked with footsteps taken unknowingly through spilled drinks. It turns out they did manage to get all the glitter out.

As Rachel talks, her grin spreads slowly until it seems to cover her entire face, until she is reduced to white teeth and eyes. She laughs at odd moments and becomes strangely sombre

at others, as though she's measuring the details of my life against some unknown internal checklist; as though, at any moment, she's going to whip out a scythe and pronounce me unfit for adulthood, perhaps even for life. Although it's hard to be sure, I think I'm failing that test, and every few minutes my eyes drift over to the clock on the wall, willing it to go faster.

'Where are you thinking of going?'

'What?'

'To uni, I mean. If you go to Adelaide, that's really close by. It's a good system.'

I take a strategic gulp of beer. 'I don't have any uni plans. I told you that already.'

'Oh.' She blinks once, twice, like she's malfunctioning. 'But—but you're getting out, right? At some point?'

'I'm not sure,' I say eventually. 'I don't want to rush into something I wouldn't like.'

'But, you know, you can change courses if you need to.'

'But that would mean more debt.'

'But then you get a job and you pay it off. You can be living out of home at that point, too. Get away from Mum. Real life can start.' She's treating me like one of her students, like she's explaining Grade Three maths, and this is the only possible technique for solving. It hardens my stomach, puts me on the defensive, and affection washes through me—for Jack and the store, for Mum and Mikes—for my little life, non-remarkable, but functional, and often enjoyable, and the product of my own choices.

Mercifully, before my rising anger can translate itself into words I will later regret, the familiar girl from before emerges from the band room and announces that the door is officially open for business, and the band will be on in ten minutes. The pool players pay her no attention, but a few people rise from their bar stools and knock back the dregs of their pint glasses. Rachel smiles at me, whether in apology or self-reinforcement I can't tell, and climbs daintily down from her seat. I've forgotten how short she is; even in her heels she barely comes past my shoulder.

The band room is a small, cramped assortment of dark corners, beer-sticky floor and Fringe posters—the kind of space that lends itself well to gigs like these, where promotion is a severe afterthought and yet the crowds keep on coming, because this is what they have done and where they have come since they were eighteen, and this will be where they go and what they do until time comes for them.

We find a spot in the centre of the room, back from the line of enthusiastic giggers at the front, a couple of them chatting with the lead singer, Liam or Luke—Luke, I think. One girl—young, black-haired, radiant—steps closer than the others, and says something to Jared

on the other side of the stage. Looking up from his bass, Jared grins at her, says something back, and comes in close, as the girl pulls out her phone and turns it around on the two of them, *flash, snap*. At that exact moment, Rachel links her arm through mine and throws me a smile, hand-painted, the warmth restricted to the bottom half of her face. I let her keep clinging to me, and forgive her for her earlier interrogation. It comes from a good place. A vastly foreign place, but a good place.

Jared's exchange with the girl reminds me of mine and Lace's airport selfie, and the urge arises, for the umpteenth time, to check if there are any new messages—even though I *know* my phone's on vibrate and my jean pockets are thin as tracing paper, after too many years of wear. When I've successfully pushed that feeling down, as usually happens, a second one arrives: the sudden need to leap onto Facebook, open up her profile, and find the selfie in question. To find something in it I couldn't see before? To make sure it's still there? Who knows? I push that urge down too; it's far too dark in here for a phone screen to go unnoticed, particularly by Rachel.

Before a third, unknown, likely unstoppable urge can follow the other two, a low hum reaches us from the stage. Jared's attention is entirely focussed on his bass now; the rest of the band are silent, but their limbs flex in anticipation, their brains whirl with counting time, with the slow build of something coming. They don't need to introduce themselves; everyone in the room knows at least one of them personally. They just need to begin. The drummer counts in, and Luke turns his mouth to the visibly beer-sticky microphone.

To the left of the stage, the girl in the green dress hovers long, dainty fingers above her keyboard, and just before she starts to play, she looks up and out into the crowd. I'm almost a silhouette, a mosaic of dark colours, but her eyes click straight onto me as if it's daylight, as if I'd just called her name. And suddenly, I recognise her as the barista from the airport. My brain, having solved the puzzle, relaxes in a wave of contentment, and I realise that this also explains why she was watching me—I've been to a couple of Jared's gigs now, and she might have been attempting to solve the puzzle in reverse. She plays her first chord—eerie, dissonant, far more interesting than the pieces of song around her—and I close my eyes to back away for a moment, to breathe.

For a second, it works; the music gets a little further away, like a dream. But then, with rising panic, I realise it's not coming back—it's being replaced, with voices, murmurs, and the smell of beer and swear is fading surely into nothing—into *nothing*. Sterilised air. Rachel's weight on my side has evaporated, body to smoke. The skin on my eyelids grows lighter. The band room is gone.



No. Fuck.

No.

#

August 8, 2054

Dr A. Ross,

*We wish to regretfully advise that your appeal has been declined. As per policy, a representative of POHS will be present at the next session. Please respond via the appropriate channels and present yourself at Scientific Affairs on the day of August 22<sup>nd</sup>, at 2pm.*

*If you do not comply, further consequences may apply. A default judgement may be entered against you in your absence.*

*Regards,*

*Scientific Affairs*

#

It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.

The chair is hard and cold beneath me; I can sense the body warmth of someone close by, I can hear them fidgeting. So: all my other senses are betraying me. But maybe, if I don't open my eyes at all, whatever it is that has brought me here will give up, send me back to the band room. I keep my eyes squeezed close, trying to will into being the thump of the music, the feel of Rachel beside me, the sound of Luke's voice.

For a moment, it seems to almost work—but suddenly, the rustling beside me turns into a voice: 'Aren't you supposed to be somewhere else?'

The voice chills me; firstly, because it is accurate, and secondly because it's familiar. My eyes flicker open and I turn towards the voice. The man from Dr Ross' office is sitting two seats away with his legs crossed and his eyes boring right through me, no longer suppressing tears but now simply wide and empty, two black holes to match his suit. All of him in mourning. He's brought his body, he's gathered his tired bones and skin and organs to this chair and arranged them in their more or less accurate positions, but he's forgotten to put anything inside; he's left the rest of him on the couch at home. My heart leaps—both in sympathy and in the sudden conviction that he can see me—but then a voice shoots past me, 'EO window's not for another five hours, there's plenty of time, Dr Nasser,' and I turn to find June sitting beside me.

‘You’re cutting it pretty close,’ he tells her, his voice weary, his syllables struggling to leave him, as though they’ve become attached.

Her shoe begins to tap against her chair leg, a hurried staccato.

‘It’s okay,’ he says, and the smile takes an effort. ‘I’m doing the same thing.’

She smiles back, straight through the space where I am, and two things occur to me. Firstly, if these two people are colleagues, why have they left the seat between them—my seat—empty? My skin trembles with goosebumps at the thought that they sense me here, sense something *other* in the space between them. But then Dr Nasser checks his watch and glances over his shoulder, and the thought settles. He’s waiting for someone.

Secondly, it occurs to me, sluggishly, heavily, that we are not in the office building from last time. In its place is a room made clean and spacious by similar shades of white and grey, with another swirling mysterious window running around the very top of the walls, just south of the ceiling. We are sitting towards the front of the room, part of a few rows of crowded chairs and a tornado of murmurings, of hand gestures, shaking heads, worried glances. Some of these people are in business suits, some in lab coats, some in regular clothes. Their voices filter through only after I’ve noticed them, like I’ve had to approve it first, like a postman has made me sign for it and then placed it in my hands, here you go miss, have a nice day.

I’m in a courtroom, but it only bears a passing resemblance to the ones I’ve seen on TV. A high bench is at the front of the room, behind which is an enormous old woman typing on some kind of computer. She looks like she was born in this chair, stretching around it like ivy, her hair grown long and silver to match the furniture. In front of her, two small, square tables are occupied by two women, both in formal business attire. The woman on the right is unfamiliar from behind, but the left is familiar, from when I followed her across a bullpen to an elevator. I recognise her even without her lab coat. The chill that attacks me is unmistakable.

Three harsh knocks of gavel on wood brings the entire room into silence, row upon row of straight backs, held breaths. The judge takes in the room, her gaze sweeping about her lazily.

‘I’ve been talking to my niece,’ she announces, sounding unfathomably bored, and lays the computer flat against the bench. ‘She’s graduating next week. Hoping for a Section Nine position. But her mother thinks working with narcotics will be too dangerous, and I’m inclined to agree. What do you all think?’

When she doesn’t get an answer, the judge frowns, then sighs heavily. ‘No-one? Ah, what a shame. I figured if we’re all going to be stuck here in this room for the next few weeks, talking about the moral code of scientists, we might as well make something useful of it.’ She

sobers and presses a button to her left; on the front of the bench, a red light flickers dully to life.

‘22362001, Scientific,’ she declares, flinging numbers into the air like confetti. ‘Movement entered by representatives of the Preservation of Historical Stability Bill against Dr Ross, owner of the patent for I.R.I.S. and founder of Section Twelve. Right then.’ She leans forward. ‘For the records, we have already held a preliminary meeting. In this meeting, we established that the trial will go forward, and that it will last until a verdict has been reached. The issue of particular concern is whether or not Dr Ross’ actions are in violation of the 2046 POHS bill. We thus requested that a representative of the POHS bill be present from today onward. Will this individual please make themselves known to the court.’

The woman at the table on the right stands up, short, squat, mousy. ‘Your Honour, my name is Jin Garson, I’m a legal advisor in the employment of POHS.’

I lean forward, the acronym clicking into place with the judge’s words. *Preservation of Historical Stability*. I’ve tried a range of search terms on my phone over the past week, but I never came up with this.

‘Now, Ms Garson,’ says the judge, ‘for the benefit of those in the room who haven’t been up to date with the world for the past ten or so years’—it’s a quip, of course, but it feels as though it’s been delivered straight to me—‘could you please elaborate on the objectives of your place of business, as it relates to this trial?’

‘Of course, Your Honour.’ Ms Garson turns to address the room, squinting like she has forgotten her glasses. ‘The Preservation of Historical Stability,’ she tells us, ‘as is mostly common knowledge, was a Bill enacted in the year 2046. It was a precautionary response to the establishment of Section Twelve.’

She pauses, as if for effect, but the audience apparently knows this already.

‘Section Twelve’s objectives,’ Ms Garson continues, becoming more confident the longer she talks, ‘are to identify and close temporal loops through the use of I.R.I.S., a device invented by Dr Ross herself. Their technology finds signatures across time which are out of place—is that right, Doctor?’

The whole room shifts their gaze, and Dr Ross nods curtly. ‘In the most general terms,’ she says, ‘that’s accurate.’

‘Perhaps,’ says the judge, ‘it would be best if the inventor explained the invention. I’m not sure about the rest of you, but time travel is *not* my specialty.’

Dr Nasser mutters something darkly under his breath, but I don’t catch the meaning; I’m too busy reeling, my mouth so agape that I’m momentarily glad that no-one can see me.

*Time travel?* My brain starts to whirl, beat the idea like a freshly cracked egg. Is that how I'm here; has someone transported me to the future? But if so, why the hell am I invisible? Wouldn't I just be like everyone else here? I think of *Back to the Future*, *The Time Machine*. No-one in any film or book I've read has become invisible when travelling to the future. What kind of story is that?

'You're doing science fiction wrong!' I exclaim loudly, because I can, and because of course no-one is available to offer a counter-argument. The feeling returns from my last visit, the sense that something is extremely wrong. Carefully, I stand up and step around Dr Nasser. His eyes are forward, and for a split second I'm looking directly into them, but there is no spark of awareness. Up close, his face is even more perfect, not a line out of place, as though each morning he takes all his surely-looming wrinkles, digs them out of his face, leaves them in the bathroom sink. No-one's face is this flawless. Part of me wants to stay there, but I make myself move forward and reach the centre aisle. All around me, the hushed voices continue in gentle waves, swelling and receding at my back, pushing me forwards, then backwards, like a swimmer treading water.

At the front, Dr Ross stands and turns to face the crowd, looking...*bored*. Of all things. The nonchalance startles me, slows me down, and I descend a step every few seconds, calibrating after each action, desperate for more information.

*Why am I here?*

'Our technology,' Dr Ross explains, 'is able to ascribe certain molecular signatures to everything in the known universe. We are able to study any object and know immediately what time period it came from. Developments in this technology have allowed us, conversely, to know where things don't belong. Our technology identifies these anomalies, and we establish a method of closing this loop and preventing a paradox.'

'Dr Ross, in layman's terms, please.'

She nods curtly at the judge and clarifies: 'We run an algorithm to discover objects in history that have the molecular signature of a future time. We call them EOs, or Else Objects. Objects that should be somewhere...Else.' She pauses, as if for applause, but no-one humours her. June's words from before find me. *The EO window isn't for another five hours*. 'We find the EO in that future time and we send them back in time so that they *do* exist. So that history will progress in the exact way that we know it does.'

A hush falls over the room; at first, it seems like the audience is contemplating the weight of her explanation, the implications. But then I pass someone murmuring, 'what?' to

his neighbour, and it becomes clear that they actually just don't understand. Dr Ross must understand this too, because, visibly irritated, she clears her throat and continues.

'Say, for instance,' she says, 'a boy growing up in 1600s Belgium finds a small, wooden horse on the side of the road after a blizzard, and writes a song about it. This song eventually makes him one of the most treasured composers of the time. But the horse,' she says, 'does not come from the 1600s. Our algorithm discovers that it has the molecular signature of an object created in 2049. So we craft the horse—the Else Object—In 2049, and we use I.R.I.S. to send it back to 1600s Belgium so that this boy can find it on the side of the road. We close the loop. If we don't, he never finds the horse, he is never inspired to write the first song, and the past changes. And if the past changes, the present changes. In *layman's* terms,' she stresses a little harshly, 'Section Twelve makes sure we all keep existing in the same way.'

'But how does it work?' The judge is leaning forward in her chair, her chin resting on her palm, looking interested in the proceedings for the first time. 'What if the EOs don't come from 2049? What if they come from 2030, or they've already been destroyed? Wouldn't you have to go back and find the object first? But that's also messing with history. Ooh, I feel like a novelist.'

'It's never happened, Your Honour,' comes the cold reply. 'All the loops we've closed have involved EOs with signatures after 2046, which notably is the year that we developed I.R.I.S. What this suggests is that it was all our doing in the first place.'

'But—but *why*?' someone in the crowd calls out. 'What's the point, why did you do it in the first place?'

'I haven't the slightest clue,' she calls back. 'But we have to do it or reality will change. *Honestly*,' she raises her voice, 'I wrote a book about this *six years ago*. It's rudimentary knowledge.'

'What about the time machine, how does it work?'

'That's in the book too. I suggest you all go and read it.'

Her words trigger more voices from the crowd, each response laden with rising distaste, so loud that I don't hear the door opening behind me, not until afterwards, not until it appears in over-analysed retrospect. The judge, waking up from her fascinated stupor, bangs her gavel again. 'We've gotten off track,' she says loudly. 'I think it's safe to say that everyone is up to speed—to *the best of their abilities*—on the objectives of Section Twelve. Dr Ross, you may sit down. Ms Garson, you may continue.'

Ms Garson comes out of her daze, blinking rapidly, as though she's trying to shock herself back into being. 'Oh, y-yes, Your Honour,' she stutters. 'What was I—right. Yes.' If

she had a stack of papers in front of her, she would have stacked them nervously and laid them back down again. Instead, she took a breath, collected herself, and said, ‘The POHS bill exists as a structural framework for Twelve, to ensure that Dr Ross and her team stick to their original intentions, and that the, shall we say *allure* of time travel does not lead to any experiments that will jeopardise our reality. In short, there are rules.’

‘And here,’ says the judge, ‘is, after what I’ll admit was a long preamble...*here* are the central questions of the Movement. Ms Garson, what are the three prominent laws of the POHS bill?’

Ms Garson draws herself up confidently. This, I’m guessing, is the professional moment she’s been waiting for, the part of the day she has practised in front of the mirror. She states:

‘Law One: The technology I.R.I.S. and subsequent technology developed in Section Twelve may be used only in conjunction with pre-approved objectives, i.e. to close temporal loops for the wellbeing of the present.

Law Two: Only an employee of Section Twelve, having undergone the correct training and briefings, may operate I.R.I.S. and any similar technology.

Law Three: Only the EO in question, which has been crafted to the exact specifications of the algorithm and has been established to bring no harm to the present, may be sent back in time.’

The judge nods. ‘And you’ve been apprised of the details of the Movement, Ms Garson?’

‘Yes, Your Honour. We believe that if Dr Ross is to be accused of anything, it is of violating Law Three. The task at hand is determining, firstly, whether the Else Object in question was properly defined and confirmed, and secondly, whether the transportation of this Else Object has harmed our present.’

‘Of course it has!’ A voice—June’s—rings out from behind me, and several other voices join hers. I run over the wording of Law Three, or as much of the legal jargon as I remember, and a slow dread begins invading my stomach, pulling me down.

‘Right,’ interrupts the judge, ‘I’m only going to say this once. I’m not an idiot. I *know* this trial will be a media circus. I know the ethics committees and social worker groups and journalists...god, the *journalists*...I am aware that this will be the only thing you drama junkies will be talking about for a long time. But before you go spewing about justice, I am also going to warn you of the legal precedents. In the decade or so of Section Twelve’s existence, there have been six legal cases pertaining to POHS violations. Only three have specifically related to the transportation of Else Objects, and of these cases, only one has ever focussed on Law

Three. That, ladies and gents, is this conundrum we have here before us. It is also important to keep in mind that not one of these cases has resulted in a conviction. The main problem here is that, due to the nature of the science, the only real authority for determining these violations is Twelve itself. And unfortunately, we often find that in terms of the legal requirements for guilt, there is insufficient proof to...'

'Insufficient *proof*?' The words are torched and thrown like a Molotov cocktail, but not from June, not from Dr Nasser, and not from any of the unfamiliar voices. This one sparks something. I turn and discover that the seat I once occupied is filled by a young man. He has the crowd now, has pulled the stage towards himself. People are nodding along with him, growing restless; a couple of people shake their fists and voice their agreement. A couple more stand up. I look around for guards and realise abruptly that there are none. The room has no security at all.

'Hello, Apoch,' says Dr Ross evenly, without turning around. 'Glad you could make it.'

'Say what you did,' the man named Apoch snarls. 'We've listened to you all going on about laws and plans and objectives, but no-one has once had the balls to say it. Tell us what you did.'

Something is gathering in Dr Ross, swirling underneath her skin like the world outside is swirling behind the glass. She stands up and finally faces him. Points her chin and says, 'I closed a loop.'

'And what did you send back in time to do that?'

'The Else Object was detected by the algorithm...'

'The OBJECT!' The word coils out of him like a snake. Dr Nasser says something to him quietly, and places a hand on his arm, but he shakes him off and cries: 'How can you call her that?'

The lurch in my stomach begins to rise. I can feel my heart thumping faster, my skin flushing red and white, the colours of the crowd around me beginning to shimmer the tiniest bit. In less than a minute, I realise, I will disappear.

'No!' I shout to the universe. 'Let me stay, I need to see!' I've forgotten myself. Something terrible, a hunch ignored and hated and powerful, is rising through me. I rush back up the stairs, so focussed on making it in time that I'm blind to the corner of the stair rail, and my hip barrels violently into it, so hard that it should have caused the people nearby to look over, to ask if I'm alright, but of course nobody does, and of course all it does is make me ache with the promise of a huge flowering bruise in a day or two.

‘She was *three years old!*’

‘For the recording,’ the judge announces, ‘the EO being referred to here is a young girl named Else Nasser. Daughter of Dr Ross here, and Dr Joseph Nasser.’

Barely hearing her words, I take the last few steps up to Aepoch, looking him in the face for the first time, as the courtroom continues to bleed colours, to disappear. In the handful of seconds before the room completely disappears and I’m stolen away, I absorb every single detail of him. Dr Nasser and June fade, Dr Ross fades, the judge and Ms Garson and the room fade. And it’s just the two of us surrounded by nothing, trapped in a blizzard.

He is young, in his mid-twenties perhaps. Younger than I’d thought. A little younger than Dr Ross, although that may be the scientific air making her appear older than she is. But his age doesn’t matter.

What matters is that my terrible hunch is correct, and it hurtles after me into the white.

#

‘Elsie. C’mon, you can’t stay here.’

Rachel’s once all-consuming grin has been left behind; it exists only as memory, in the confines of what *was* an event in a bar. Perhaps it is still there, a faint press of teeth and lipstick, hanging in the air of the band room. It has been replaced by a thin line, a strip of dire concern which doesn’t take over the face so much as it detracts from it, so much as it drags her features down into the sum of their parts.

Beside me on the bench, Jared sits with his legs angling away from me, looking across the other side of Victoria Square where, cloaked in shadow, a drunk man yells slurred obscenities at the incoming tram. It ignores him, in the manner that vehicles tend to ignore most bouts of dialogue, and eventually grinds slowly away on its sleepy southward route to the beach. The man grumbles to himself, before reaching for the shopping trolley he has parked nearby and wheeling away into the darkness. I have the sudden, inexplicable need to follow him. We walked here for the air and the clarity, and all of a sudden I am desperate for both. My brain clicks into overdrive, processing, slotting puzzle pieces into place.

‘*Elsie.*’ Rachel stops pacing and touches the side of my face, makes sure I’m looking at her. ‘We’re going to get you an Uber. Jared, get her—*Jared!* Baby, get her an Uber. My phone’s dead.’

‘Sure,’ he says. But his eyes are still on the drunk man in the distance; I can feel the clumsy motion of his hands, feeling blindly for his pocket. He is annoyed at me; I fainted in



the middle of their first song, which turned out to be a debut. Despite that I toughed it out the rest of the gig, albeit in the corner with lemonade, his mood is an exciting new toy and he's not giving it up.

'No,' I say. The word feels new, vulnerable. I hasten to follow it up with other words, so that it isn't on its own. 'I'm okay, really.'

'She only had one drink, Rach.' His hand accidentally brushes the side of my leg, pulls back hurriedly. 'No-one's that cheap a drunk.'

'I don't *care* how many drinks she's had.' Her voice strains; she gives him a pointed look, bordering on a glare. 'We're not leaving until either she gets in an Uber or Mum comes and...'

'*No.*'

They both cock their heads at me. I've sat up straighter; my hands have balled instinctively into fists. It's not about Mum, could never be about Mum; it's the notion of going home. The word "home" has twisted beyond recognition, has become an irrational duality that brings a wave of violent nausea I almost beat back—but no, I retch, and it splatters in sickly brown chunks onto Rachel's heels. She squeals, horrified, her bare feet launching onto the concrete, the shoes tipping over and lying inanimate.

Jared rests a hand on my back—the same hand that accidentally touched me before—and says, 'Where do you want to go, then?'

I wipe my mouth, feeling a little emptier but in no way better, and try to think clearly. Ideas are coming in thick bubbles that I cannot burst, and it's suddenly warm, too warm to be touched, and I stand abruptly. Jared draws back his hand only halfway, leaves it hanging for a couple of odd moments, like a half-hearted wave of greeting.

I look around the square, beyond the park, at the buildings all asleep for the night. The Flinders University building on my left; the Post Office behind me, which according to Mum is the geographical centre of Adelaide, from which all else is measured. In the opposite direction, there is Grote St and the still-lit but vacated edges of the late-night Coles. From the corner, the Hilton Hotel winks haphazardly in bursts of lights turned on, switched off, curtains drawn and spread. The line of taxis in the loading zone are dormant; everyone is where they need to be.

'The shop,' I say.

'What?'

'The shop is a few blocks down Grote. And I was there today, so, look—' I rummage in my bag— 'I've still got the keys if I need them.'

Rachel looks dubious, but Jared is visibly relieved. The situation is coming to an end; he can go back to his life now, forget about his fiancé's crazy sister.

'You can *walk* me there if you want to,' I say firmly, when she still hasn't moved. She remains frozen for a few more seconds, and then her eyes drift discreetly over to the heels she will need to scrub in the morning, and she deflates. She, too, wants the night to be over.

We pick ourselves up and start to walk, Rachel holding her heels away from her with the tips of her fingers, staring intently at the path her bare feet are picking out, and a silence follows us. I'm not particularly keen to break it. I want them gone as soon as possible, and I walk faster than my stomach can really deal with, resisting the urge to double over again when we pause at the red pedestrian light.

I feel inescapably as though this is the dream, and where I have just been pulled from is my real life. Angles are tilting away from me, resistant to the shape of me in their space; shapes and colours shift in and out of focus. We pass the Metropolitan and a man laughs loudly at a table outside, a pint of something in his hand, and the sound doesn't sink through. I am on a different frequency to him, and I'm not all that sure that I care. He wasn't mine to begin with. I wouldn't have listened, and now I don't have to.

After a couple of blocks, the shop forms in the distance in between its neighbours, a jazz bar and a Chinese restaurant. The building's two levels are both shrouded in darkness; he must already be asleep.

'Okay,' I say, hearing my own voice from the bottom of a lake, 'I'm good now. Thanks for...for the concern.' I feel stupid now, like a misbehaved child, and grateful that the night's hiding my shamed pink cheeks. For an instant, I'm worried the lack of upstairs lights will dissuade Rachel from letting me go in by myself, or at all. But Jared has turned his attention to the restaurant next door, which is still open for another half hour, and is wafting out heady smells which would usually do wonderful things to my stomach, were it in a good state.

She looks me over, and I don't hear her so much as read her lips. 'Message me in the morning?'

It's less a question than a demand, and it makes me not want to do it, but I nod. Her shoulders sink in thinly veiled relief, and she steps forward to hug me carefully. Without another word, no *it was nice to catch up* or *let's get together again soon*, she takes Jared's hand and follows him into the restaurant. They are gone, and I turn towards the shop, and being alone is the sweetest relief.

He has always preferred the overgrown, lost in the wilderness sort of aesthetic; he's always said it helps foster the idea of true discovery in the mind of the customer. It makes them

really feel like they've pulled a diamond out of the commercial rough. This works quite well during the day, but at night the shop just looks creepy, each surface another canvas for my paint to wash wicked pictures over. The top right-hand-side window is just textured enough that I can twist the darker shapes into a silhouette. I blink heavily to erase the image, pull my keys back out, and let myself into the shop.

Have you ever been inside an antiques store at night? It's like an abandoned city. Like Atlantis, or Pompeii. Except not underwater, or on fire, but ravaged instead by dust, despite the sure knowledge that customers have come in and ran their hands over several items during the day. Add moonlight, add shadow, and I feel like an archaeologist or an explorer, like I should have brought a flag to claim the land.

Being here makes the past few hours fall away, like dead skin cells brushed into air. The bar, the band room, the courtroom, the square. They don't exist, because—how could they? This room, this house of dust and nostalgia, this is the only thing that can be real. I take deep breaths, each more relieving than the last, and cross the room to stash my handbag under the counter, because that is what I always do, and I am not together enough to deviate from routine.

I glance over at the bottom of the staircase, peeking out from the corner of the room. Above me are no floor creaks, no tinkling cutlery or running water or television murmurs. He is either asleep or not here, and my gut tells me the latter. I've never been upstairs, never been higher than the third step, and that was only on a very busy sale day with no other clear path around customers. Hard to believe now, with all this space, all these wide, delicate patterns of absence and presence, these memories and secrets.

Slowly, as though if I move too fast it will summon him séance-style, I approach the staircase, then climb it. Nothing but soft creaks and shallow breaths. At the top of the staircase is a large brown door, and my heart sinks—I'm going to have to sleep downstairs, or leave—but to humour myself, I try the knob. It turns easily, and the door swings towards me, inviting me inside.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. I had so little to go on before tonight. The upstairs floor is mostly a lounge room and attached kitchen, which, when I very nervously flick the switch, are filled with common household items which could belong to anyone. An old leather couch, a glass coffee table. A bookshelf lined with mostly non-fiction. The only real oddity is the lack of a television, but honestly, considering what he does for a living, it's the only thing I might have potentially expected to discover here.

At the other side of the room is a door, which, given that it's the only other door I can see, must lead to a bedroom. I open it just enough to be certain he's not home, and then I close

it again. The coffee table draws me over then, and I notice that it's lined with two drawers. The top is full of old newspapers, nothing of interest. Reaching for the bottom, I imagine other bits of paper, scraps, cut-outs. A secret scrapbooking habit, maybe.

But it's locked. The knob's inner mechanics brace against my grip, and I let go in confusion, stand up straight again. Who leaves their front door *open* and locks their *coffee table*, in a house only *they* live in?

The lock lifts me from my stupor, and suddenly I can hear *everything*—late night birds, drunken laughs, clumsy footsteps, the throbbing of drums from a nearby gig. Colours become sharp, angles and lines snap back into place. And I know that I can't run from my own life. I should go home. I'll cuddle up to Micra and sleep until the sun comes up and hug an apology to my mother and treat myself to a coffee from the Central Market across the street, and then I'll turn up here as though nothing's ever happened, acting surprised at what could only be a potential break-in, going about the day, taking it back, taking it all back.

I turn to head downstairs, but he is standing in the doorway.

I try to say his name, apologise, do something useful with the space between us, but the silence sheds me like snakeskin. There is nothing else of which I am capable. I'm led to the couch, made to sit, left for what seems like milliseconds before a steaming mug of tea is pressed between my hands. An Art Gallery logo. Chamomile. It searches out every crevice in my throat, smooths over the aching gaps in my stomach where the lining used to be. He says nothing, just sits next to me and occasionally glances sideways, taking careful stock. When it's down to its dregs I put it down on the table and pace the room, trying to out-walk my thoughts, to get far enough ahead to be able to comprehend them, to condense them into words, to get those words out.

From the other side of the room, as he stands to take the empty cup back to the kitchen, with the dim overhead light barely reaching my face and the darkness all around me, I finally get it right.

'Apoch,' I say.

The cup clatters to the floorboards, but does not break; the china is stronger than I thought.

## Tuesday

We go to an all-night kitchen a couple of blocks north, the kind architecturally suited to quarantine the drunks from the night owls. Around us are an odd selection of both: bleary-eyed students on laptops, almost hidden behind ceramic skyscrapers, precariously stacked coffee mugs, long-since drained: but nearby, the strange species, the Wednesday-night-ers, with eyes glazed for different reasons, eating pancakes and laughing, texting, taking pictures. My stomach is a nervous mess, but Apoch orders waffles to share and makes me accept a set of cutlery which burns cold between my thumb and forefinger.

He's half-hidden by the darkness of the booth, but I study him anyway and make a list of tentative but undeniable conclusions. He is older now, ten years or so, I'd guess. His hair is thinner, greyer. He is not quite so prematurely exhausted; the age is from natural time and applied incrementally, in the way that it should be. His eyes are the same, though. They are full of something different now; something fuller, and at last able to direct themselves at me. But they're definitely the same eyes, and now they're confused, wanting.

'How do you know my name?' he blurts.

'Me first,' I cut him off. 'I have a lot of questions.'

'Ask anything you like,' he says earnestly, carefully. 'But I should preface by saying that there are things I'm not going to be able to answer.'

'I don't believe any of this,' I say, because it seems important to establish a starting point. 'I'm going to maybe seem like I do, because that is the smoothest way to navigate this conversation, but at the end of it I'm going to have come up with a better explanation. One that makes sense. And then Ashton Kutcher's going to jump out with the cameras and you're going to break character and tell me that it's our work anniversary and this is your fucked up present to me, and I will tell you to go fuck yourself, but in a semi-affectionate way, and in the morning we're just going to go back to work. Deal?'

'Who's Ashton Kutcher?'

'Doesn't matter. *Deal?*'

'Okay, sure, deal.'

I think deeply for a few moments. What do I need to know first for my cross-examination? What contradictions are necessary to bring the whole house of cards down, to fold the nonsense in on itself until it cancels out? The walk here has achieved something in me,

a breaking-down of something overwhelming into a swallowable amount, a list of questions to be asked slowly, and in order. But which order? Does it matter?

I start with the first thing that pops up.

‘Are you named after that guy from *The Matrix*?’

‘What?’

‘There was a character named Apoc. But without the ‘H’, I think.’

‘*That’s* what you wanted to ask first?’

‘I needed to start with something easy.’

‘I thought you might try and ask what happens in the next thirty years, or something idiotic.’ He frowns. ‘But to be honest, I don’t really know where my name comes from. You’d have to ask my parents. Although they won’t be thinking about it for another eight years, *and* they’re in Belfast.’

A plate of waffles appears in front of us, the syrup inspiring nausea even before the waitress, glassy-eyed and lightly sweating, has left.

‘So what happens in the next thirty years?’

He snorts and pulls the plate towards him, visibly calmer, for which I’m glad. ‘Don’t you dare.’

‘*What?*’

‘You’re *seriously* going to ask me about how the future turns out? Have you seen *any* movies? Next you’ll start asking what would happen if I went back and tried to kill my own grandfather.’

‘No, I know enough about that paradox. What’s gonna happen when you’re born, though? You’ll exist in two places at once. Is that a paradox, are you going to get zapped into thin air?’

‘Elsie, you’re *getting off track*.’ He leans forward. ‘Tell me how you know my name. *Please*.’

He has sidestepped the paradox question, and I make a mental note to bring it back later, when he hasn’t prefaced it himself: when he’ll be surprised and tongue-tied enough to mess up. The guffawing of the drunks go first, then the buzz of normal conversation, then the kitchen bell, then the music. For a second or two it is just the tapping of the nocturnal student in the ceramic city and the ragged pull of my inhale. As long as I’m here, I decide, I may as well cash in on having someone listening, without the hassle of a shrink’s bulk-billing paperwork.

‘I’ve been having...hallucinations,’ I begin. ‘Well, at least I thought they were.’ I tell the story of two nights ago when I dropped Lace at the airport, that first encounter with Dr Ross in her pristine office, that haunting walk of shame to the elevator and the conversation with Dr Nasser. And then the events of a couple of hours ago, vivid with proximity. The chaos of the courtroom. The sound of my name, the middle link in a long, tangled chain of scientific explanation. Apoch has always been a good listener, and continues to be—he never looks away, doesn’t react when one of the drunks spills a milkshake behind his shoulder and the waitress rushes past with a tea towel. Maybe he’s in this vacuum too, with me and the student. He nods when I describe the cloudy courtroom windows, as though something’s clicked into place. Seems pleased that I understand the basic concept of Else Objects, as though he wasn’t looking forward to explaining it to me. But by the time I recount waking up, back in the band room with Rachel kneeling over me, he’s grimacing.

‘I can’t believe she got there,’ he says, long after I’ve stopped talking.

‘Got where?’ I ask.

‘These...hallucinations, you’ve been calling them. They’re the result of highly advanced quantum programming which Dr Ross was developing. She talked to me about it a couple of times. The windows you described, the way you couldn’t see everything, that’s got POHS written all over it.’

‘Preservation of Historical Stability. Yeah?’

‘Bingo. Basically, she must be making it so you can’t see anything which will...I don’t know, rupture the timeline or some science crap like that. You’re seeing exactly what she wants you to see, and nothing else.’

‘So she wants me to see the trial,’ I think out loud.

‘And she must have wanted you to realise who I was.’

‘And who are you?’

‘I guess, in this instance, I’m the person who’s supposed to convince you that you’re not crazy, and that it’s all really happening, and you shouldn’t ignore it.’

‘I’m not crazy,’ I repeat quietly. It comes out like a question: *I’m not crazy?* so I try again. ‘I’ve been travelling to the future.’ The coat doesn’t fit yet, but it’s shrinking slowly over time, squeezing all the air out of my lungs, and I have the horrible feeling that I might believe it all soon, that it might fit me better than my own skin. *What am I doing?* Under the coat washes the self-loathing, desperate to cover me whole. Fifteen minutes ago I was disgusted by the idea that any of this meant anything. Because if *any* of it was true, then surely the whole thing...why would you tell one ridiculous truth, and then make up the rest of...

‘It would be more accurate to say that you’ve travelled *from* the future,’ he says. ‘That came first. Well, kind of. Okay, I’m going to start at the beginning now.’ A pause, pregnant. ‘I apologise in advance, I’m not a scientist. I can explain the most basic idea of I.R.I.S., and how to manually operate the system, but as for actual physics...’

‘What were you,’ I ask before I can stop myself, ‘if you weren’t a scientist?’

‘I was a lawyer, mostly. But I moonlighted as a historian, when Twelve was founded. Sorry, that’s Section Twelve, that’s the home base of the scientists. Dr Ross was—will be—the founder.’ I remember the office I followed her through, and mentally authenticate the information. But I don’t need to question him as a historian, not one bit. He reads my mind, and shrugs. ‘A love for the past,’ he says, ‘doesn’t disappear, no matter how...direct your source material gets. It’s how I know this stuff. It’s mostly classified. In the early days, Twelve liked having historical consultants around, just to reassure themselves that they were taking all the right precautions. And, I expect, because historians make better media faces than scientists. There’s more accessibility there than with a scientist, at least most of the time. And more media support, more funding. That’s the way it goes.’

‘I.R.I.S.,’ I muse, sifting through memories. ‘Someone referenced that in the courtroom, I think.’

He nods. ‘It stands for Ionic Reversion in Spacetime. Please don’t quote me on this, but the easiest description of time travel is that it’s like...hitchhiking.’

‘Hitchhiking.’ I repeat dumbly. It’s the last thing I expected him to say.

‘Yeah. That’s actually the official name for it. You essentially have to buy into the idea that the universe is created of one single entity, just darting about time and space like...like a weird moth, I guess. It’s everywhere, and every*when*, at once. So what Dr Ross did was figure out a way of attaching something to that entity, and detaching it when it’s reached the space she needs it to be in. Literally hitching a ride from one point to another, except instead of travelling across space, it’s time. Well, it’s spacetime, so...both? Anyway. She makes these tiny little devices, inserts them into the EOs, and programs them for travel. Then, poof. Magic. Except it’s not magic, it’s just something completely impossible to understand until you’ve got a PhD in theoretical physics.’

‘So, when she sent me back, she inserted a device...into me? Wouldn’t it, you know, set off metal detectors at the airport?’

‘It’s programmed to self-destruct,’ he says. ‘It implodes, in a way. It erases all traces of itself, which, when you’re dealing with EOs, is kind of necessary. But in our cases...I think it’s easiest just to show you. Do me a favour, hold out your arm.’



I hold out the right; he looks it over, then shakes his head and reaches for my left. After a moment, he smiles and pulls back his sleeve, placing his arm beside mine, our palms pointing up. On the inside of my elbow, there is a miniscule scar in the shape of a square. I've had it ever since I can remember, have always assumed it was a birthmark—that is, until I see its twin, etched into Apoch's skin.

I pull my arm back, first as a jerk response, and second to bring it closer, to study it properly for the first time. It looks like every other imperfection on my body, every other odd mark and scar that one accumulates over a life.

'The device isn't quite as compatible with human skin,' he adds. 'I remember it burning a touch when it imploded. But you were quite young so you probably don't remember.'

'What year was this?'

'2054.'

'So I was born...'

'In 2051. Hold up, this might help.' He takes the napkin underneath the waffles and flips it over to its less soggy side. From his bag he takes a pen and draws a straight line across. 'Think of this as linear time,' he says. 'Past on the left, future on the right. You were born at this point here,' he makes the dot, right in the middle of the line. 'You lived for three years, and then she decided that you were an Else Object—there's some nominative determinism for you there—and she used I.R.I.S. to send you back to 1997.' He makes a swooping backwards arc, ending up at a second dot, a few inches to the left of the first. 'You were adopted. You grew up here. You had a normal life. And then, for whatever reason, she's decided to give you access to your origin story.'

'And you?'

'What about me?'

He's admiring his handiwork, hand lax. I take the pen with no resistance, and then, upside down, make a line that swoops identically to mine, until it ends at a point that I mark 2017, without really thinking. *That's when you first met him.* But he's shaking his head before the nib leaves the napkin, and says, 'you're out by quite a few years on this side.' And I remember the observation I've already filed away: how much older he looks.

'I was *supposed* to get here not that long ago,' he says, 'but as I said, it's not my area. I ended up getting the decade wrong. And no takebacks, obviously. No time machines in 2009. So I figured out where you were, and I knew you were fine for another ten years, so I decided to explore recent history. I really did live in Melbourne for a bit—there's a writer there I wanted

to meet. Doesn't finish his masterpiece for another twelve years. A lot's got to happen to him first, the poor bastard.'

'And why you? What have you got to do with me?'

'I came here because I care very much about your father, and because he couldn't come himself.'

*Else Ross-Nasser, daughter of Dr Ross here, and Dr Joseph Nasser.* The words finally, finally, sink in.

'Oh.'

That's why he was so upset.

'Dr Nasser is your biological father, Else.'

'And the two of you...'

'Yes.'

Well, that explains the lack of girlfriends.

'But then...they're not together? Dr Nasser and Dr Ross?'

'No. They've never. They only worked together. She asked him to be a donor, just out of the blue one day, that's how he described it. I guess she just got to thinking about time in a different way, and decided she wanted to be a mother, but that she couldn't be bothered with conventional methods. Turned out Seph—Dr Nasser—was also thinking about it, in a very different way, and they made a deal that worked very well for both of them.' He shrugs. 'You were a curious appearance—the media were on her about it for ages, asking who the father was, asking her if she was planning to take maternity leave, if she'd quit to raise you, Jesus, you can imagine the sorts of things. And when you were born, you looked *so much* like him. All the news talked about was Twelve being the product of a love affair. It was disgusting, to be honest. A fair bit changes in the next few decades—*that* kind of bullshit sticks around. And what's worse is that he never got any of it aimed at him—it was all her.'

'Where is he from?'

'What? He lives here in Adelaide with the rest of us. Well, he *will*—'

'No.' The desperation is surging out, forcing itself into words. The most important words, the words that I have needed to ask my whole life. The words that will define me. '*Where is he from?*'

'Oh.' Aepoch realises, corrects himself. 'He got his degree in Cairo. He grew up in Alexandria.'

'So he's...'

'Egyptian.'

*Egyptian.*

Else Ross-Nasser. Egyptian-Australian. I hold out my arm again, but instead of the scar I now look at the skin around it. The colour. I think of the man in Dr Ross' doorway, and everything changes and suddenly I am thinking of Dad in Mum's doorway, and it doesn't really make any more sense but at the very least it is a Mystery Solved, a Question Answered. One of the biggest, to be sure, but it arrives in the midst of so much other chaos that it absurdly shelves itself, *it's okay Elsie, I'll stay out of your way, I'll be here until you want to talk.*

'Wait.' It comes from my skin, my tongue, my nervous system, but not yet my brain, and I sit there for a few more seconds, waiting for whatever's wrong to unveil itself, while Apoch's brow furrows and furrows until it seems to be the only thing on his face, and he knows he's said something he shouldn't have, he's shifting around and swallowing. Words from a while ago, twenty, thirty sentences back, are swimming towards the surface, and then they break.

Oh, yep. That's it.

'What do you mean, you knew I was fine for another ten years?' When he doesn't answer, my heart starts up a little faster. 'Ten years from 2009 makes it *now*. What, am I *not fine* anymore? Are you here to stop my assassination? Are you off to find Lee Harvey Oswald now?'

It's a joke, a desperate attempt to return to the certainty that, despite all, was here before. It doesn't work.

An additional question crawls out of me, seeks cover from the air. 'What happens to me?'

A pause, then: 'We don't know.'

'What do you mean, *we* don't know?' My voice cracks, the dam breaks. 'Isn't I.R.I.S. capable of locating everything across time by its heat signature? That's how it finds EO's. Or did I misunderstand?'

'No, you're right,' he responds firmly. 'It should be able to find you. But it can't. Or at least it couldn't when I was there.' He looks down, inhales. 'Elsie, when I say *we* don't know, I mean the entire future doesn't know. You just...*disappear*. From time. Your records are in perfect condition for twenty-two years, right up until November 24, and then poof. No data. We don't know if it's because we figured out a way to bring you back home, or whether...well, let's just say that if Dr Ross wanted to...erase the problem altogether, there are ways she could do it which would comply with POHS and also be completely untraceable, even with I.R.I.S. And she could argue that, because known history is that you vanish, she's not altering anything.

She's not in violation. And these preview sessions she's giving you, they might be leading you straight into her trap.'

'But you're saying I'm her *daughter*.' My pitch rises, ungraceful, uncaring. The assassination quip has shrivelled and died in my stomach. 'She wouldn't get rid of me just because the science fits.'

'It hasn't stopped her so far, has it?' He leans forward again, puts a hand lightly on my arm. The scar from I.R.I.S. pulses beside his thumb. 'But listen: that's *not going to happen*. I'm here to make sure of it.'

'It was supposed to be a joke,' I say weakly, tears forming but not falling, not here, not yet. November 24 is *this Sunday*.

'And it would have been pretty funny,' he says, smiling bitterly, 'if it weren't true.'

I look back down at the scar in my elbow, and the urge washes over me—grab the knife resting on the plate, drive it down into the skin, get it out, get it out.

'Nope,' I say. 'I'm done with this bullshit. I don't care anymore.'

'Else, wait.'

'I'm going home,' I say, loudly enough that a few faces shift towards us, their gazes burning. 'If you want me to come in and work tomorrow, you're going to need a damn good apology. Otherwise, unless you have some *serious proof*, I quit, and you can leave me the fuck alone.'

'You want proof?' he asks. He's stood up with me, and his arm twitches as if desperate to reach for mine. We freeze in stalemate for one second, two.

'Yes,' I answer. 'I want proof. Rock-hard. Undisputable.'

'Okay. Then I have something to show you. But please, Else, take the couch at mine.'

'I don't—'

'Please?'

#

I convince myself that it's too late for me to go anywhere else. The leather is sweat-sticky and I peel myself off it in patches in the morning, having learned, much too late, to sleep on top of the blanket instead of under it, letting the old fleece save me from the leather. It's not needed, anyway; it's a second-floor space and the heat infests my brain like termites, chewing apathy through all the walls. I toss and turn and dream about the future and forget where I am when I wake up. In those few moments before the colours become shapes, before Apoch wordlessly

sets a coffee cup from the Markets on the table, I could be anywhere, and my body seizes. Only later, when I remember everything, do I realise that I'm tensing in preparation of being back there. Or forward there, depending on how you look at it. Dr Ross is in the linings of the couch, the grooves of the coffee table, waiting for me. Time is passing.

But Apoch is waiting for me too—and after I've had my first sip of coffee, he smiles and says, 'I would like to show you that proof now, if you're up for it.'

He's holding a key, and I know what it's for even before he kneels in front of the coffee table. Turns out I was right; it is full of paper. A face-down envelope on the right hand side; a large bound book on the left. I absentmindedly reach for the envelopes first, but he cuts me off, lifting out the book and almost thrusting it at me.

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to Spacetime:*

*Single-Electron Theory and Ionic Reversion as a Basis for the Transportation of Else Objects*

*by Dr A. N. Ross, PhD (King's College, London)*

The cover is black with white text, simple, as though actively trying not to catch the eye. Surely a book about time travel would at least have a galaxy print on it, or a picture of Einstein, or David Tennant, or something? It's almost disappointing. I flip a couple of pages to read the publication details, just for the hell of it. *First ed. distributed January 2044. Second ed. distributed March 2047, incl. Appendix B: The Establishment of Section Twelve and the 2046 Preservation of Historical Stability Bill, J. Garson.*

'Just in case you still didn't believe me,' he says.

'Is that a Douglas Adams reference?'

'I said she's an evil scientist. I never said she doesn't read.'

The margins are nearly destroyed with handwriting, the pens three or four different colours, but the handwriting consistent. He's been carrying this around with him the whole time.

'How did you...'

'I sent it back through,' he says, 'right before I went. I figured, hey, I'm already in extreme violation for bringing myself—might as well bring a book. And at the time I thought that if I could understand more of how her brain worked, I might be able to understand what she was planning. Unfortunately, it's only confused me more. Jesus, there is a lot of wank in here. I might be the only person who's ever read the whole thing.'

I turn to the inside of the cover and stare at the author photo, at the face of the woman who supposedly brought me into the world and may take me out of it. Here, she is a little softer, a little warmer. The next few years must do something terrifying to her. As she smiles up at me, a thought occurs.

‘What if you coming here has changed it?’ Hope flickers out of nothing. ‘What if when you arrived, some kind of...I don’t know, butterfly effect happened, and that cancelled out my disappearance?’

‘I thought you said it was all bullshit?’

‘Humour me.’

He nods. ‘I did think of that, and you’re absolutely right, me being here will make a change of some kind. But I don’t think so. I think I would have been told.’

‘How? By who?’

Apoch doesn’t answer, only takes the book from me. But a sadness crosses his face, a heaviness which surprises me, convinces me to drop the subject.

‘You can look at this anytime,’ he says, ‘but you can’t take it with you, okay? I don’t think I have to explain to you the dangers of the time machine being invented twenty-five years early.’

‘Sure. Absolutely.’

The tone of my voice makes his sadness retreat; now he frowns and asks, ‘What’s your problem now?’

‘Look, it’s impressive,’ I gesture to the book, ‘but it’s not exactly proof beyond reasonable doubt, is it? It’s not very hard to get a book printed with the wrong year on it. And anyway, won’t books have died out by this point? That’s what everyone says. The future’s not going to be using paper!’

‘It’s not paper, it’s...Jesus Christ, you are just as stubborn as your father.’ He takes a deep, steadying breath, and changes tactics. ‘Else, *why* would I be trying to convince you of all this, if it wasn’t real? What would be the point? You’re doubtful, I understand that. It would be strange if you weren’t. But if you’re so sure, then explain what you’ve seen. Explain how I knew about things before you told me.’

A car honks from the street below; I cross my arms and stare at a spot on the floor, frustrated by the silence in my head.

‘Promise me,’ he says, ‘you’ll come up and read this on your lunch break? Bits of it won’t make any sense, but it might at least convince you to trust—no, not now.’ He steps backwards, away from my outstretched arms. ‘We don’t have the time.’

‘Do you mean that as a joke?’

‘No,’ he replies, and locks the book back away. The envelope disappears with it. ‘I just mean that the shop opens in twenty minutes, it’s going to take you longer than that. We should head downstairs.’

‘The shop? We’re going to...open the shop?’ *You’re telling me I’m going to disappear on Sunday and now I’m supposed to sell antiques?*

‘Well, there’s no point in just waiting around for the end, is there? And besides, there’s nothing we *can* do. We don’t know what’s coming. We just have to be ready for it when it does.’

#

At around ten-thirty, Jared comes to visit, and it seems as surprising to him as it is to me. He’s on his way past the front door, business suit tailored around him, suitcase in hand, and just happens to look in. Seeing me, he does a double-take—as if he didn’t walk me here last night, the prick—and, after a moment’s hesitation, steps inside, approaches with a cocked head, like I look a hell of a lot like the girl he thinks I am, but he’s not quite sure.

It’s only when we’re standing a metre apart, with the counter between us, that he makes the decision to enter the situation and say, ‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ I say back, a little too perky, customer service voice still switched on. I’ve launched myself into it; it seems the only way to go. If I exist only for the customer, then I will not exist as an Else Object, and the whole damn mess will go away. Maybe *that’s* what happens to me on the seventh: I achieve peak Customer Service and lose myself.

He pauses, then asks, ‘How are you feeling?’

It takes me a while to realise he’s talking about the gig. It feels like it happened years ago. ‘I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Hell of a night, wasn’t it?’ He smiles, and the gesture is odd. A customer near us discreetly looks us both over, clearly imagining something entirely incorrect. I recall the feeling of his hand on my bare back. It sticks out in my mind, more vivid than the taste of beer, or the propulsion of vomit.

I cough lightly. ‘Can I interest you in any antique collectables?’

‘Oh, nah,’ he replies quickly, looking around, like he’s only just realised where he is. ‘This kind of stuff isn’t my thing.’

‘Antiques?’

‘Not that, just y’know. Homewares. That’s Rachel’s area.’

I believe that. I imagine their house, straight out of a catalogue, complementary pastels and soft textures. I wonder if he has to take his shoes off before he goes inside. I wonder if they have pets, if they want to have any children; if the idea is fed to him subliminally, in inflections and seemingly absent-minded comments that will eventually make him think it’s his idea, to make this little thing that looks like him, who he can teach to kick a football.

‘Elsie?’

I’m staring. His eyes are so blue you can’t look away, so blue you forget about the rest of him, which is decidedly mediocre and forgettable. In the day time, his nose is more pronounced, his arms thinner, his skin paler. His hair clings more desperately to his head, as though, just behind my sight, more and more of his bare scalp is beginning to peek through.

He opens his mouth, to likely say goodbye, but then his phone rings, loud and obnoxious. I see Apoch, beside the fine china, wince at the suddenness.

‘Hey babe,’ he croons into the phone. ‘Nah, I’m not—nah, I ran into Elsie. Yeah. Yeah, at work.’ He rolls his eyes at me, and I don’t know how to feel about it. Again, I remember the feel of his hand on my back, the way it seemed to make my organs stiffen. Heart and lungs inhabiting the same atomic coordinates, legs and torso fused together. A vacuum-sealed person. ‘I don’t know! It’s not my business, is it? Ugh, fine.’ He pulls the phone away from his ear. ‘You’re staying at ours tonight. She wants to play nurse.’

Behind him, a young woman and her mother wander into the shop, making the bell in the doorway tinker. Apoch, engaged with another customer, smiles at them and says he’ll be there in a minute if they need anything. In my periphery the younger woman nods, then says something to her mother and they wander over to the antique chairs. Her voice dances through the room and wrenches my gaze away from Jared; it wraps me up and throws me off the top of a skyscraper; it plummets me into the earth and out the other side, into orbit. It’s Arabic.

‘It’s a futon,’ says Jared.

The young woman catches my eye and steps over. I forget Jared for a moment and smile at her, at the familiar sight of her, the hair that looks like mine, the skin that looks like mine, the words that might come from her, the *I am you*, the *I might even be from Egypt too*, or *somewhere nearby*, the *come with me and learn about yourself*, the—

She asks a question – or at least I assume it’s a question, because she’s still speaking Arabic.

‘Oh, sorry.’ My hearts freeze over. ‘I don’t—’



‘Sorry,’ she cuts me off, ‘I—oh. It is fine.’

She smiles reassuringly, and goes back to her mother, but the damage is done. They leave the store and the doorbell is a violent goodbye, and it all hurts in a way that is both loneliness and jealousy, in a way that makes me feel inexplicably small.

‘*Elsie.*’

‘Huh?’ I break out of my trance.

‘It’s a futon.’

‘What’s a futon?’

He blinks. ‘It’s, er, a kind of bed—’

‘I *know* what a futon is. I mean, sorry, I zoned out. What were you saying?’

His eyebrows furrow in either frustration or amusement. Probably both. ‘*Our* couch. Is a futon. But honestly, it’s heaven just as a couch. Should be, for twelve-hundred fucking dollars. But doesn’t matter, I’ve got a client meeting to get to. Rach will be back from four-ish. Go or don’t go. I’d best be off.’ He pauses, turns, then as an afterthought says: ‘Glad to see you up and about.’

He leaves as unexpectedly as he came, and after a few moments the woman Apoch’s been helping walks over, cradling a handful of silver jewellery, visibly pleased with her find. I imagine the jewellery on her social media half an hour from now, to the admiration, the jealousy, of all her friends.

‘Found everything you were looking for?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes,’ she beams. ‘Thank you.’

What a luxury, to have found what you’re looking for.

#

‘Hey, sweetheart.’ Mum is cheerful, but sounds tired. ‘Did you enjoy Jared’s concert?’

‘Yeah, the gig was fun. I stayed at Rachel’s afterwards.’ From the other side of the store, Apoch looks pointedly at me, and I shrug. It’s half true, I guess; it will be true enough in a few hours that I can squint at it, make it work.

‘Oh, good. Good for you to get out, get your mind off your friend leaving.’ A quiet sigh. ‘Listen, it’s been a long day so I’m gonna pick us up some hot dogs and ice-cream, and let’s watch something horrific on TV to match the calorie count. Sound good?’

I swallow. ‘I’m actually...I’m going to stay at Rach’s again tonight, if that’s cool. We want to catch up some more.’ The guilt arrives with the silence and I add hastily, ‘If you’d rather I didn’t...’

‘Oh, don’t be silly,’ she cuts me off. ‘Two nights in a row, Rach will love it. Actually, would you mind, she’s been wanting me to take the old family scrapbook, I think she wants to do a board for the wedding or something.’

‘Sure, I’ll go grab it in a bit.’

‘Thank you.’ A pause. ‘I love you.’

‘Love you too, Mum.’

There’s something horrible, something understanding, hovering in her voice, and I hang up with the ridiculous feeling that she knows exactly what’s going on.

#

It’s not paper.

He’s sent me up here with ramen from next door, advice to start at Chapter 4, and specific instructions to keep said ramen far away from Chapter 4—in a separate room, if possible—and I’ve trudged up and unlocked the drawer, and ran my hand across the pages a few more times, and no, no, it isn’t paper, but no other word is taking its place, and I sit across the room slurping noodles, staring at its front cover, thinking about what it actually needs to be made of for me to believe what’s written in it.

*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Spacetime:*

*One-Electron Theory and Ionic Reversion as a Basis for the Transportation of Else Objects*

*by Dr A. N. Ross, PhD (King’s College, London)*

And on the next page:

*in collaboration with Dr J. M. Nasser, PhD (Al-Azhar University, Cairo)*

I smile at the name, what it conjures. Then, carried by a runaway thought, I get out my phone and Google the title, just in case. The lack of results doesn’t quite calm me, however, and the search *people who claim to be time travellers* is half typed before I turn off the screen and flip the phone over.

A. N. Ross.

‘Alexandra?’ I ask aloud. The room doesn’t answer me, so I try again: ‘Anita? Axiom?’  
*No*, the thought springs up, *she’s only twenty-five years into the future, she’s not going to have*

*that extreme a name. And shadowing that thought is a second, panicked one: you blaspheme, you don't believe it, so why does it matter what the A stands for? Might as well stand for Asshole.*

'Dr Asshole Nutcase Ross,' I say, and the doorbell answers faintly from downstairs. Ding ding, you've won the car behind Door Number Three! I laugh, and the wave of satisfaction brings with it a confidence. It doesn't matter what's in the book. The book can't touch me. A few minutes later, with only the dregs of the ramen left and the next half hour of my break hanging emptily in the air, I pick up the confidence and let it settle comfortably around my shoulders as I walk to the kitchen. As per Apoch's request, I wash and dry my hands, and then I turn curiously to the book's first and second chapters. Why am I not allowed to read these ones? But as my gaze skims across the beginning of Chapter One, I realise that it's less a question of reading, and more one of understanding.

*Chapter One: Underlying Physical Explanations of the Single-Electron Universe as First Hypothesised by John Wheeler and Richard P. Feynman (1940)*

Thick blocks of text are punctuated by diagrams featuring what *must* be size 2 font, and flanked by equations which only very occasionally feature a recognisable symbol. One of them is composed entirely of letters; this one is circled, and accompanied by five question marks in angry red pen. Evidently, Apoch hasn't had any luck either.

I flick ahead to Chapters Two and Three, and the rest of my comprehension skills fall out the back of my brain.

*Chapter Two: Characteristics of Single-Electron Theory which Correlate with a Potential for Ionic Reversion of Object Particles*

*Chapter Three: Research and Practical Aims of the Patented Machine I.R.I.S.*

Turning back to the contents page, I discover that these chapters combine to two hundred and seventy-two pages, and promptly decide that I'm quite alright with skipping the exposition, and that I'm sure I'll pick up the plot later. In the same moment, I catch the title of Chapter Four. The room hushes around me, the furniture tensing in preparation. *There's some nominative determinism for you.* Apoch's words from last night sound again in my head, but

only now do they reach out and take hold. My name stares up at me from the page; a familiar arrangement of letters completely out of context. A fantastical origin story. Or is it? What came first, the chicken or the egg? The person or the time machine?

My fingers shake as I search for the beginning of the chapter, and a voice, very small and very calm, begins to remind me of the scar Apoch has that matches mine, and that he not only knows what happened in my hallucination, but he appears in it, and that my hip hurts as though it really *did* bang into something, and that no-one, *no-one*, would do this just to fuck with me, there are so many other ways, and *easier* ways, ways that would trap me like a starving mouse, so if he isn't trying to fuck with me, and neither of us are actually crazy, then...

I think of the half-typed search on my phone. The foot dangling over the edge of the rabbit hole, waiting to fall. Wanting to fall?

Who came first, the person or the time machine?

'You came first,' I tell myself, 'because you are the thing that exists.'

And in chunks of paragraph, swirling and overlapping with Dr Ross's explanation in the courtroom, the bits I know peeling away, the bits I don't holding fast... in out-of-order vignettes, I read.

And by God, I fall.

#### *Chapter Four: The History and Origin, or Lack Thereof, of Else Objects*

*(For the purposes of clarification, it is necessary to note that the uses of "we" and other collective pronouns across this chapter signifies work conducted by myself and Dr Joseph Nasser, unless otherwise stated.)*

*...on July 10, 2045, a prototype of I.R.I.S determined that it is possible to create a molecular link between the Electron's geographical and temporal position at a single coordinate, and a collection of the Electron's previous, or future, coordinates, i.e. those which compile to a single object mass. In creating this link, we sought first to sustain it, and then to manipulate it; our hypothesis was that if the link could indeed be controlled, then the dismantling of that link could also be controlled. By providing the prototype with several specific imperatives (see pp. 128-9) within a controlled hypothetical environment, we established that it was indeed possible to program the aforementioned "collection" of the Electron's past and future selves (the Object) to sever the link in the instant that the travelling Electron reached a certain coordinate.*

*In short, it became theoretically possible, after programming, for a physical object to independently*

- a) attach itself to the Electron's current spacetime coordinate*
- b) travel with the Electron across its spacetime trajectory*
- c) detach itself from the Electron at a specific spacetime coordinate, erase all traces of our program, and cease all communications*

*In our 2046 International Lecture Series (see p. xi) detailing the results of the experiment, Dr Nasser referred to this process as Hitchhiking. The term is now in official usage as the means by which an object is sent back in time.*

*...as explained in the previous chapter, the prototype had earlier confirmed our suspicions that the trajectory of the electron was random, and therefore writing an algorithm that would predict this trajectory across linear time and geographical space was impossible. The task was then to create a map for these co-ordinates as we observed them, by following the Electron on its journey and recording and compiling data. We created a second version of the prototype—which absorbed all progress and corrected early developmental oversights—and tasked it with the sole purpose of mapping the Electron's trajectory, as well as recording any emergent patterns or unexpected characteristics. This version was entirely self-functioning, and gave us the freedom to continue our original experiments with the other version...*

*...after six months of reviewing the data, it became apparent that there was, in fact, a correlation between particular points in spacetime, by way of an as-yet unobserved heat signature created in objects by the position of the Electron in spacetime...it became possible, through the algorithm's method of sifting data, to read the molecular signature of an object and know its exact origin: not only to the year, but to the second: not only to the country, but to the centimetre. The signature, which behaves most similarly to a heat signature, despite the absolute irrelevance of object temperature, is revolutionary not only to our understanding of molecular identities as pertains to theoretical physics (see Chapter 7), but also to our identification of the Else Object.*

*We drew two conclusions after analysing this data. First, that objects of a certain point in linear time emit a certain signature identity, which allows us to know where it comes from. Second, and most important; in a data pool of sixteen trillion coordinates, we discovered that twenty-seven of these signatures were out of place: that in fact, their signatures instead bore almost identical resemblance to those of our present day. The only conclusion we could*

*possibly make is that these objects arrived in the past as a result of our present research; we have sent them Hitchhiking, and what we are observing is the consequence of as-yet undecided-upon actions, or the effect before the cause. There is nothing particularly special about these objects; apart from their collective inanimate nature, they vary widely in terms of their colour, shape, function, and location in history. We have, for instance, observed a pearl necklace in fourteenth-century France which derives from the Electron's coordinate at 9:13am on August 19, 2050. Similarly, a pair of socks in the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun bears the signature of 1:58am on December 29, 2053. These objects are not unique in their construction, nor are their effects on the timeline in any way substantial. There seems no real motive to us having sent them in the first place; but we mustn't rule out the possibility that their appearance in these new locations has erased the problems which caused our initial sending of them. Furthermore, we also mustn't rule out that this may not be our first attempt to transport these objects; that perhaps our first linear transgression created a new fork in the road, a fork we have been repeating with each new discovery...*

*Nevertheless, whichever theory of worlds and timelines is the favourite of the reader, these objects are there, and at this moment in time our research is the only possible explanation for them being there. Therefore, in order to maintain our current and exact chronology, we must continue with this research. We have a unique and critical responsibility to fulfill our half of the relationship between action and consequence...*

*...and so, in February 2046, Dr Nasser and myself ceased the majority of our experiments with the prototype, obtained the patent for the second version of the prototype, and christened it I.R.I.S., meaning, of course, Ionic Reversion in Spacetime. There are more accurate names for what the program performs; Dr Nasser and myself, however, decided (in one of our more sentimental moments) that the name of the first time travel machine should reflect the enormity of the occasion. It is, after all, one of those scientific achievements which makes the laws of nature appear almost fantastical. After some deliberation and experimentation with acronyms, we decided on I.R.I.S. because Iris was, in Greek mythology, the messenger of the Olympian Gods. It is satisfying to us, the thought of our machine being a messenger across time, delivering objects which—if any person should witness the moment of their appearance—might very well appear to have been heaven-sent.*

*...the name 'Else Object' derives from an intention to be neither too romantic nor too clinical. Given that I.R.I.S. was jointly coined, and that Dr Nasser owns the rights to the term*

*‘Hitchhiking’, we decided it was only fair that I should have the responsibility of naming the Else Objects. My professional opinion was that to use the term ‘Else Thing’ or ‘Else Entity’ creates the potential for it to one day encompass a living creature, and the effects of time travel on the central nervous system is as yet unexplored, and furthermore stands in direct violation with the laws of POHS (outlined in full in Appendix B, and referred to in Chapters 6 and 7). Likewise, to use the term Lost Object would be to insinuate that we do not know where it belongs, or where it has come from. We know the answers to these questions, and we acknowledge that they are different; where one has come from is not necessarily where one belongs, nor should it be. The Object is not Lost, nor is it Misplaced, but it is some-when...Else. On a more personal note, I also enjoy the synchronicity of the relationship between a machine named after a Greek goddess, and a series of objects with what could be a woman’s name—and such a lovely name at that. In my less professional moments, I think of I.R.I.S. sending an Else Object back through time with all the love and care of a mother and her child...*

‘Else. Elsie.’

He’s standing in the doorway, in the exact spot that he was last night, but he doesn’t make any move towards me this time, as if there’s some weight in the air between us, too dangerous for him to wade through. Suspicion pools in my stomach.

‘What’s going on?’ I snap the book shut and place it next to me. ‘You need me to start back early?’

‘No, I...actually, ugh.’ He points awkwardly to the clock on the wall beside him. ‘It’s two thirty.’

‘Oh, *shit*.’ I leap to my feet and turn to grab the book, but the blood has rushed into my brain and the hand that steadies my head comes away wet, salt-stained. ‘I’m sorry, I must have lost track of time.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘I can stay later if you—’

‘Jesus, stop.’

‘I don’t know why I’m crying!’ But I almost laugh as I say it, in the face of the absurdity—because I *do* know why I’m crying, and by the sudden look on his face, the grin stretching warmly across it, he knows why too.

Nothing in particular has pushed me, but the walls of the rabbit hole are rushing past me anyway.

I believe him.

#

The bruise began as a tenderness, nothing more. I imagine it occurring in my sleep, the result of a violent dream, or of Micra shifting the slightest bit too aggressively next to me. But it's turned green, the shade of weeds and basil, and it spreads down and out from the bony tip of my hip bone, a veiny, disfigured hand stretching out for my knee. Soon it will be purple, a colour so pretty and eye-catching that I will consider taking a fine liner and tracing geometric shapes on top of it, turning it into a watercolour tattoo, the kind that impossibly beautiful hipster girls online now have, that are photographed and filtered in such a way that you could not believe it was ever just skin, or that it could ever really be a bruise.

Apoch lets me leave early—insists on it, in fact—and half an hour later I am back home. In the doorway, Mikes climbs halfway up my leg with excitement, barrelling into the tenderness on her first try. I lock myself in the bathroom to get away from her, and take a slow, methodical shower, running my fingers lightly over my hip bone every few minutes. This is the kind of bruise that comes with a story, that's never questioned or wondered about, that you can remember conceiving like a child. The cold knock of the courtroom's stair rail, right in the darkest spot, is accompanied by vivid recollections, snapshot details. For the first time, I treat it like a memory instead of a dream; tentatively, at first, and then with all the vigour of someone recovering from amnesia. *Yes! That's how it was, it all makes sense now!*

I pull on shorts and a T-shirt, and pack the cleaner of my work outfits in a backpack, and then head to Mum's study: a small, messy room consisting mostly of a desk, a computer, and a series of mismanaged book shelves. Mum puts all her meticulousness into her profession, which leaves very little to go around for the rest of her life. The walls are mostly animal science textbooks, although a line of Liane Moriarty novels stand out like they're printed in neon. The family scrapbook is wedged next to a David Attenborough biography, and seems to have been there for a while, judging by the dust flung airside when I dig it out.

I walk over to the desk and stare down at the drawers, then slowly, quietly, I slide open the top drawer. A stapler, a hole punch, an assortment of pens likely dead and dying. I've seen her pull them out one by one, scribble maniacally on a sticky note, find one with some ink left, and then drop the rejects all back into the drawer, a pattern to be identically repeated the next day. I close that drawer and open the one below it; notebooks and manila folders named mundane things: 'Clientele', 'Operations Invoices', 'Medical Stocktake'. Things that are supposed to be here, and of course they are here, of course the only copy of my adoption papers



is framed in the lounge, of *course* there isn't a secret original right here on the top with that mysterious future heat signature that only I.R.I.S. can detect, or with a handwritten note paperclipped to the bottom on that strange paper-not-paper, *Dear Samantha, please take care of my abandoned kid, thanks very much, kind regards, Dr Ross.*

#

The beach winks through the window; the pier extends halfway to the horizon before the view slides smoothly into nothing but ocean and a slowly descending sun. Jetty Square is packed with tourists, families, old couples sitting at tables slurping coffee and not looking at each other; dog-walkers, skateboarders, joggers; children screaming, running, kicking footballs; ice cream of all flavours melting out of cones, dripping onto burning concrete, the kind of surface that I can feel even through my shoes, that makes me walk more quickly.

I weave through the crowd, shielding my eyes against the low sun. I don't come to Glenelg that often, and every time I do come it feels like I'm meeting the place all over again, like this isn't even Adelaide, but an odd little city of its own. Jared grew up around here, I learned, in a family of lawyers so middle-class that they make he and Rachel now look like dole bludgers. I imagine what his parents thought, when they met Rachel. Whether they were happy or not, whether she fit into their daughter-in-law shaped hopes, whether she looked half like the grandchildren they dreamed about.

Thankfully, Rachel and Jared live only a few blocks from Jetty Road, so I only half to walk another ten minutes. By the time I get there, I'm sweating, red-faced and wishing I'd gone home first and taken my car; sure, the air con is useless, but surely sitting in a sauna is better than walking on fire. Either way, I'm glad to arrive.

The house is large, modern, and surrounded by white picket fence. An actual white picket fence. They're literally living the dream. I stare at it for a few seconds, like always feeling the strange urge to laugh, before I come back to myself and undo the latch. The yard is big, simple but well-kept, no toys or water bowls strewn across it. They have a cat, Jupiter, I remember, but she appears in conversation so rarely that I often forget she exists, and I imagine she is the same in real life. Cats, in a highly suspicious, criminal fashion, know exactly how to erase all traces of themselves. It's a true skill, I decide. Who wouldn't want that superpower?

In the driveway is a pink Honda Jazz. One guess at who it belongs to. It seems pristinely kept, but as I scrutinise it I notice a single spot of bird shit on the windscreen. It can't be more than a couple of hours old. I imagine the moment it happened, the way it must have made

Rachel's teeth grind; how her first instinct would have been to pull over and wipe it off. It's odd that it's still there, that she has left this dirty windscreen in her open driveway, for all the world to see. The only explanation is that it happened after she arrived home, while she's been indoors and blissful unaware.

'Elsie, honey!'

She sounds so much like Mum, so utterly parental. A second later she appears in the doorway, wearing a long white skirt and blouse, looking like she hasn't spent the whole day corralling children but has, in fact, been bathed and pampered for several hours. It angers me, this perfection. It makes me want to mess something up, as I hug her; it makes me want to hug harder so that some of my sweat gets into the silk. Compared to her, I am slimy, unpolished, broken. But I feel the way she squeezes me—sincerely, warmly—and immediately feel bad, and hug her properly.

'Mum said you wanted this.' I hold out the scrapbook, the sun catching the bookshelf dust on it that hasn't yet been freed.

'Oh, *excellent*, thank you so much,' she croons, and then, 'come in, come in,' and we do just that.

#

She makes me a coffee, not from a teaspoon of Moccona and some hastily boiled tap water, but from a real espresso machine, the kind that grinds the beans for you and fills the kitchen with that exquisite earthiness. I close my eyes and inhale, and it's almost as good as drinking the end result.

The couch is, in fact, much comfier as just a couch, like Jared promised. It certainly beats Apoch's couch, but in his defence this definitely cost more, and I am afraid to touch it, let alone sleep on it.

'I'm sorry about last night,' I say as she hands me the mug.

'It's okay,' she says. 'But what did you want to be at work for? That was so left field.'

'It's not important,' I say. 'But it all worked out. I...I just needed to talk to my boss about something, and I ended up sleeping on his couch.' All true so far.

'Didn't he think it was a bit weird?'

'No,' I throw back, defensive, a little harsher than I'd planned.

'Okay.' She frowns slightly, then lets it go. 'Well, I guess it's nice that he would go so far for an employee.'

*Oh, you have no fucking idea.*

‘But you’re okay?’ she presses. ‘You’re not feeling woozy?’

‘I’m fine...’

‘Because you’re not supposed to go to sleep if you think you’re concussed, it’s really...’

‘I’m *fine!* Can we drop it?’

She flinches this time, and as her eyes trail down to my bruise I find myself wishing desperately that it were cool enough to wear pants.

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ she asks.

‘Not at the moment, no.’

‘Really? Any casual...you know...’

‘*No.*’

She sits for a moment. ‘Is Mum seeing anyone?’

‘Rachel, come right out and ask it.’ She retreats, wavering on the edge, and then draws herself back in at the last minute. She’s the kind of person who doesn’t really like to *talk* about things, likes to sweep the important parts under the rug and then talk all day about how pretty the rug is. She would never in a million years stand up in the middle of a party, cocktail in one hand, cheese and cracker in the other, and ask: *what’s the rug hiding? Are you being abused?*

‘Elsie,’ she says, all flustered, ‘I just care about you. That’s all.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ I say. ‘You sound like Mum.’ And in an instant I am twelve again, and she is seventeen, and my teachers are looking at me and seeing her, and my friends are coming over just to sneak into her room, and I am an unripe version, an unnecessary second draft. I stand and walk away, out of the lounge room and down the hallway to the back of the house, places I’ve never been in. The doors are all ajar, offering glimpses of little worlds: a master bedroom, a smaller bedroom made spacious with pastels. A guest bedroom perhaps—but then why wouldn’t she have offered it to me?—and it reminds me so much of the courtroom and the office building that I don’t go into either. I just keep walking. The house is new; someone else built it, but they have their personalities bleached into the floorboards. Rachel is in the curtains, the picture frames, the red and purple pegs clinging to wire, coiled to look like a rose over the washing machine in the laundry. But Jared is in the differences, in the *lack* of Rachel. The state-of-the-art dryer, as opposed to the clothesline. The framed band photo on the hallway table. The electric toothbrush. The razor sitting proudly on the edge of the sink, aftershave beside it. A woman is here in the colour palette, but oh yes, a man is here too.

I perch on the edge of the bathtub, thinking about the smooth, rich coffee I’d stupidly left in the living room. Down the other end of the house, I hear a rustle, and then a series of

slow clicks. She's coming after me. But is she wearing heels? In her *own home*? I'm disgusted with her all over again; so childishly mad, in the literal sense, that when I notice the open bin beside the toilet I half go over, hoping for something even more disgusting than me, something secret I can blackmail her with later. On the point of analysing the bin's contents, I realise the full depths to which I've sunk and decide never to revisit this moment ever again.

But it's too late. I've seen what's inside.

'Elsie,' she says through the door, and knocks gently.

There's the usual bin stuff. Scrunched tissues with unidentifiable smears that one should never analyse too closely; makeup removal pads; toilet paper wrapped loosely around tampons.

'Elsie, come out. I'm sorry.'

Shoved down into the depths of the bin, but not quite deep enough to hide; a pregnancy test. It's one of the kinds that don't use lines, but that gives the result in words to erase all doubt. They wouldn't have spent a few minutes making sure they were decoding the number of lines correctly. They would have just needed to read the cheery, bright *Not Pregnant* on the tiny screen.

She knocks again, and I stare at the door. I think about the room I walked past, the room I assumed was a guest room. The wash of pastels, the minimal decoration. The weight of it. The *emptiness*. I look through the door and I see Rachel, twenty-nine years old; most of her friends married, many of them mothers. I imagine her showing them around this house for the first time, opening the door to that room, smiling proudly at the *intent* of it, at the approval it garners, but underneath, the image of the negative pregnancy test in the bin. The flat stomach in the mirror; once so perfectly small, but now too small, too hollow. I remember when her first friend from high school became a teenage mother; how she talked about that baby, how when her best friend announced her pregnancy on social media she retreated to her bedroom for an hour, and came out with a face too raw, too pink, too happy.

I open the door and say, 'Let's not fight.'

Slightly startled, her hand still raised to knock again, she smiles and says, 'Come finish your coffee.'

She takes a thread of conversation and offers it to me, and I take it, and we pick up where we left off. The scrapbook, as Mum thought, will be burrowed through and dissected for a photo board on display at the wedding. Versions of family members that fit the aesthetic. Photos that include my tattoos, of which there are several, are hastily skipped. Instead, Rachel lands on an old favourite; the first ever picture of me, which now sits framed on the lounge room table, faded slightly from time and love. It's at my Nan's birthday dinner, her fifty-

seventh birthday, and her last, as it turned out. Me, small and lively, hands sunk deep into a bowl of chocolate ice cream, apparently impervious to the temperature. Mum's arms wrapped around me from behind, her head thrown back in laughter in response to some long-forgotten joke. Somewhere outside the frame, Rachel is nine and perfect—and outside the scrapbook, Rachel is twenty-nine and still perfect, although the significance of perfection is different now, a little hollower, a little lonelier.

I look at this photo, like I have several thousand times before, and the realisation jolts up my spine: I was three or four. Newly adopted, I know from listening to the anecdote over and over. I would still have had the future on me. Food particles in my teeth from a fruit tree which hadn't yet been planted. Skin cells infused with pre-existent oxygen. Water in my stomach from a cloud which, in the moment my little hands sunk into ice cream, was still part of a lake, or evaporating upwards.

Eventually, Rachel excuses herself to go grocery shopping at the Coles on Jetty Road, *you'll be alright here, yeah?, text if you need anything*, and suddenly I've got the only heartbeat in the house. I spend a while longer looking at the photo, unable to believe that I have passed for a normal baby. Then, needing a fast and effective distraction, I make myself spend the afternoon online, searching for any news of Lace's adventures in South Korea, because that's what I would have done, that's all I would have cared about if everything had been normal, *there's no point waiting around for the end, is there?*, and when my search comes up empty *she's busy she's busy and you care you definitely care that she's busy*

#

16:29

Sender: Elsie Wright

Recipient: Larissa Jeong

Do you remember my boss Jack? Turns out his name is Apoch—yeah, I know, like in *The Matrix*. Not even the weirdest thing about him, not by a long way. I guess since I'm not sending you this message, I can skip over the exposition. I don't know how to process the fact that I've been working for him this whole time, and he's never once said anything, he just waits until I find out myself and then he's all, *oh yeah, I guess I should mention I'm all tied up with your parents and you're going to vaporise at the end of the week?* What is that? Did he think he could fix it all himself without worrying me?

Strangest thing is, Lace—I still think he’s a good person, and I still trust him. There’s a voice in my head telling me be angry, but I don’t know, I just can’t get myself there. He’s the only one who actually came to get me, and the list of potential rescuers included both my parents, so I guess all my anger is being channelled in a different direction right now. Do you know what it’s like to be so furious that it sucks all the other emotions out of you? But the person you need to unleash it all on isn’t there, and won’t be for decades?

I’m not making sense anymore, I’m so tired, I don’t know why I keep writing these messages and then deleting them, it’s such a waste of time. I hope you’re having a good—actually, no. No. Hey, you know what, I found some more anger just for you. I hope you’re regretting everything and I hope you’re dreading Melbourne and I hope you’re buying flights back to Adelaide right as I’m typing this. So many things are happening right now and I’m scared and I need you here. Screw you.

Message Unsent

#

16:47

Sender: Elsie Wright

Recipient: Larissa Jeong

I’m sorry. I miss you.

Message Unsent

#

Soon after the messages are safely deleted, and with nothing better to do, I decide to have a shower. My second in a couple of hours, but the Jetty Road tram has demanded it—hormonal body odour from the feeble endings of the school rush, space-hogging plastic gripped by the clammy hands of early Christmas shoppers, spreading from the epicentre to the suburbs like a viral disease. I need seventeen showers, if I’m being honest.

In the middle of massaging some stolen shampoo into my scalp, with my body vulnerable and warm, the observation I've been avoiding seeps out of its cage and swallows me whole.

I am too calm. I am far, far too calm.

Maybe I'm in shock. Maybe my body is just taking the time to calibrate, to redefine itself. Surely even Albert fucking Einstein would need to take the day off, if someone had told him he wasn't supposed to be here and shortly wouldn't. I look down at my bruise again, run my fingers gingerly over the part which even since the last time I've touched it has darkened. Maybe this, too, will spread like a disease. Maybe this, too, will swallow me.

At the other end of the house, the front door bangs open. I think about the pregnancy test again, how different mine and Rachel's problems are. How difficult they would both be to explain; she's never been one for science fiction, and I've never been one for maternal instincts. How the best way to talk about these things to each other is to not talk about it. Not to let them fester, but to let them grow around each other like vines. Pull back the rug and let the secrets blink in the unfamiliarity of light. And then leave them be.

I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts that I don't hear the bathroom door open. I hear the zipper, though. Ready to chastise Rachel for thinking she can try to pee while I'm here, I slide open the shower door—but right as I do this, I remember that she was wearing a skirt.

'Elsie,' says Jared dumbly, naked from the waist up, his business pants around his ankles, sporting a giant erection. His eyes bulge into mine, and then, inevitably, they travel south.

'What the *fuck*?' I exclaim, slamming the door back across me.

'*Sorry!*' Clothes rustle; a zipper is hurriedly pulled back up. 'I thought you were—why are you here?'

'You invited me here, asshole!'

'No! I mean—fuck. I don't know.'

The bathroom door opens.

'Sorry. I...yeah.'

*Click.*

Water patters into floor tile, and the air is heavy-misted and unreliable.

#

*Search: people who claim to be time travellers*

*About 49,800,000 results (0.37 seconds)*

I tap the teabag once, then twice, against the inside of the mug, and then wrap it in a tissue. The only things in the room are my phone screen and the digital clock on the table; the moon hasn't found its way inside tonight. Upstairs, a set of footsteps gives way to the squeak of a bed spring, and the house falls into silence, and here, in the eye of the silence, in the centre of the universe, I read firstly about John Titor, whose name I already know. His forum posts claiming to be a time traveller, on a pit stop back to 2036 after acquiring an IBM computer system from the seventies, spawned such a cult that they reached mainstream media. He also claimed to be retrieving certain objects which were necessary for the survival of the future—and while this importance on objects piques my interest, Titor doesn't satisfy me. I don't know quite what I'm looking for, but I know I need to go beyond internet hoaxes. So I fold my legs underneath me, drink some more tea, and dig a little deeper.

I read about a man who, at an airport in Tokyo, insisted he was from a country that didn't exist—a country called Taured, which was validated by his passport, and which he claimed had existed for a thousand years in a location that, when he thrust a frustrated index finger at a map, turned out to be Andorra. The agents, understandably confused, confiscated his passport and put him in a heavily guarded hotel room for the night until they could figure out what to do with him. But in the morning, both he and his passport had vanished with no logical explanation. Did he go back to the future? Did someone come for him too, intent on fixing a paradox, righting a wrong? It makes my skin crawl, convinces me that I have already disappeared, in the same way that reading ghost stories at night make you convinced that your house, no matter how new, is haunted.

In hopes of shrugging off the feeling, I scroll down further and purposefully lose myself in a story about two women, Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain, who in 1901 visited the Palace of Versailles. While walking through the gardens on the way to the Petit Trianon, they found themselves temporarily surrounded by a scene long-gone. Around them were official-looking gentlemen in cornered hats, an eighteenth-century plough and farmhouse, a man suffering from smallpox, who graciously gave them directions to the Petit Trianon—and a young, blonde woman in an old-fashioned dress, sketching on the grass. Charlotte and Eleanor soon returned to the palace, where the farmhouse and people had all disappeared, and life again became that of 1901. But for the rest of their lives, Charlotte in particular insisted that they had entered some time slip, and that the woman she had seen sketching was Marie Antoinette.



## Wednesday

I dream that I am Charlotte, caught somewhere between the world I know and the world I have learned about in history books. Beside me, Eleanor is saying something, pointing to something, but I can't understand her, the syllables are individually familiar but they're falling all over themselves, and in the distance, the Petit Trianon rises and shrinks, rises and shrinks, and I'm so captivated by it that I don't notice the man with smallpox appearing, and his syllables are the same as Eleanor's but they fit together, and they begin talking, their hands gesturing wildly towards the garden in front of us—and suddenly I realise they're speaking Arabic, and as the man turns to point in a separate direction his violet suit is caught by the sun, perfectly creaseless. As he waves us on I try to call to him, but my body is moving forward on its own, and my vocal chords do not answer to me, not even when we reach the garden where Marie Antoinette is sketching, not even when she looks up at me and smiles, turns the paper so we can look at what she's drawn, not even when the paper is covered, corner to corner, with equations...

I wake up in a cold sweat, and two enormous yellow eyes are staring me down, floating completely detached in the darkness. *She's here*, screams my brain, *Death is here*, and I jump so violently that the eyes themselves screech, reeling back, getting smaller—and only when I see my backpack on the floor and the cold cup of tea on the table do I remember that it's Rachel's cup, Rachel's floor. And Rachel's cat, whose inspection of my face has been cut short by my conscious state, and who now curls at the other end of the couch, purposefully ignoring me.

'Sorry, Jupiter', I whisper. 'Bad dream. Won't be Googling again.'

Sitting up, I shake my head to clear out the confusion, and like a switch it awakens the desert that is my throat. On shaky legs, I walk over to the kitchen in search of a glass of water. But I've lost the sensation of my feet on the floor; I look down, I *see* my toes curling around the tufts of cream carpet, but they are someone else's feet, someone else's sister's carpet. Perhaps this is the dream instead. The feel of the tiles is similarly numb; when I open the cupboard to find a glass, my hip bangs against the benchtop, right against my bruise, in the way that would usually cause a sharp intake of breath, a brace against the delayed but vicious pain. Instead, I just look down at myself and think, *you should be hurting. Why aren't you hurting?* Did something happen to me, the last time I visited the future? Did I leave my pain receptors there—or, worse, some other, larger part of me, that I haven't yet realised is missing?

I walk over to the sink, twist the all the way to hot, then hold the palm of my hand underneath until the skin is visibly red. Nothing happens.

*Why aren't you hurting?*

'What the fuck are you doing?'

The voice electrocutes my nerve endings, sends haphazard jolts of water spilling over the sink, hitting my shoulder. At last, as though the shock brought me back to life, I can feel it—brief, vibrant pain, flowering across my collarbone. I am here again. I am alive again.

'Oi,' the voice continues, and I turn around.

'Just getting a glass of water,' I say, my voice rasping on cue.

'A glass of boiling water? You know there are kettles right?'

'Yeah.' I laugh. It sidles out, checks the air first.

Jared's pyjama shorts are slightly too big for him, settling at the very lowest, boniest parts of his hips. A thin trail of hair falls from his belly button to disappear beneath, so dark that it makes his skin almost translucent by comparison. I become suddenly, horrifically aware that I'm only wearing a T-shirt. The bottom half of me shivers, even in the warm.

'S'been nice having you stay here a bit, you know,' he says. 'Nice to have another chick in the house.'

I turn around and flip the tap back to cold, willing the water to come faster, willing my T-shirt to thread itself longer by six inches. 'Yeah,' I reply over my shoulder, 'it has.'

I glance back with words poised in my throat—*did you need something?*—but they fizzle out as his gaze snaps back up, from my arse to my face. Too long we are frozen there, pathless, me slick with night-sweat, his eyes black. Then, suddenly, he walks over to the fridge, and the suctioned *pop* of the door releases my breath. The water is finally cold, and I thrust my glass underneath.

'You know we're trying for a kid?' he asks, far too casually, and drops two pieces of bread into the toaster.

The image of the pregnancy test returns, vivid, horrible. 'Yeah, I do, actually.'

'I'm surprised she's said anything. She never wants to talk about it anymore.'

I gulp the water down in seconds, but my mouth still cries out for more, and, furious at myself for still needing the sink, needing to be here, I turn back to the faucet. Behind me, there's silence, and I shrivel beneath fear that he's looking at me again—but when I push myself to check, his gaze is stuck to the side of the toaster.

‘It’s just that, fuck, Rachel...she’s so sad, all the time afterwards. After we, you know. It’s so *organised*. Gotta fuck at this day, this hour, I just, Christ...I just want to be spontaneous. It’s only natural.’

The second inhale of water is not enough—but it will do, and the glass clangs too loudly into the sink.

‘It only natural, right?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I’m going to bed. Enjoy your toast.’

I cross the room and the couch angles into sight—empty, seductive—but Jared has said something as I’ve moved, and I’ve heard enough of it to pause, to turn and ask: ‘what was that?’

His eyes peel off the toaster and meet mine. ‘I said,’ he answers quietly, ‘I know you’re the wrong person to ask about natural anyway.’

‘What...what are you getting at?’

‘Oh, it’s just that...Rach told me, you know. About your friend, the one who went back to China or whatever. I know your deal, Elsie, I know you swing the other way.’ He smiles. ‘Or is it both ways?’

His eyes are bulging with something monstrous, and there is too much of his skin in this space, too much white, too much hair, too much, too much.

‘Fuck off,’ I say, my voice cold and shaking. The toasts pops up, distracting him briefly, and I slide out of the room. But the couch isn’t far enough anymore, and the bathroom calls me in with its silence and its door lock which slides across with reassuring volume. I sit there on the closed toilet seat, breathing methodically through my nose until the slow pad of his footsteps follows him upstairs, wait a few more minutes just to be sure, and then I creep back down to the couch and crawl under as many layers as possible. My phone screen says 39 degrees; the air hangs like hammocks, stuffed full with lounging, sunbathing heat.

Dawn finds me before sleep does. Quickly, in case either of the upstairs inhabitants are on the verge of waking up, I pull my jeans back on and pack my bag. On my way past the kitchen, I pause to scrawl a note on a post-it, just enough to avoid questions:

*R—g ot asked to work early. Thanks for having me! E x*

Around me, the kitchen looms with last night’s conversation, and I am desperate to not be here for a while, but as I turn the photo frame on the bench, the one showing Jared’s band calls me over. And latches me into places. Stops time. Leaps onto my already flammable skin and sets me on fire, from the tips of my fingers to my innermost veins, my most secret electrons.

Without a second thought, I lunge for the photo and take it with me out of the house, the display side facing firmly away so that it remains no more dangerous than a mere possibility, a framed Schrodinger's cat that will stay alive until confirmed otherwise by the only person who can.

#

I remember coming here with Lace once, in July or August of last year, just after her mid-year exams finished. It's always quieter in winter; the people are indoors, the leaves have all finished falling, the birds keep their distance. Even the bats are calmer, less inclined towards becoming sky tornadoes in the evenings. She'd emerged on the other side of two weeks of cramming, the palest she'd ever been, with no memory of the sun, no concept of grass or bark or breeze. Needing to be elsewhere from the stress of looming job hunting, the pull of the future. Long before she'd increased her search to interstate, before the concept of Melbourne even arose. Back when the only pressing loss was that of autumn, of the sight of orange leaves flung upward in the wheels of passing cars, and the hush of the post-Fringe city, the early days of cultural hibernation.

I'd bought her a hot chocolate, because it was exactly the kind of day for hot chocolate. We'd walked into the greenhouse wrapped in scarves which were soon tugged off and scrunched in one hand. The temperature was kept tropical for the butterflies, we'd read on one of the wooden signs, and we'd frowned and commiserated at the fact that we were not also butterflies, that no-one had kept the world warm just for us. *But butterflies only live for a day*, Lace had said. *What's the point? What's the point of being warm if you're temporary?*

*We're all temporary*, I'd wanted to say, but it sounded like a cliché, so I shrugged instead.

Today we have the opposite problem. Today, the birds perch in plain sight and look down at us, as if to say, *this is your fault*. I send silent apologies up to them.

I've bought the drinks again this time, berry smoothies in plastic cups that make my hands drip with condensation. Each sip is like heaven in my veins, making incremental repairs to the damage caused by no sleep. I melt into the bench seat, relieved at the presence of something solid, something to keep me going in the wake of the long-evaporated adrenaline. A passing jogger tilts a concerned head, but Apoch says nothing. Apoch has said nothing since I handed him the photo frame and pointed to the face second from the right.

‘I went forward again last night,’ I say, ‘so her face is vivid. But please tell me I’m wrong. Tell me that isn’t her.’

‘No,’ he mutters, ‘it’s her. She’s here.’

Dr Ross—a much younger version—smiles cheerfully from beside Jared. She’s not wearing the green dress in this picture; she’s in a collared shirt and jeans, her hands not touching keys or even steaming milk, but holding a glass of white wine.

‘This was the band you saw on Monday?’

‘Yeah. Second from the left, that’s my sister’s fiancé. She was also...she made me coffee at the airport.’

‘What?’

‘When I dropped off Lace on Sunday. She was working in a café. I recognised her at the gig but I just thought, you know, Adelaide is small, people turn up in unexpected bits of my life all the time, there was nothing *suspicious* about it.’

We fall silent as two women stroll by, pushing prams. They are wearing gloves and ankle-length dresses hemmed with lace, and one of them looks me straight in the eye and smiles conspiratorially—but I blink, hard, and of course they are wearing jeans, and of course they are paying no attention to me. I shove them out of mind and look over to across the other side of the path, just far enough away, where a man in his late twenties is meditating, eyes closed, legs crossed, completely unfazed by the outside world.

‘I watched her go back,’ I say, the syllables all rushing out at once. ‘Last night. I watched that day that you got that phone call in the elevator, and it was just nuts, and people were saying that she disappeared.’ When he doesn’t respond, I add: ‘And then you and June broke into one of the labs...’

‘You don’t need to remind me,’ he cuts me off, coldly. ‘I remember it extremely well.’

‘Shit. I’m sorry. Of course you do.’

‘It’s not right.’

‘I know, I wasn’t thinking...’

‘No, I mean, this photo. It’s *not right*.’

‘What?’

‘She’s too *young*! Can’t you see it?’ His gaze snaps onto mine, his pupils dark and suddenly terrifying. ‘If she’d really come here, if she’d really disappeared that day to come here, she would be in her mid-forties. At the *least*.’

I glance again at the picture, and realise with horror that he’s right. The Dr Ross in the picture, the woman who watched me from the stage, is in her early twenties at most.

I rack my brain for something plausible. ‘Maybe she’s here naturally? What year...’

‘She was born in 2013, in Sydney. She’s there now. She’s supposed to be *six*.’

My fatigue has clogged my system, made me calm, made me methodical in my denial.

‘Okay, right, she’s not here naturally, we can rule that out. So she’s...I don’t know, let’s say 22, which means that she must have travelled back from...’

‘Somewhere around 2035. See the problem?’

For a few seconds, I don’t.

And then I do, and it electrocutes me, sends me unmelting, leaping onto my feet. I take the few steps to the other side of the path, sifting through the most painful of the adrenaline, and then I turn around and take a step back towards him, and I say, ‘I.R.I.S. isn’t invented for eleven more years.’

‘Bingo,’ he says. ‘Even if she invented it and immediately sent herself back...’

‘...the youngest she could possibly be is thirty-two.’ I can’t sit down again; I can’t occupy the same bit of path for more than a second. ‘So...so what does that *mean*?’

‘It *means*,’ Apoch answers, looking terrified, ‘that something else is going on. Some new technology, some new law...I have no idea. I can’t just *go and check*. I can’t Google it. Elsie, I’m working completely in the dark.’

‘Okay,’ I say, trying to keep my own fear at bay. ‘Then what do we do?’

‘I need to...I’ll figure something out. I’ll fix it.’ He stands up quickly. ‘You’ve got to go home, stay put. Shop’s not opening today. You said she worked at the airport?’

‘Next to International Departures.’

‘Okay.’ He pulls me into a hug—not our first, but our most important. ‘Call me if *anything* happens.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You’re going to be okay. We have four days until you disappear. That’s the one thing we know. I promised I’d keep you safe, and I will. I’ll find her.’

Over his shoulder, the man across the water opens his eyes and looks straight at me, as though meditating has advanced his hearing skills and he’s heard every word we’ve said. Slowly, the edges of his mouth curl upwards. I imagine his hands around my neck. I wonder if I can change Dr Ross’ mind, when she finds me, because of course she’ll find me. She won’t be guessing where I am, she’ll be remembering. Evasion is not the question. The question is whether I have more weapons in my arsenal now than when I was three, or whether I’m still just as helpless.

#

‘Wright’s Veterinary Clinic, this is Brenda. Yes, ma’am. Yes, that’s right. Oh, I’m not sure, you’d have to Google it, hon. That’s no worries, net’s not for everyone, is it? Oh, did he? Well, that’s Facebook for you. You should have more luck with the phoneb—well, that’s odd because I certainly got one, it sat out on my veranda for a while though, must say. Ah, there you go. The dirt’ll come right off. Best of luck, ma’am, have a lovely day.’

‘Who was that?’

‘Wrong number. Asking about motorbike lessons for her nephew, of all things.’

‘Good lord, I hate motorbikes, they’re like bloody wasps.’

‘Me too, hon. Had one the other day on Greenhill, or was it...no, it was South. In the morning, everyone dreary-eyed, me before my first coffee, and this thing just looping in and out like nobody’s business, nearly took out a cyclist. Little prick was trying to do the exact same thing, but.’

‘Be nice if they took each other out, hey.’

‘I’m going to say no, because oh God Liz your mind, but I’m going to secretly think yes.’

‘Oh, hello Elsie, love, we weren’t expecting you today!’

Brenda and Liz have worked here for twenty years between them; their faces are stamped into my memories of puberty, my high school dramas, my first period, my first kiss. I was here a lot more than Rachel, who never cared much about animals beyond the possibility of a cute picture. But I was drawn to this place, where broken balls of fluff and sadness were fixed. And so these two women know almost as much about me as Mum does—certainly more than Rachel does. I remember my high school graduation, how they’d pooled their wages together and bought me a giant bouquet of flowers and the online voucher which got me the Docs I’d been telling them about for months. I look down at them now, worn in with such dogged perseverance—their creased black edges, the slight stain on the left toe from a dropped hamburger with way too much grease. And I think about how lucky I am to have had this life that isn’t mine, to have been sent here to be on the receiving end of such kindness.

‘Elsie, are you alright? You don’t look very well.’

I look up from my shoes and try to keep my voice even. ‘Is Mum in yet?’

‘You’re in luck,’ says Liz, ‘she has a scheduled amputation. Although I guess “luck” is the wrong word for the dog who got himself ran over. Hell of a start to the day.’

‘She’s in surgery now, but she should be done in about half an hour.’ Brenda smiles again. ‘You want to wait with the overnights? We’ve got a beautiful fluffy thing with a broken leg. That’ll cheer you up.’

I look around the empty waiting room, the walls lined with posters sprouting health tips for pets, the mood dull and sleepy, and I say, ‘Yes, please.’

He’s a Samoyed, according to the sheet of paper taped to the front of his cage, but in essence he is a polar bear, big and sad—and I discover, as I read his name, that I am not the first to realise this.

‘Hey there, Polar,’ I murmur. He looks sorrowfully up at me, ear twitching at the sound of his name. I kneel down in front of him, examining his front leg which is trapped in plaster and patterned with bitemarks, some of them still glistening with saliva. He whines, quiet, defeated, the last in a long line of unheard complaints.

‘I know, I know,’ I tell him. ‘It sucks. But you shouldn’t go putting yourself into dangerous situations.’

The cage is wide enough to slide my hand through. Snowy strands of fur pass like wind through my hands, so soft that it’s like I’ve touched only the idea of the fur, or the space where the fur once was. I close my eyes at the delicacy of it, and feel the wet sponginess of a nose, then a coarse tongue, a sign of curious friendship. And suddenly the concept of standing back up again is unbearable. With a shudder, my legs give out and I fold on top of myself like human origami, my right side digging into the cage, my eyes still closed. I hear a shuffle, a rearrangement of fur and limbs, and a satisfied release of weight. All along where my body meets the cage, there is fur. Polar, it seems, needs the comfort as much as I do.

I don’t know how long I sit there, listening to the sounds of adjacent rooms. The phone, cutting across air like a hurled frisbee. The two distinct chirps of Brenda and Liv, their receptionist’s voices and their real voices. The swish of the front door, the hum of people existing, their bodies moving. Breathing, both mine and Polar’s, mine slower than his. I soothe him through the cage and wonder if he’s thirsty, if he’s impatient, if he’s worried. If he misses the people he belongs to, if he feels like a belonging. I think about his heat signature—not the insulated warmth pulsing from his fur, the cause of his almost desperate panting, despite the water bowl in the corner. No, I think about the heat signature which in a few decades will be analysed by I.R.I.S., as one on a list of billions. Is it the right heat signature? Or is it the same as mine, speaking in Mandarin rather than Cantonese, Portuguese rather than Spanish? One day—maybe when alive Else Objects are routine—will his signature be singled out for further research? I don’t know any of these things. All I know is that it is early, and I am tired but I



can't sleep yet, and the bones in my arse are so sore but, equally, that here is the only place in the world where I can be.

'Elsie, what are you doing down there?' A cool hand, pressed to the side of my face. 'Oh, honey, you've got a bit of a temperature, I'll be right back.'

The footsteps rise and fall so quickly that I wonder if time has sped up on us, in this little bubble of space that we share. Time is certainly guilty of odder things. A wet cloth presses to my forehead, wrung out rashly, drops of water escaping down the side of my face. Strong arms, the arms I remember, the arms of my childhood. They pull me up, away from fur and cage. When I open my eyes again I'm in a different room, one that I can't remember entering. It's Mum's office, but it takes me an age to recognise it, and much more time to recognise her, sitting across from me.

'Hey there,' she smiles. Her face is tired; the surgery must have been a lot to handle this early in the morning. 'What's going on?'

I swallow, and my words spill out violently, like vomit. 'I just came to say hello.'

'Are you okay?'

I nod.

'Sweetheart, you're shaking.'

'It's cold in here.'

'It's forty degrees outside.'

Her face is delicate, the skin on it clear, the angles just pronounced enough to keep from being harsh. Rachel looks so much like her. It's so strange. I look at her and choke down the lump in my throat and I see my sister's face, in the doorway of the bathroom, in the mirror as a child, reflected backwards. *You're left-handed now*, I shout to her as a five-year-old. Squished all together in glee. *You're the opposite of you!* But in fact, it's me who's the opposite of her, me who says everything without thinking, me who covers myself in pictures to avoid all the parts underneath, me who is wrong, she who is right, she who is beautiful, she who is not pregnant, me who is the exotic sister, the unnatural sister, the Else Object, the newer, nicer toy.

*Mum I'm going to disappear in four days*

*Mum I'm scared*

*Mum help*

'Say something,' she murmurs. 'Tell me what's happening.'

'Mum,' I say. The backwards mirror version of Rachel sticky tapes to the front of my mind. It works both ways, I realise. If I am the opposite of her, then she must also be the

opposite of me. But what is the opposite of an Else Object? Something that belongs entirely? Something that never doubts its right to be here?

*'Elsie.'*

The lump bursts in my throat. Tears hot and ferocious as magma. I am useless after that.

#

The opposite of an Else Object is a man.

#

The mother is an odd creature. A god. A doctor. A mad scientist. We all begin as an idea in her mind, before anything else. We are thought up—thought *of*—in moments of love, hope. Desperation. Genius. Given our most basic components and then worked on, in a sterile habitat, until we are capable of functioning on our own, more or less, of course. And later, when we are properly on our own, she sees us and she is able to know and remember us in the same instant, and we are loved, and we are saved.

And because of this, because I am my mother's invention, she likes to think she knows exactly why I do everything. She is smug about the notion that she can read my programming, and she's often right; even when she's wrong, it's only by a few degrees. If she tilted her head at a slightly finer angle—if she narrowed her eyes a millimetre or two—I suspect she'd know everything about me.

I don't remember being driven home. The colours and angles are all there, but slightly out of order, as though I'm stuck in the limbo between the future and here. The shape of a doorframe, however, is clear enough to navigate, as is the next, and the next. The doona cover is just familiar enough that I know to get on top of it, but not underneath it, no, not in this weather. She sits at the edge of the bed and it sinks, angling my body towards her, transforming me into a planet in her orbit.

'Do you want to talk or do you want me to talk?'

'You.' A single syllable. Easy to shape the tongue around. Easy to export.

'Okay.' A beat. 'I know it's been a hard week for you,' she says, 'coming to grips with things.' Her voice is quiet, tip-toeing, out after curfew, and the truth of it kickstarts my heartbeat. Then she adds, 'You weren't right on Sunday, I could tell,' and adrenaline pushes

me upright, because *of course* she doesn't know what's happening, but fuck, her introductory line is close, it's too close...

'Woah.' Arms grip my shoulders, pull me back down. 'It's okay. It's okay. You can tell me.'

Is she from the future too? A scientist, sent back to keep me here under the illusion of safety, her records erased by Section Twelve and therefore not in violation, not technically? Is she poised to send a message the moment she leaves the room? *She's here, Dr, Ross, she's all yours. Come and get her.* Did she adopt me for this purpose, twenty years ago?

I can't hold it in anymore.

'Mum, I'm going to disappear,' I blurt, and then, because the gates are already open: 'I can feel it already, nothing *feels* like it should, all the colours are wrong, I'm more there than I am here, and I can't do *anything* about it, except wait...but it's only a few more days, what am I supposed to do?'

Her hands, still gripping my shoulders, now pull me into a hug, and whether she's a secret agent or not, she is home, and I fall into the embrace with relief. Into my hair she says, 'I understand.'

'How could you possibly understand?' I ask bitterly.

'Well, I've been in love too, you know.'

Oh.

I pull back.

Oh.

'Rachel told me once, that she'd seen you at a party, but I wanted to wait for you to tell me yourself. It's your truth. It's got fuck all to do with her.' Mum smiles gently. 'Have I got that truth wrong?'

'No,' I say, 'you're pretty bang on.'

'Shove over,' she says, and stretches out beside me on the bed. 'Look, I know Lace feels half the world away right now, and maybe she is, but like you say, only a few more days and you'll be in Melbourne with her. Not that far away at all.'

'I know.' The tears are back, painful, bitter. If only all I needed saving from was heartache. *If only this was all it was.*

'I haven't told you much about my love life,' she continues, 'but that doesn't mean I never had one. I fell in love with a man when I was in my early twenties, third year of uni, I think. He was on a six-month exchange from Vienna. And I *knew* that, it was the first thing I

knew about him, but when he left it still felt like the universe had decided to take my soul away. You're right; it feels exactly like disappearing. Nothing tastes right. Nothing *feels* right.'

She exhales, long and cathartic, and turns on her side to face me.

'I love you,' she says, 'exactly as you are,' and presses a kiss to my forehead. I am still crying, but the tears are unquestioned, are able to masquerade as other tears.

'Love you too,' I murmur. *I love you so much. I'm so sorry that I can't stop it. Please be okay afterwards.*

She leaves sometime later, headed back to work, and her absence in the doorway is replaced almost immediately by Mikes. She's been asleep; one of her ears is stuck the wrong way, flipped inside out and resting on top of her head. In the couple of seconds before her head turns and she sees me in bed, I realise that we were meant for each other, in ways we didn't know before, only suspected. Both of us, here by circumstance and luck and the will of somebody else. I wonder whether her first owners really were as malicious as I'd imagined. Maybe they'd known somehow that Mikes needed to be here. They'd known that I needed her, and made it happen in the way that they knew it had to.

She finally notices me. Barrels over. Sticks her nose into my face, wet and warm and smelly. The most welcome help of all.

#

The edges of afternoon begin to blur, and, still lying in bed barely an hour after Mum has left, I let the feeling take me. Why would I fight? All I have are questions, and the answers aren't liable to come from anywhere else.

When the dizziness fades, I find myself in an elevator, identical to the one I followed Dr Ross into a few days ago. Beige, cramped. Section Twelve. Apoch is standing next to me, phone to his ear, and there's a voice, thin and distant, streaming from it, but he's not responding, he just lets the wave crash. I wonder if he's being torn apart by a superior, if he's done something wrong. But then the crash ends, and he whips the phone down, presses a button, pushes it right back up against his ear. A voice recording. And I see his eyes. They are not soaked in shame, or embarrassment. They have anger in them. Steady and rising. We are rising, too. Apoch started at the ground floor—he is coming, not going. But what for?

Suddenly, he turns in my direction and throws the phone; I cower, of course I do, but of course it flies through me, clatters violently against the wall at my back.

‘What is *wrong* with you?’ I scream, if only to expel the adrenaline. He shudders heavily, and all at once there is hurt, sewn across the bridge of his nose, the edges of his mouth. There is an aqueduct, bursting at the corners of his irises.

The elevator lurches as it slows down. He stands up straight. Leaves his phone where it is. The doors open.

In the hallway is a state of total confusion. People dressed in prim suits talking into mouthpieces, journalists dictating rapidly to their pocket computers on the trail of five thoughts at once, a few lonely souls in civilian clothing, wandering about seeming as confused as I am. Voices erupt from every crevice, some loud and angry, some nervous, some excited; arms bustle, feet tread with renewed purpose upon carpet. So much is going on that it seems a gap won’t open up; that we’ll just stand there until the doors close again; but somehow, the universe makes space for us, and we are both sucked into the swarm.

His eyes search the crowd, bulging with purpose, and after a second of fruitlessness he stands on tip-toe, cranes his neck to see further, and shouts: ‘June!’

Out of the swarm, she appears, flustered and red, hair sticking to the back of her neck, hands wringing endlessly.

‘She did it.’ Her voice, when it finally comes, is a tangled string.

‘What?’ Apoch grabs her by the shoulders. ‘June, what’s going on?’

‘I can’t believe she did it.’

‘*June!*’ He shakes her and she comes to with a jump. ‘Who did what?’

‘Dr Ross.’ She stares blankly at him. ‘She’s gone. She used I.R.I.S. on herself.’

The energy sparks behind Apoch’s eyes, rattles a shockwave through him. I can’t read his expression anymore, but I am afraid of it.

‘But...’ he falters. Tries again. ‘But who was with her?’

‘No-one. She did it herself, that’s what they’re saying.’

‘But the program requires two prints. Two people.’

‘I don’t know,’ June almost whimpers. ‘She must have created a...a bypass.’

‘What kind of bypass?’

‘Fuck, *I don’t know*, okay!’ Even yelling, her voice only matches the others around her. ‘The point is that she’s not an Else Object! She’s not! She’s just violated all three POHS laws...’

‘Do you know where Dr Nasser...?’

‘...and she built an auto-erase code into the system. Only she could have done that. We don’t know where she went, we don’t know why...’

‘June, have you seen...’

‘...but if we’re still here, that means she hasn’t changed anything significant, right? If she was going to do anything drastic to the past, we’d know already? But...’

‘*June!* Stop! Listen to me! *Where is Dr Nasser?*’

‘I don’t know! Why does that matter?!’ June’s eyes scan our surroundings, the chaos of people which hasn’t let up, has only become denser if anything. Maybe the question plaguing her is the same one hanging over me. How many people can populate a building before the building falls?

‘*June, when did you see him last?*’

‘This morning, I guess? Twenty minutes or so before...oh.’ She snaps back on to Apoch. Inhales violently. ‘I haven’t seen him since she left.’

‘She took him. She took him with her.’

Apoch goes inside himself for a few seconds, a momentary body without a soul, and then takes June’s arm, yanks her to life. And then they’re away, pushing past journalists, creating a suffocating path for themselves through the crowd, and I’m following close enough behind to hitchhike in their space before it closes over again. Not a single person even comes close to me, as if they know I’m there, as if this whole world has been manufactured around the shape of me, a bypass written into the code. I follow them to the end of the hallway, where there is a fire exit, and as I shadow them up the stairs even more people are passing us, heading down, and Jesus Christ, *why are so many people here?*

‘What are you doing?’ I shout to them all, but they just keep on passing, their heads in their phones, their bodies wrought with tension and purpose.

We reach the next floor; Apoch leads June to the third door on the right and indicates to the print scan. She presses her finger against it. It opens with a soft, polite beep and we enter a room consisting only of a high table, a complex looking computer, and a series of frame along the wall which, naturally, are all clouded when my eyes pass over them. *Laboratory C3*, which is printed on the outside of the door, is the only text I am allowed to read. But how is this a laboratory? Where are the beakers, the fizzling concoctions, the white mice in cages? This reminds me more of an office—Dr Ross’ office, more accurately. Had I read that wrong? Had that been a laboratory too, masquerading as something more mundane and unassuming?

Was that where it had happened?

Had she taken me into that office one day and emerged without me, closing the door discretely so that no-one would think to look inside? Did she go for lunch afterwards? Did she

take an early day, fake a fever, go home and fall apart in safety? Or did she carry on, undisturbed, satisfied to have closed another loop?

*How long did it take for someone to notice I was gone?*

June takes a breath and begins to move, and a sureness settles over her, the kind of purpose that only comes with authority and expertise. This is her domain. It is so clear, and it must be clear to Apoch too, who just stands back and watches it happen.

This is not an impromptu sequence of events, I realise. This is a contingency plan they have crafted and fallen into. And what is about to happen becomes blindingly, terrifyingly clear.

June turns on the computer and opens the top drawer of the table. From there she pulls out a syringe; holding its surface to the light, she quints at it, reading something, and copies it into the computer. A serial number? The computer beeps in response, and she lays the syringe down on the table as gently as if it were a newborn baby. I cross the room to stand behind her, watching the screen ask for a second confirmation code, and then a third.

‘Oh, good! Your prints are already in the system, linked to that EO you sent back.’

‘That media thing?’ He frowns. ‘20...’

‘...46, I think. Dark ages. But it means you’re already linked to 2009, so we don’t have to reprogram, we can just clone that. I’m sorry, I know it’s ten years early, but it’ll have to do. Everything else will take so much longer.’

A beat. Condensed, painful.

‘Okay,’ he nods, ‘do it.’

They are speaking conversationally, but the words are nonchalant fronts for their heavy actions, for the sound of Apoch’s footsteps, for the beep of his thumbprint on the pad beside the computer. *The program requires two prints. Two people.* But he does it too hastily, with too much adrenaline, and they have to go through it a second time. In a moment of madness, it reminds me of idiots swiping their cards too early at Coles, and I almost cackle to myself, lost in the absurdity of it all, the horrors of this situation that is ever so slowly dawning on me.

The beep is different this time, and both Apoch and I raise an eyebrow at June, whose face hardens.

‘It’s raised an alert,’ she mutters. ‘We have to move quickly. Roll up your sleeve.’

‘What are they going to do to you?’

‘I’ll be okay. I’m owed a few favours. And besides, they have enough on their plates with Dr Ross on the run. You’re not a priority compared to her.’

‘Ouch. Thanks.’

‘What I *mean* is that you’re a good person, with noble motivations. You’re going back to save people, to fix everything that she broke. If anything, me sending you back is in *accordance* with POHS.’

He hesitates. ‘June...’

‘We have a maximum of two minutes. Three, if the crowds haven’t thinned. Roll up your sleeve *now*.’

He obeys, and the syringe is pushed into the crook of his elbow. Absent-mindedly, my fingers run over the identical scar on my skin. I imagine the syringe being pressed against me, pushing in, depositing the mysterious contents.

‘Shit,’ he mutters, then, ‘is there a copy of her book around?’

‘What?’

‘Surely that’d come in handy. I’m going in a bit blind.’

June pauses, then opens a couple of drawers; she frowns with the first, and sighs with the second, pulling out a black textbook. *The Hitchhikers’ Guide to Spacetime* is printed on the front; clean and new, before he covers it in his own handwriting.

‘God, she’s vain,’ June mutters. ‘I bet there’s one in every room.’

‘Prep it,’ he presses. ‘Send it at the same time.’

She repeats the process wordlessly, more quickly this time, and then they are left staring at each other.

‘June?’

‘Mmm.’

‘What if it doesn’t work?’ He searches her face.

Is this how it was? Three-year-old me with a needle in my arm, in a laboratory which looks like an office? Dr Ross standing beside me, typing into a computer, and then poof, I’m gone? Did I cry? Did she? I remember her fingers lacing together in the courtroom, long and delicate. I imagine them soothing me at the pain of the injection; I imagine one of them pressed to the scanner, waiting for the beep. Who was her second fingerprint? Who helped her? Or did she use the same code to bypass that she has used to transport herself?

This is not how I wanted it to be. To look. To feel. This wasn’t the science I was thinking about, the kind of mad, messy experimentation just romantic enough to excite, just abstract enough to keep at a distance.

‘June, what if I don’t come out the other side? What if Dr Ross and Seph are supposed to be in the past and I’m not?’



This is clinical, mundane even. I.R.I.S. is a computer program and I am a statistic. There is nothing romantic about this. I *hate* this.

‘Have some faith. What if they’re not supposed to be there, and *you are*?’

Brisk footsteps echo from down the hall.

‘But you’re a scientist. You’re not supposed to have faith.’

‘On the contrary.’ She smiles. ‘Faith is all I have.’

The footsteps thump closer, and I can no longer stand my own inertia. Striding to the door, I stand and wait and wonder what it would take to make my presence felt here: how much belief would push me, Tinkerbell-like, into being.

‘Good luck,’ I hear from behind me, but it’s too quiet to attribute.

The doorknob twists in front of me. I lunge for it, and when my hands inevitably pass through it swings wide open and a man appears, tall, suited, no-nonsense. Nice to know security never changes.

‘Leave them alone,’ I shout, as loud as I can because fuck this, no future has a completely unbreachable mute button, I want to yell so I’ll yell, and I keep yelling, my vocal chords straining under the sudden workload, my heart pounding, my vision blurring in frustration when the man only looks straight through me.

‘Damnit, they’re doing it for me! For me and my Dad! Leave them alone!’

But of course this has already happened, and of course it is also yet to begin, and Apoch is both long gone and not yet arrived. June stands alone, defiant. She acknowledges the man, but keeps typing, precise, urgent, and she keeps typing until the man reaches her; but as she’s pulled away from the computer, he’s neither violent nor defeated. Whatever she needed to do, she finished it.

‘It worked,’ I say to her as she passes, hoping desperately for some of it to seep through. ‘He made it through. You were right. He found me, and we’ll be ready for Dr Ross when she comes, and then wherever Dr Nasser is, we’ll find him too, and we’ll save him.’

June looks in my direction.

Straight at me.

There is no person behind me to explain it, no slightly misjudged angle to brush it off with. There is nothing of interest behind me. I am the only thing she could possibly be looking at, and I’m invisible.

And yet, she looks at me. And, just before the edges of her face blur, she smiles, as if to say, *You’re welcome*.

#

‘I searched for her everywhere at the airport, and she’s not there. Couple of other places I’m going to try, and if not...you said your brother-in-law works down the street, I’m going to go find him. He’ll know where she lives.’

‘Sure,’ I say, still feeling frazzled, slightly high. I only came back a few seconds ago, as though the phone had woken me up from a dream. I stare into the hallway mirror, slightly transfixed by the lines etched into my face, the pattern of my pillowcase, the shadows of sleep and time travel following me along, milliseconds behind, falling further and further back the harder they try to keep up. I want to burrow into my own skin, become as tiny as the atom that makes the universe, watch my skin rise and rise until the lines have faded completely.

‘Where are you?’

‘At home.’

My voice sounds far away, as though someone’s borrowed it while I’ve gone swimming. But then, whose voice do I have? Is it me speaking, or them?

‘Good,’ he says. ‘That’s good. Stay there. I’ll call you in a couple of hours when I find something. Remember, you’re fine until Sunday, there’s absolutely no need to panic.’

‘I’m not panicked.’

‘That’s the way.’

‘How did you two meet?’

Silence.

‘Me and...your mother?’

‘No. You and my Dad.’

‘Oh.’ A beat, a pulling together of resources. He forgets his own urgency, which is what I’d hoped for. I want him on my level. ‘Well, like any two people meet, I suppose. Disproving the assumed laws of the universe.’

‘That’s a little less anecdotal than I’d hoped.’

‘Okay, fine.’ I can almost hear the frown stretch across his face. He continues: ‘We met during a media session. I was picked to do a live demonstration of I.R.I.S—with expert guidance, of course. Dr Nasser was the expert. I think at the time you would have been about...six months old? I remember being introduced to you, a couple of months later. Jesus, you looked so much like a tiny version of him.’

‘And you fell in love with him? Just like that?’

‘Just like that. You need to realise, Elsie...scientists in the early days of I.R.I.S. and Twelve, nobody trusted them, but no-one could look away. Christ, they were like magicians.’

‘Oh.’ Something spikes in my memory, and only takes a moment to define. ‘That’s the media thing that put your prints in the system. That linked you to 2009.’

‘Oh, you saw...you’ve been shown that?’

‘I listened to a conversation about it.’

‘Right. Yeah. We sent a spoon back to the 1700s. According to the data, it kickstarts a Scandinavian royal affair of some kind.’ He laughs at the memory. ‘I never knew what he saw in me. That’s not intended as self-pity, that’s a fact. We were nothing alike. We believed in very different things. I had faith in people, for instance. I believed that even with time travel in their faces, all these experts telling them they had no free will...I was adamant that people were still inherently good. That they’d do good things, all on their own.’

‘What did he believe in?’

‘Structure.’ He falls into silence. I let it sit, sifting his reply over and over again on my tongue, and am on the verge of asking him to elaborate when he asks, ‘You know that Twelve never figured out the whole Else Object thing? Why all these bits of junk were turning up in the wrong places, why we had to fix it? I got the sense that Dr Ross never minded the mystery of it, she just liked the science. But it made your Dad *furious*. He needed the purpose. He needed to wake up in the morning and know exactly what his day was, and why it was like that, and where all the tiny bits of his life were kept. I think losing you would have been...not *easier*, just less terrible. If he knew more about the Else Objects. Where they started, what they were actually for. And then he became one himself, in a way. She sent him elsewhere, and then she made it so we couldn’t trace it.’

‘Did you ever find him?’

‘No.’ His voice is small and sad. ‘We talked about moving to Melbourne a few times. Doing something because we wanted to, not because a machine told us we needed to. I thought maybe, if Dr Ross was coming after you and brought Seph with her, I thought maybe he’d find his way there. And we could have that. It wouldn’t matter that it would be decades early, it would still be ours. But I don’t know where he is. I stopped looking when I got his letter. It just makes me more confused...’

‘What letter?’ But even as I ask the question, my brain hands me the memory of the coffee table drawer, the face-down envelope next to Dr Ross’ book.

‘It came a couple of years ago,’ he says after a long pause. ‘Just an ordinary morning, I’m wiping down one of those chests of drawers, you know with the carved flowers on them?’

I open up the top right-hand side drawer, and there's an envelope in there. I figure the old owner just didn't look too hard before they brought it in, and I don't want to invade their privacy, so I pick it up and mean to take it to the bin, never think about it again. Halfway over, a voice in my head starts telling me something, louder and louder and louder, until my foot's on the pedal and the bin is flipped open like one of those baby birds waiting for food, and I finally listen to the voice, and it says, *look closer*. So just to humour the voice, I look closer. And I realise that the envelope's not made of paper. I almost...I almost *threw it out, Jesus Christ.*'

'It was from him?'

'Yes, it was. Written in his handwriting, and full of things only he could know. It's only a page long. But it tells me...well in short, it tells me not to worry. That everything's going to work out, and that he's going to see me soon, and he loves me. That's all. No date. No clues to help me find him.'

'But surely now you know that he went somewhere safely?'

'Honestly, it only makes things more complicated. The letter arrived like an EO world, which means he must be somewhere he can access I.R.I.S. Which means 2046...onwards. That doesn't narrow it down, that makes it worse. I know he didn't write it before he left, because at that point I was still in 2054, and there was no record of my whereabouts in the past because...well, because I wasn't supposed to be here. It makes more sense that she sent him three thousand years into the future, just to get him out of the way, and forced him to write it.'

'What do you...?'

*Knock knock.*

'Someone's at the door,' I say, drifting mindlessly down the hall, drawn towards the noise.

'Don't open it!' he yells down the line, all of the weight lifted from his voice, as though he's just remembered the point of the call.

*Knock knock.*

'Elsie, open up!'

'It's fine,' I say, 'it's my sister.'

'Are you sure?'

I peek through the hole and a tide of blonde hair dominates the view. 'Yep, I'm sure.'

'Okay.' He takes a breath. 'I'll keep looking for her. *Don't leave the house*. I'll call you.'

The phone goes dead. I stare at it blankly for a couple of moments, and then a third round of knocking brings me sharply out of my daze. The force with which Rachel pushes past

me shocks my system back into a vague kind of normalcy. A temporary return. She keeps going until she reaches the kitchen and then stands electrically charged, breathing a little heavier than she should be, cheeks flush even through her foundation, knuckles stretched white over the strap of her handbag, painted to match the white of her dress. But there are creases, I can see, right before she turns back to face me. She didn't smooth down the back before settling in the car. She was in a rush to get here. A tiny thrill tickles me spine. Something has happened.

'Coffee?' I ask. 'Tea?'

'No.'

I flick the kettle anyway.

'How's life? How's wedding prep?'

'Oh, you know.'

'You sure you don't want any coff...'

She says: 'I need to talk to you about something.'

I imagine the smile beginning within her, unfurling like flower petals, within seconds of reaching her face, of becoming impossible to tame. I imagine her teeth, perfect and white, grinning joyously around the announcement; I imagine my arms reaching to hug her, forgetting completely about the handbag, watching it clatter to the floor, the contents spilling in slow motion over the tile. I imagine us laughing at the mess, which seems oh so trivial now by comparison, in the face of this new and beautiful revelation.

I smile in preparation, my toes tensing, ready to go.

She says: 'Jared told me what happened.'

The whirr of the kettle holds the floor for a few moments; a rising overture.

'What?'

She breathes deeply, looking down at her nails. 'Early this morning. In the kitchen. He told me about your...conversation.'

There's no guidebook for how to respond to this. Should I be happy that he opened up? *Rachel, beloved fiancé, just letting you know that I was pretty creepy to your sister last night, my bad?* I open my mouth and decide to run with whatever comes out first, when suddenly:

'How could you do this to me?'

'Wait, what?'

'Better yet, how could you do this to *him*?'

She's found it in her to look straight at me now. She's hit upon the strongest part of her arsenal; she is loaded with grenades, holding the first in front of her with the hook out, ready

to explode. But her words are encrypted, confusing, and something drops inside me, down past my hips, my knees, the soles of my feet.

I ask, slowly: 'What did he say?'

'He told me the *truth*,' she spits, like the sight of me disgusts her—a mould, a dirty scab sitting across the table. Her words bleed out of her, quiet, controlled. 'That he'd gone down to the kitchen for a glass of water, and then you turned up, half-naked, and you...'

'No. That's not...'

'You didn't take no for an answer.' She keeps bleeding herself out. 'Even when he told you to stop.'

'He's *lying* to you.'

She reels back like I've slapped her in the face. 'He would *never* lie to me. And besides, if you've got nothing to be sorry for, why did you leave so early this morning? You didn't want to wait around until I woke up.' It's not a suggestion, but a fact. She's a police officer reading me my Miranda rights; a lawyer reciting the charges brought against me. 'You knew he would tell me, you knew he'd never keep something like that from me. That he's a good man.'

'He's not a good man.' But my voice barely exits my body. The words are the last droplets in the bottle, clinging to the rim, afraid to let go. I keep pushing them out anyway. 'How can you just believe him like that? You know what men are like...'

'I know what *women* are like,' she cuts me off. 'And I know what you're like, Elsie. You don't like other people being happy unless you're happy yourself. You couldn't stand my life moving forward while yours stays in exactly the same place. But you know who's fault that is? It's *yours*. You've done it all to yourself. You could have gone to uni, got a real job. You could have kept yourself prettier. You could have had any guy you wanted, but you decided on mine, because you were jealous that I've done everything right and you haven't.'

'You know I'm not interested in men.'

'Oh, grow up,' she snaps.

The kettle boils.

'I thought you were pregnant, you know.'

'What?'

'I saw the negative test in the bathroom bin.' I lean forward, on the offensive now, my need to land a blow pushing beyond rational thought. 'I know you're trying for a baby. I know it's not going well. I thought you'd finally solved the last piece of the puzzle for your perfect fucking picket-fence life.'

Like a dying star, her face collapses on itself, the anger evaporating into steam, the other emotions sinking back down into hibernation, waiting to be needed again. Her presence halves in size, and for the tiniest of moments I see her as a child, too small, too optimistic for a world like this one. Too liable a commodity. I have gone too far and so has she. But it's too late to go back. We've fucked it all up.

She stand up slowly, her limbs moving as if for the first time, wobbling on newborn legs. When her voice comes it is pre-personality, robotic, stock recording.

'I think,' she says, 'that it would be best if you didn't come to the wedding.'

She leaves in an anti-climax, a shuddering absence.

'It's okay,' I say to the door, to the skin cells she has left behind. 'I probably won't be able to make it anyway.'

The kettle boils.

Behind me there is the rustle of a paper bag unfolding, the cold clink of teaspoon against china. I turn around to find my tea being made for me, carefully, methodically.

'How many sugars do you take?' asks Charlotte Anne Moberley.

'One, please,' I answer. 'Thank you very much.'

'My pleasure.'

She pours the water slowly, dunks the teabag a couple of times and then leaves it to marinate. Brings over the cup and gently curls my fingers around it, standing so close that I can feel the soft lace of her dress against my bare legs. I can see the beginning of lines on her face; she is older than I thought she was, maybe thirty-seven or thirty-eight. But the crows feet lead into eyes like galaxies, eyes that have seen the future. She is beautiful.

I say: 'You don't seem that surprised to be here, Charlotte Anne Moberley. You know this is the twenty-first century.'

She says: 'I gathered as much, but you know, there's really no cause for alarm. This stuff happens to me all the time.'

## Thursday

A list of all the tattoos on my body, in chronological order:

A pink rose on my ribcage under my left arm, on the verge of blooming. A metaphor in retrospect, being my very first, the day that I turned eighteen, before I understood the correlation between painful tattoos and the nearness of bone.

A teacup and saucer, on my upper right arm, with a rabbit's nose and ears poking out. After I understood the correlation.

'So it goes' along my left collarbone in typewriter font. (I know. *I know*. I thought it was unique at the time, even when the tattooist raised her eyebrows at me.)

A golden framed painting on my upper left arm. A young woman in a green flapper dress glares out of the frame, holding herself accountable to no-one, holding a cigarette that wisps its way out of the painting and coils like a smoky snake before it.

A giant lace bow in the middle of my back. The most expensive piece. Each tiny detail in the fabric carved out of me, crafting me into a present to be given away, because I *must* be a present if I'm wrapped in lace (in Lace). Nobody knows about this one. I forget about it too, except under the angles of changing room mirrors, and when I remember the five hours I spent under a needle, waiting to be wrapped up in texture and minutiae, waiting to be made pretty.

Mikes' name in delicate black cursive, lengthways along the side of my right wrist. Done the week after we brought her home. She was just emerging from her shell at that point, a newborn turtle discovering the sun. I bared my arm to her, said, *see, you're home, I told you I loved you*, and there must have been a whiff of chemical still hanging because it sent her skittering across the room to Mum, who she preferred more at the time because Mum used to sneak her medication into biscuits.

In the smudged mirror reflection, they squirm across my skin like insects, miniscule refugees seeking cover. They burrow away from my touch, my fingers spreading across my arms, my shoulders, my stomach. They don't want to be a part of me today. But I am their mother. I invented them from love and ink and money. And denying their own beginnings is the same as erasing themselves entirely, fading, soaking upward out of skin, until I am newborn, until I am not me anymore, or perhaps not me yet.

'I really like this one,' says Charlotte, pointing at the top of my arm, and giggling when the flapper stops glaring, switches her cigarette to the other hand, and waves. 'Her clothes are just divine. I feel so dumpy in comparison—I mean, just look at all this material! What's the point of it?'



‘You’re not that far off, you know,’ the flapper tells her. ‘Only twenty years or so. Although, you’ve got to have the war yet.’

‘The war? Why, we’ve already won the war! We had the South Africans trembling in their boots *years* ago. All is well!’

She grins triumphantly, and the flapper looks up at me in exasperation as if to say, *should you tell her, or should I?*

#

Sender: Larissa Jeong

Recipient: Elsie Wright

*Hey, I’m officially in Melbourne! Can’t wait for you to get here. I have no plans and no friends and I’m so boooooooooored*

Message Sent

So much has happened in her absence, so much has poured itself into the space she filled, that it feels almost abstract to think of her now. Like once upon a time I thought her up, imagined her out of thin air and pieced her together from instances of inspiration, from things that surprised me or made me happy—things I could pin onto her like money onto a wedding dress, until she twirled, fully-formed and performative and radiant, in front of me—and now, with the sun hanging low and the band gone home and the elation in the swansong of its course, she stops smiling, and turns herself back into instances, into snapshots of colour and dialogue, and I move on to other, more substantial hallucinations.

#

It’s the hottest November in forty-two years, says the news. Adelaide has become a melting pot. Imagine it: strangers scream at each other in traffic for minor, victimless offences; CBD traffic lights commit suicide and are replaced by fat, sunburnt tradies whose fingers rotate between flipping signs, chain smoking and flipping the bird at any cars they don’t like the look of. I imagine it, but never venture out to see. This present is an hallucination, crafted specifically for me by a mad woman masquerading as a magician; the outside world is

dangerous and I am not allowed to know about it, let alone step out in it. My clothes are hands closing around my throat, unwanted cloth fingers running over my back, my stomach, my legs. I take everything off and walk around the house naked, mapping each of its sections. All the way from the front door to the back. Cataloguing the objects. The heat signatures, like auras, all mixing together to make the colour of air. Is anything in here an Else Object, apart from me? This comb. This sock. Will the clock on the wall not exist until twenty years from now, when I.R.I.S. seeks out its colours and my parents find it amongst them, call it to action like a sleeper agent, program it for hitchhiking, send it off? Will it be unremarkable until it is remarkable? Or has it always been so? I unhook the clock from the wall. Unscrew its back, take out its gears, its batteries. Nothing here. No secrets. No answers. It is an unremarkable clock. And yet, even when I return everything to its proper place and hook it back on the wall, the hands stop moving, as though its job is done. Secrets divulged. Return to sleeper state until next mission. I stare and stare and stare, waiting for the secret. But the secret is not for me.

#

‘Elsie, it’s Mum.’

‘Oh.’

‘I tried to text you but I think your phone’s off.’

‘It didn’t charge.’ I haven’t seen it in days. It’s in some corner under stale air, the precursor to a layer of dust.

‘I just thought you’d like to know I’m bringing a guest home tonight. He’s been having a rough time with his leg at the clinic, and you know I’ve been looking to train Mikes as a therapy dog, and no time like the present. Thought he’d help cheer you up, as well.’

I think about Apoch’s phone. How long did it spend, smashed at the bottom of the elevator while its owner vanished from time? Did anyone see it, in the chaos? Or did it live there for days, weeks, a similar dust crawling by increments over the glass, freed only by a janitor or a wayward eye, a response (*at last*) to a strange glint in someone’s periphery?

‘No time like the present,’ I say, and almost send a laugh burrowing through the phone after it, wishing she could see how wrong she was, marvelling at her smallness, her blindness.

#

Polar sniffs, tentatively at first, but then my scent registers in his mind and he's licking me for dear life, this familiar smell in a room of strange things, this welcome distraction from the still-bandaged foot. Mikes presses close, not jealous, only curious, and later almost maternal, as though she knows it's her audition, knows she's being watched.

'I thought you might like him in your room tonight,' she says. 'Obviously Mikes will get to be around you both then, and you can keep an eye on this one. It's going to be a hot night. If he gets really uncomfortable, give him this.' She indicates an ice pack, then walks over to the freezer and stashes it inside. Polar looks up as if to say, *you better*. His fur is the swirl of the sky outside the courtroom windows, keeping me from dangerous knowledge. Too late for that. It's such an amusing thought that I don't notice the pause stretching slowly around us, nor that it's pregnant.

'I wanted to chat about Rachel,' Mum says. Her syllables are careful, planned. Another pause. A pause worse than before. 'I think she's worried about you. She said you left without saying goodbye the other morning.'

'Yeah, she came over yesterday.'

'Oh, she did?'

'We talked.'

'I hope I didn't...I hope our conversation didn't complicate things.'

'No, we talked about Jared mostly.'

'Okay. I just... well, you know what Rachel's like. She worries about the small things.'

'Sure.'

'So if you hurt her feelings, it might be best just to apologise...'

'There's nothing to apologise *for*.' It crawls out of me, harsh and frightening like a cockroach. I finally look up and watch her throat constrict, her irises bulge and shrink, her fingers whiten around the edge of the couch. But I don't feel any guilt.

'Don't worry about it,' I say. Force out the smile. Force one out from her. There we go.

We make hot dogs for dinner and watch *M\*A\*S\*H* on her suggestion, bits of the earlier seasons, the comedy seasons with Trapper and Henry, heavy with the laugh track and the nonchalance and the beating back of the darkness. It's something we haven't done in years, and which I suspect she's doing to reassure herself deep inside that we're fine. She makes popcorn and lets me hold the bowl and feed the un-popped kernels to Polar and Mikes, and with this action it's like she's saying, *see? We are what we were before. We are okay.*

We are not okay. Nothing is okay. But that fact in itself is almost okay, it tailors well, and I understand the desperation, I accept her offerings of peace. Charlotte hasn't been around

today, and the flapper on my arm is once again a snapshot of ink, so who knows, she might be right. At roughly eleven she trudges off to her bedroom, exhausted, but smiling to herself. I sit a while longer on the couch, content at the denouement, which right at this moment, with two dogs curled up on my legs and a full cup of tea on the table beside me, feels more like an ending than anything else.

I'm supposed to take Mikes and Polar to my bedroom. I haven't brushed my teeth yet. It's far too hot to be lying underneath two dogs, and yet I do that, and we all fall asleep with the light still on, a last hurrah of peace in the centre of the universe.

## Friday

I wake up with dog hair sweat-glued to my legs, limbs groaning with weighty inertia, tongues panting desperately in the air I'm supposed to be breathing, air I inhale only for my body to reject, to send back up and out in a muggy stream of coughing.

Mum has the air con blasting before I'm awake, ready with a two-litre container of juice and a huge bowl of chopped fruit.

'It's gonna be the hottest day of the year so far,' she tells me, gesturing towards the weather app on her phone. 'And I know that was a terrible preface to this question, but before you head off to work, could you *please* help me bring Polar back to the clinic? Bren and Liz want to see you. Just want to make sure you're okay.'

She smiles. The tension has abandoned us in the night, bound for more vulnerable people. We eat lazily, feeding strawberries to the dogs when they come over to visit, Polar's paw suddenly of little to no bother in the presence of food. I watch Mum eat. I watch a thin stream of juice escape from her lips and run to her chin. I watch a seed wedge itself in between her two front teeth, almost white enough to blend in when she smiles. I don't tell her. The seed may need to be there for a reason. I don't want to throw it off course.

Before we load Polar to the car I brush him down, wishing I could unzip him from his fur and let him be as naked as Mikes, let his skin breath. Then, in the laundry, I make a show of pulling my work uniform out of the dryer, setting up the ironing board, steaming the material that will be folded neatly into my backpack and never taken out, at least, not by me. I go to my room and make my bed, even though nobody has slept in it. Rip off all the covers, pretend I have been here. Turn it off and on again. But I have not been here. And I was never supposed to be. And that's okay.

The outside world is not so unknown today. I have stepped into that nuclear swirl, that haze outside the courtroom window, and after all that it is only a normal world. A car I have been in before, a route I have taken hundreds of times. A clinic my brain needs no new data for. Two receptionists who have hugged me before, whose bodies are warm, whose perfumes are doused on enough to suffocate, but smelling of comfort, of warmth. *I'm fine*, I say, over and over again, but when the phones ring again, I want to stop them from retreating behind the desk, *don't answer the phone, you're not even open yet, I need you both out here in the world, with me.*

'Thanks, Elsie,' Mum says, as the lock on Polar's cage clicks back into place.

‘My pleasure.’ Polar pushes his nose as far as it will go through the bars, and I scratch the end of it with my index finger. Warm rubber, rough tongue.

‘I’ve got someone coming to pick him up this morning. Well, theoretically. She’s been rather difficult to get a hold of.’

‘Oh really? That sucks.’

‘I had half a mind to call the RSPCA on her, except that then I’d get hell from Rachel.’

‘From Rachel? Since when does she care about pet owner rights?’

‘Well, turns out this person is a friend of hers. Or a friend of Jared’s. Well, at least I *think* it’s the same person, you knew I only went to that one gig of theirs, but I’m *pretty* sure it’s her, and it’s such an unusual name...’

Warm rubber.

Rough tongue.

Then air, just air. I draw back from the cage and I sit and stare and think, *oh*. And I realise that it is probably not a coincidence that this dog’s coat reminds me of courtroom windows, that on some level he is a herald, a messenger of the end times.

*This* is how she does it. *This* is how she finds me.

‘She’s here, she’s outside.’

‘Sorry Bren, who?’

‘The owner,’ Brenda says from the doorway. ‘She’s here for Polar. Want me to open early?’

Mum sighs, mutters something under her breath, and then says, ‘Sure, let’s get it done.’ When Brenda is gone she turns and says to Polar, ‘For your sake, buddy, I hope she’s a better owner than she is a client.’

‘I should go,’ I say.

‘You don’t want to meet her? See what I’m dealing with?’

‘No, that’s okay.’ And then, ‘I might go get a second breakfast before work.’

*I need to go I need to go I need to g*

She stops me with a light hand and wraps me in a hug. Her arms are strong around me, toned from a life of wrestling animals, and buried in them I remember the restaurant photo of us, my little arms swamped by her big ones, the youngest I have ever seen myself. Was it this picture that the woman waiting outside saw first, twenty-five years from now? Did she see the love in our eyes, the strength in our grip on each other? Is it what convinced her that she could never win me back over, that my disappearance could only be a disappearance from everywhere? That it would be easier to erase me than ask me for forgiveness?

Mum leaves the room to welcome in the young Dr Ross, and I silently head for the back entrance, which leads to the alleyway curving around the side of the building. But I cannot avoid seeing her, just for a moment. I turn and walk quickly across the front window of the clinic, realising too late that I should have turned right instead, walked the half-block around to avoid the view altogether, fuck the weather, and she turns and looks straight at me, right before my heart breaks through my chest, right before I take off running, because running is the only thing that will stop me from screaming.

The windows are full-length and clear. Almost not there at all. And she takes me to pieces in the space of a moment, with the gaze of a scientist. I am the sum of my parts, a network of more or less successful circuiting, a system of organs and neural functions. It doesn't make me feel special anymore, or transparent, like it did on Monday night whilst she was on stage. It makes me nauseous. Too nauseous. It makes me feel inhuman. And so I run until the nausea evaporates with the sweat.

But the feeling doesn't leave. It never leaves.

#

'Elsie, it's Apoch, call me back when you get this.'

...

'Elsie, please pick up.'

...

'Elsie, *pick up*, damnit. She took the book. Must've broken in while I was out searching for her... fuck, she has the book! Elsie, please, if you get this, don't go to Melbourne. You can't. It might feel like you're running away from her but I swear to you, she will know exactly where you are. The only way to beat her is to change the game. Stay here. Don't let her get to you.'

...

'Elsie.'

...

'Are you there?'

#

Sender: Elsie Wright

Recipient: Larissa Jeong

Do you remember when I came over sometime last year, to grab that jumper, and your Dad told me that story about his first few months in Australia? How his English wasn't good enough to get to know people, so he paid for lessons and spent hours and hours practising the shape of vowels, and then, when he got an English-speaking job and made a couple of Australian friends and got really proud of himself, wanted to tell his Mum...but when he called her up, all excited, they went back and forth for ages before he realised she couldn't understand him? He was putting the Australian vowels into Korean words. And he didn't know how to undo it. Remember he said he felt like he'd been lost somewhere between Seoul and Adelaide, half of him in each place, and he couldn't put himself together again? And the only constant, the *only* source of grounding he had, was your Mum, because she was going through the same thing, and because it didn't matter what language they were speaking, he didn't need the right vowels to be able to love her.

He was talking about a feeling he had twenty years ago, so he was laughing, and we were smiling and nodding along, and the sense was that he'd probably gotten over it.

I didn't really understand him then. I just wanted my jumper back.

But I get it now.

I'll see you soon.

Message Unsent



## Saturday

The further away we get, the clearer the air becomes, as if it weren't the same air as before, as if somewhere over the South Australia/ Victorian border we'd slowly materialised onto a different plane. I look out the window to clouds I have never seen, new atmosphere, new ocean, and when we start descending again, the architecture of new buildings, built with walls which hide no secrets from me. Highways with miniscule cars, driven by people I am not avoiding, people I do not fear or hate or love, desperately, but just cannot be around.

It's an almost surreal reversal; it doesn't feel so long ago that I was standing by International Departures, trying to imagine my life without her, trying to imagine how I could even attempt to stretch other parts of life over the space where she used to be. It's been six days. Only six days. But so much has happened since then. So much that I'm not sure if I can tell her, I'm not sure she'll even entertaining the possibility of believing. I collect my small suitcase from the carousel and begin the pilgrimage to Domestic Arrivals. I'd expected her to be late, but she's there at the front of the crowd. Her eyes scan the crowd for a few good seconds before they find me, and in those few moments I wonder how we're going to play this. Pretend the kiss never happened? Laugh it off with a well-written, nonchalant joke? Make out with her again?

She finds me at last, and a grin spreads broadly across her face. Pretend it never happened, I think. Definitely the best course of action.

'Elsie!' she calls out, and when I reach her she wraps me in a bear hug. She smells different; she must be using a new shampoo. I pull back and notice her fitted black pencil skirt, her silk blouse, her heels. She has a new fringe, blunt and thick, sitting daintily on her eyebrows—*when did she find the time for that?!* It's a Saturday evening; everyone around her is tired, heaving from the day, and from the much bigger weight of the week just gone. But there are no bags under her eyes, no wrinkles in her clothing. She looks as perfect as if she's just stepped out in the morning. Nine-to-five accounting will suit her.

'I'm *so glad* you're here!' she tells me, and takes my luggage from me. 'What the hell's been going on?'

'Just work stuff, mostly,' I lie as we head for the exit. 'Busy season.'

'November is a busy season for antiques?'

'Absolutely. Now, tell me about Seoul.'

We hold hands as we walk out. It's a friendly embrace; it comes without the meaning I used to hope for, but I find myself not caring. The evening has arrived and the air is cool, and it lifts stress straight out of my skin, and Melbourne is a new world.

#

Lace has just moved to a house in St Kilda with three other nine-to-fivers, which, she tells me on the way in, is the only way they can manage the rent in such an area, and in such a beautiful house. It's exactly the place I pictured for her; timber floors, white walls, high ceilings. The kitchen window looking out to a garden so intricate that the landlord must pay a landscaper to come maintain it. I shake the hands of three elegant, well-spoken people who disappear immediately afterwards to go to dinner, and I can't imagine anyone in this house knee-deep in weeds, hiding dirt-stained jeans in their wardrobes.

'Don't mind them,' she says quietly, leading me down the hallway. 'I thought they were all posh as fuck when I met them on Thursday, but they're nice people.'

I go to laugh when I see her serious expression. Does she really not look in the mirror?

Her room, except for the dimensions, the mint green wall and the yet-to-be-unpacked city of cardboard boxes, is almost exactly the same as her room in Adelaide. It's comforting, knowing that this collection of furniture, this specific arrangement of doona cover and desk and faux sheepskin rug from Target, still exists somewhere. She proudly hands me a paper bag, inside which is a green bottle of something called soju, a pair of lurid green socks with dog faces on them, and a handheld paper fan strewn with watercolour flowers.

'The fan is hanji,' she says, 'traditional handmade paper. It was everywhere, man.'

I imagine her walking through the photograph she sent me, pausing by all the market stalls, finally stopping at one to buy the fan. The paper is soft and delicate in my fingers, and beautiful, but I can't shake the melancholy notion that it's been made for tourists, made cheaply, sold for exorbitant profit. They may have seen her coming, heard her accent, known she wasn't local even though she looked it, known she could be duped just as well as the white, fumbling Westerners behind and around her. I fold the fan back up and thank her, trying to keep the sudden, unwelcome disappointment out of my voice.

'Let's have some of this later.' I hold up the soju and go to read the label, but of course it's in Korean, and I feel silly.

'Absolutely,' she nods. 'But firstly, what do you want to do tonight?'

'You mean apart from drinking this? I don't know. Is there anything going on?'

‘Are you kidding?’ She flops onto the bed and pulls out her phone. ‘It is a Saturday, you know. Fucking hell, there’s *so much more* to do here than there is back home. It’s so nice to not have to resign yourself to Hindley Street each weekend. Give me two minutes.’

As she types something into her phone and disappears inside it, the pinboard above the desk catches my eye, and I wander over. This is a new addition to the collection of familiar things. A couple of the photos are of her as a child surrounded by her parents; one shows her donned in a long black graduation gown and cap, beaming, her parchment glaring against the afternoon sun. One has clearly been taken very recently; sporting her new fringe, she’s in a bar with the housemates I’ve just met, holding a flute of champagne. Did she literally print this the morning after? Was this more important than unpacking? The photo only makes me sadder, but I’m not sure why.

The feeling lasts until I look at the polaroid tacked to the corner of the board, and I see my own face. I don’t remember this photo; no version of it exists online, and there’s nothing in the background to suggest a certain place or event. It must have been taken years ago, in the week between Christmas and New Year’s Event, before the novelty of the polaroid camera wore off. We are huddled together outside, and I’m happy. It radiates from me. I can feel the sadness slipping off me the longer I stare, and soon I am light again, giddy at the thought that this, of all photos, made it to her pinboard—that she must have forgiven me after all, she must have stood in this very spot very recently and made a conscious decision that she wanted to see this photo every morning.

‘Gotcha,’ she exclaims, cutting into my thoughts, and sits up on the bed. ‘There’s a rave in the city. Two dollar skittlebombs. We gotta, Elsie.’

‘Cheap, alcoholic, high-energy?’ The euphoria pumps through me; even as I’m talking, I can’t quite tear my gaze from the polaroid. ‘Sounds great, let’s do it.’

#

I didn’t think to pack any nightwear. I didn’t think to pack anything, really, except for a couple of T-shirts and a toothbrush. I explain this sheepishly and she laughs, delicately, *oh Elsie you poor pleb*, and then opens her wardrobe. Digs around for a minute or two, then extracts a purple dress dotted with flowers and orders me to undress and step into it.

‘What, right now?’

‘Sure, why not?’

She turns around slightly to give me privacy, but the flush spreads across me anyway. The scars are too visible; the moles, the stretch marks. Covered in many cases by my tattoos, but still there, always still there, lurking. I pull the dress up as quickly as I can; she turns back to help with the zip, and I stare at myself in the mirror.

‘I would never buy this for myself. *Ever.*’

It clings to all the terrifying parts of me, so tight that to get the zip all the way to my neck her fingers have to press right against my back. The feeling would distract me, if the sight of my cleavage weren’t already doing the job.

‘That’s why I picked it for you.’ Her reflection grins at me. ‘This is Melbourne. You don’t have to be yourself. You can be someone completely different.’

I’ve never seen so much of my own skin while fully dressed, but in a strange way my tattoos make me feel less naked, as though they know I’m in need to protection. They swirl together and cover the parts of me I hate, ink grafting into body armour, as if I’m wearing a second dress, the real dress underneath.

‘Now,’ Lace says, ‘How about shoes?’

I look over at my Docs. ‘Punk feminine is a thing now, right?’

She frowns. ‘Not tonight, it isn’t. Hang on, what size are you again?’

‘Nine.’

‘Hmm.’ She looks her shoe rack up and down; her frown widens. ‘Wait here.’ She disappears for a couple of minutes, leaving me alone with my boobs, and returns triumphantly with a pair of black heels in hand.

‘Hayley won’t miss these,’ she says. I’ve already forgotten which one was Hayley, but I take the shoes anyway. They are nightmarish and make me feel ten feet tall, but the effect is lessened once Lace is dressed, her heels higher than mine, her dress black and lacy, almost lingerie-like. She takes glitter dust and sprinkles it over her arms, then over mine, and, cracking open a small makeup bag, she paints both our eyes smoky and gold.

‘Put your hair in a pony tail,’ she tells me, and I obey. She then takes a comb and teases it out, repositions the hair tie a little higher, a touch more daring. By the time she hands me one of her tote bags and nods approvingly, I feel as if I’m about to take centre stage. Lines rehearsed, character formed, audience to please. Perhaps this isn’t that different. As she says, perhaps I can be someone entire new here. Perhaps I can even be me—the me I think about sometimes while I’m falling asleep, the me that I might have been if I’d stayed in my own timeline.

‘You look fucking hot,’ she says.

I smile at my reflection. I am no longer Elsie Wright, retail employee. Tonight I am Else Ross-Nasser, daughter of Dr Ross and Dr Nasser, Else Object, the first human time traveller.

#

Else walks confidently in the heels that Elsie would have limped in, almost surely rolled an ankle in. Her shoulders are straight. Boys do not bother her. She knows of the misogyny in this time, of the wage gap, the domestic assault, the cat-calling and the wolf whistling; all the animal terms. She is not naïve; it just barely registers. In her time, the time she grew up in, all this nonsense has been forgotten. In her time, a woman can walk down a street and feel powerful, nonchalant. A woman can walk down the street and feel like a man.

Else and Lacie catch the tram into the city centre, so caught up in the presence of each other, the conversations they have missed, that they get off one stop too far and have to double back. Melbourne is warm, because it's November in Australia and the law is the law, but the heat exists almost sheepishly, apologetically, around them, and when Else presses the pedestrian button at the next intersection her hand leaves no sweaty imprint behind, no trace that she had ever been there.

They find a door, almost invisible, and when it opens it's as though they've passed some great test. Down, down, down and out into a night sky—but no, just a room of strobe lights and ceiling colours that look like stars in periphery, artificial constellations looking down over the young and the reckless, the adults who do not know who they are, only that dancing helps somehow.

Her alcohol of choice is tequila; her dance style is sensual, but the kind of sensual that is performed for no-one but herself. She is her own audience. She and Lace tilt their heads back for three, four, five shots, and then lead each other into the middle of the room, the hub of the galaxy. And they are transformed; they become planets, they are Venus and Neptune, magma and ice, pulled together from such great distances for these sparse, miraculous moments— orbiting so closely together that their gravities are dipping and swaying, within arms' reach, then hips', and when they do meet it is not a crash so much as a unison, a sharing of space, a celebration of the most marvellous of astrophysics.

#

Else draws the letters on a piece of paper ripped from a sketchbook. The pen is black, old, flaky; the design is rough as guts by the end. But it's perfect, she says to the artist, in the wake of his raised eyebrows, his offer to tidy it up on the computer, to start again, make it symmetrical, make it clean. But faces aren't symmetrical. Lives aren't clean. So what gives this the right? A stupid reasoning, she knows, but as she follows him out the back and he prepares the ink, it makes more or less sense than everything else.

She rolls up her sleeves, indicates the bare patch of skin, and lies back on the chair. As he wipes the area she looks up at him. From this angle she can count all the hairs in his nose, all the hues of shadow on the underside of his chin. The angle that makes a person ugly, even though he is perfectly cute from every other angle, even though when she walked in, he reminded her of the boy who lied about the broken engine, only with more colours on his skin and more time on his bones. Or less time, in a way. She doesn't know anymore. But she looks at this man in his ugliest form and she thinks, *you've already given me this tattoo. You gave it to me before I was born.*

'What does it stand for? EO.'

'It's my partner's initials.'

'Hmm.' He pauses. 'Ethan? Eric? *Erica*?' He gestures towards Lace, who is watching an infinity symbol getting carved into her elbow, and consequently doesn't notice.

'Something like that.'

He doesn't push it, just traces the stencil into the crook of her elbow, right beside the scar.

'Well,' he says, 'at least if it doesn't work out you can avoid the whole Johnny Depp Winona thing and just tell people it means something else.'

The window behind him is one way, for the customers who come in to get their boobs or their dicks voluntarily stabbed. She looks through it to the three a.m. carpark, where a teenage girl is arguing with her boyfriend. You are an Else Object, Else thinks, as the dull pricking of the needle begins. You, too, are something that belongs somewhere else.

'All done,' he says.

*Not even close*, she thinks. But she sits up anyway. Outside, the girl and her boyfriend are hugging, his hands down the back of her pants. The world goes on. She twists her arm to examine the tattoo. It looks like a branding, a registration.

'It's perfect,' she smiles. 'Thank you.'

From this position, he's no longer ugly; he's rather beautiful. But even as Else makes this observation, she makes a second, darker one. She thinks about how he will age—how

gravity will seduce him, dark corner by dark corner, and how he will be powerless to resist, caressed by deceptively smooth hands and promises of more, more, *more*. How one day he will wake up and he will realise, as though he's just read it in the paper, that he is the last of his kindergarten class to still be here: or worse, that the band he followed across Europe in his twenties are nothing more than one of the bonus level answers on a comedy quiz show, and that—far removed from living fast and dying young—something perfectly mundane took them in their sixties, like bowel or prostate cancer, and the fastest they ever lived was the speed at which the ink travelled from the needle to the dermis layer, the red furious pace of the skin rejecting the tattoo.

One of them slides a card through the machine and seconds later they burst into the carpark, Lace wincing slightly over the clingfilm wrapped around her arm. Her very first transgression. Else stands exactly where the teenage girl stood before, Hayley's heels rubbing against the sides of her little toes, and she wonders whether it is the first transgression of many. Wonders if Lace will keep the infinity symbol hidden under sleeves, or whether she will grow a slow garden across herself, constantly in bloom. Whether one day, people will ask her about the colour of her skin in a way that she will finally enjoy.

But suddenly, Else realises that she will not know.

'So many things are going to happen,' she says, and the *without me* dissolves bitterly in her mouth.

'I know!' Lace spread her arms and spins slowly, looking upwards. 'We have *so much* to look forward to.'

'Are you going to have any kids?'

'Jesus, I hope not for a while. Not until I grow out of tequila.'

'Are you going to be happy?'

'What's with the questions? Am I on *60 Minutes* or something?'

'Listen...'

'Tonight's top story, the life of...'

'LACE.' Else grabs her by the shoulders. The impression falls away with the grin. 'You have to be happy. There's no point to any of it if you're not happy. And I don't know if I can check! I don't know where I'm going.'

They drink each other in. To a stranger walking past, they are two typical young women who have had too much to drink and reached the emotional stage. For one of them, it looks very much like that too, and why should she think any different? She never received any of the emails. And that woman says:

‘You can message me anytime. Facebook, Skype, whatever.’

She means it to be reassuring; she says it with as much warmth as she can muster. But to the mythical stranger, she has confessed to something terrible; the other woman’s face contorts, folds in on itself, and when it folds back out the skin is glossy with tear tracks, running from the eyes all the way down to the jaw.

The woman tries again: ‘I’m happy right now, is that enough?’

‘No, it isn’t *enough!*’

And the blonde woman starts sobbing, each gasp a violent seizure—and neither of them have practised for this, neither of them know what to do except stand there, looking in different directions, living on different trajectories. The stranger—the tattoo artist, perhaps, headed home after a very long day—leaves them alone, and knows almost as little about them as they do. Two buildings down, a blaring television switches to an ad break. On the next street over, a front door slams, and a car engine starts, and two minutes later that same engine passes them, bound for the CBD, and Lace is relieved no-one else is around, and Else is still crying, and she will not learn how to stop for another four minutes and eight seconds, and turning herself numb will take even longer.

#

They do not remember getting back to St Kilda, as if they materialised through sheer willpower. As if I.R.I.S. has sent them there, thinks Else, or she would have, if this were the timeline in which she had become an Else Object, in which she was doomed to be Elsie, normal and scared. The house is empty and still around it, and in it they feel like elephants, charging about, on the verge of breaking something very fragile and very perfect. They despair at the idea, so to distract themselves they open the soju, pour it into Charlie Brown coffee mugs. It tastes like vodka, shrinks their throats like a boa constrictor, but it is not tequila and so they drink it gladly, sitting on the veranda watching cars roll haphazardly past like stray cats, until the bottle is almost empty.

Lace pours the last drop into Else’s mug, and guides it to her mouth. Their gazes meet as she drinks it, and neither of them break the hold when Lace’s fingers intertwine with Else’s and tugs, gently, until the hold is relinquished on the mug. Charlie Brown is set down on the old table beside his duplicate, where he will stay until the morning light hits the lipstick stain on the rim. Lace takes Else’s hand and guides her silently back into the house, through the kitchen, the hallway, into the bedroom, under the sheets, under clothes, under skin. Starting



slowly, clumsy with alcohol and newness, increasing with confidence and the learning of rhythms, of the feel of two bodies, two sets of skin, four arms, four legs, two vaginas, two mouths. And the muggy warmth from outside leaves them alone at last. They are in no need of a heat source; they have discovered their own.

## Sunday

The chair on the veranda is cold, now, shocked by the crispness the sun's brought in, braced and rock-hard. My bones protest the choice of furniture. They know there is a couch inside, soft and forgiving. My head knows there is coffee and Panadol inside too, and pounds at intervals to remind me that there is a way to fix this feeling, or at least make it small enough to carry. But my arms don't work yet, and so I will sit here, staring at the empty bottle of soju and the Charlie Brown mugs, waiting to feel like myself again, but somehow not sure that I ever will.

Lace was still asleep when I got up. My eyes flickered open to the wide expanse of her naked back, the sheets tangled up around our knees, thrown off in our sleep when the temperature got into our dreams. I reached out and ran my finger down the air beside her skin, trying not to touch her. Her spine is still slightly crooked from scoliosis, an almost successful surgery she had when she was eighteen. She told me she used to walk like Quasimodo, and it had made me laugh, the thought of her limping around a tower, the very notion that any part of her could have been ugly. I pulled on my clothes from yesterday and crept outside, where the sight of the mugs and the bottle sent the hangover bursting through my brain like fireworks. The only thought that hasn't completely overwhelmed me so far is the memory—distant and heavy, but nonetheless, a memory—of Lace's hand running over the tattoo on my back, the lace bow. I wade through it again and again, and I wonder if, in the middle of everything, she put two and two together. If the touch was a question, or the discovery of an answer, or whether it was simply a touch. But right now, the memory is enough. It clings to me like the clingfilm still around my elbow. I twist my arm towards me and inspect the EO; apart from a slight red flare, it looks healthy.

A car pulls up to the curb, a Nissan Micra, and I think longingly of Mikes. One of Lace's housemates, whose name I forgot before I'd even shaken her hand, climbs wearily out of the back seat and trudges up the driveway, her shirt untucked, her hair sticking out at angles. She gets to the veranda steps before noticing me, and when she does she jumps, violently.

'Sorry, man.'

'Fucking hell, it's a Sunday,' she says, and disappears inside without explaining herself further.

The second and third housemates come back together, barefoot along the footpath, heels dangling from one hand, coffee enclosed by another. One of them has a bag of chips, despite it being nine thirty. They notice me early, and smile as they approach. The brunette—*Hayley?*—

silently holds out the bag of chips, and I take one, feeling a little like a toll booth officer, demanding payment in exchange for safe passage. They, too, enter the house, and like a French farce the fourth housemate turns up. I close my eyes and wonder briefly, as her footsteps grow louder, if I can ask her for a glass of water; the salt from the chips has turned my mouth to desert.

The footsteps stop before they hit the veranda.

And then I remember that Lace doesn't have a fourth housemate.

#

'Before you say anything,' says the young Dr Ross, 'just let me talk first. *Please.*'

'How did you find me?' I ask, my voice gravelly, but even as I ask I remember that if she's who Apoch says she is, she will have a record of my whole life. Everything I will ever do, logged on a computer somewhere, beyond my control. So instead of waiting for her answer, I rephrase: 'If you already know how this is going to end, what are you pleading for? You already know whether I'm going to say yes or no. I'm not an idiot.'

'It doesn't...' she pauses. 'It's not like that.'

'Oh, really? So you didn't turn me into an experiment?'

'Elsie...'

'You didn't raise me just to send me back in time?'

'No,' she says simply. 'There is so much more to it than that. I *promise* you, I'm not here to hurt you. That's the last thing I want to do.'

My brain screams, the cells too dried out by the hangover to wrap themselves around non-linear concepts. Maybe I've imagined her; in fact, this is exactly the kind of thing I would do to myself. I stand up, as quick as I can without inviting nausea, and turn to head inside, thinking that maybe, if I wait it out, the hallucination will just leave. But then she reaches into her handbag and pulls out a bottle of water. Offers it to me, tentatively. She knew I'd be hungover. Of course she fucking did.

'Don't you want to know why?' she asks quietly.

'You don't even know why,' I say quickly, surely. 'You say so yourself. You don't know why you have to make Else Objects. You just know that if you don't, it'll mess everything up.'

'Did Apoch tell you that?'

'You did. You *showed* me.' My voice rises angrily, proudly. 'I was *there.*'

‘What?’ Her brow furrows. The upper hand slips from her grasp. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t play dumb. I know why you’re here. I know today’s the day. *Doomsday*.’ The word swirls around my tongue, the “oo” luxurious. ‘I don’t care anymore. Just fucking do it.’

‘I suspect,’ she says slowly, methodically, ‘that not everything you have been told is true.’

‘Good morning,’ comes suddenly from behind me. Lace is sleepy and slow in an oversized T-shirt, pulled straight out of a romantic comedy. Her eyes are on Dr Ross, who smiles politely.

‘Hi,’ I say, dragged out of the intensity of one conversation and into the equal gravity of another, with a speed that makes me dizzy. My heart starts thudding violently, and without looking I accept the water bottle, gulp half of it down in a matter of seconds.

‘Sorry to intrude. I...I used to know Elsie when we were kids. I was just passing.’

‘Oh, wow.’ They awkwardly shake hands. ‘What a coincidence, hey.’

‘Yeah, we were just laughing about how crazy it is.’ She smiles at me to complete the effect. But her eyes are hardened.

‘You want to come inside for coffee?’ Lace asks. ‘Everyone in this house is a little seedy right now, so there’s lots of it going. I think someone’s also making chicken nuggets.’

#

I don’t know how it happens, but it does. Me, the love of my life, and my biological mother from the future, seated around a table with three accountants, eating chicken nuggets. It would be laugh out loud funny, if it weren’t so horrific. I drink coffee and water in a repeated loop, feeling my brain relaxing in millimetre increments, barely paying attention to last night’s anecdotes passed back and forth across the table like freshly lit joints. And Dr Ross, sitting across from me, pretending everything is fine, pretending that she didn’t follow me across the country. Is Apoch on his way too? I hope so.

I need Dr Ross to leave, or I need everyone else to leave. There is no in between. There is no coexistence between these two factions of my life; I cannot be both at once. After an hour, when the coffee mugs are empty and the anecdotes have dried up, Lace’s housemates drift off one by one to their bedrooms. Soon it is just the three of us, seated in awkward silence.

‘Could I possibly steal Elsie away for an hour?’ she asks Lace. ‘I have...something she gave me a long time ago. I’d like to give it back to her.’ Lace coughs violently, and winces.

‘Oh, uh...sure thing.’ Lace looks over. ‘If that’s what you want to do?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say to Dr Ross, ‘we’ve already got some plans. It can wait until tomorrow, can’t it?’

‘Actually,’ she says, ‘it’s pretty time sensitive.’

I remember her words to me at the airport, rising word by word out of the vault.

*I’m not going anywhere, I’m afraid.*

*Ah, well, it’s only a matter of time.*

Dr Ross stares intensely, and I shrink under her gaze like a specimen in a petrie dish—but then I see something unexpected, something that brings me back. Desperation. It leaks from her. And I have the upper hand. Here, in 2019, in the suburbs of Melbourne, without her technology, she has nothing.

‘Well,’ mutters Lace, coughing violently, ‘do whatever you want, to be honest. If you need me, I’ll be in the foetal position.’ She stands gingerly, and crosses the room.

‘I’ll join you,’ I say quickly.

‘Else,’ Dr Ross says quietly.

‘Excellent,’ yawns Lace, ‘let’s get some juice and watch Netflix.’

‘I know where your Dad is.’

She has said it softly enough to reach only me. The doorway is around me, the hallway in front, the kitchen behind; the edge of the rabbit hole once again, except this time the abyss asks me to fall in backwards. I won’t see the ground; I’ll only feel it when I stop falling.

Down the hall, in the doorway to her own room, Lace looks over her shoulder, and we look at each other from two different cliffs, and I suppose that we were always headed for this. Not this situation, particularly—but something like it, something wearing these faces, delivering these horrors to us. Lace’s T-shirt droops over her shoulder, exposing skin my lips remember, morning pre-shower sweat that would be salty to taste, if I chose to go back to bed with her. And I could. I really could. We could lead each other down the hallway and lie on top of the covers, waiting for the feeble movement of the ceiling fan to reach us, and we might fuck again, or just talk. She might say I was just an experiment, a night she needed to figure herself out, and she might end it then and there and thank me, with no understanding of the way she had just used me. But I am an Else Object, used to being an experiment, so these are recycled feelings and I will pretend not to feel them as I tell her it’s okay, it’s okay, we can still be friends, of course we can. The hurt will implode on itself like a dying sun and the atmosphere will absorb the fallout. This is the likely solution. That is the effect of the cause.

But this is the problem; I *am an Else Object*. And here is the woman who will make me into one. I am the effect of her cause. The answer to a question not yet formulated. And she knows where my father is.

I think about the face-down envelope in Apoch's coffee table drawer.

I think about the mobile phone, smashed to pieces in the elevator.

The man, smashed to pieces in the elevator.

I can put those pieces back together. Those pieces are not part of experiments, of a *figuring out of the self*, of a *sorry but I'm straight*, they are a *yes I love you, I have figured out the self and the self loves you*. This is a dying star I can resuscitate. Dig out the hurt with my bare hands. Reverse the entropy. Fix everything.

'I'll be back soon,' I say, 'I just have to get something.'

And I stare at Lace with every part of me and think, *I would have loved you your whole life*.

#

She leads me to a hotel lobby and into the elevator, and I hear June screaming at her, I hear phones smashing, I hear Apoch crying. They are all here with us—they climb with us all the way to the thirtieth floor. The room looks out over the city, the bustling metropolitan traffic, the sporting families travelling to games, the dog-walkers, the construction workers. Even here, a quarter of the city is being reborn all the time. I peer down to the specks of lurid orange and yellow, the colours of Melbourne, and Adelaide laughs at me from the inside of my head, as if to say, *you see? It isn't just me. Everything's in progress*.

I sit on the window ledge, my feet on the carpet, and I feel far too calm. All week, Apoch has been weaving fear of the harm this woman will bring to me, but if housekeeping wandered in at this moment all they would find are two young women admiring the view, planning their holiday. Dr Ross sits in a chair, directly in between me and the door, and asks:

'What do you know?'

'Where is my Dad?' I ask in response.

She takes a staggered breath and insists, 'It won't make any sense unless we start at the start. And you must start. Please.'

From my upper vantage small, she is small, too small to be the villain at the centre of all this.

We are both too small. Together, we might almost make one full villain, or one full hero.

But which one?

I say: ‘You founded Section Twelve and invented I.R.I.S.—well, you *will* invent it—for the purposes of identifying, crafting and sending Else Objects backwards through time. You don’t know why you do it. You just know that if you don’t, history will be different, which means that your present will be different. You discovered that your young daughter was an Else Object, and you chose science-hood over motherhood, and you sent her back to where she needed to be. Your government put you on trial for violation of a law, you spent the whole time being a complete villain and destroying your reputation, and on the day of the verdict you used I.R.I.S. to disappear. Your daughter grew into me. You’ve been showing me snapshots of the future all week for, I don’t know, some sick kick of yours. And now you’re going to make me disappear, and I can’t do anything to stop you, because there are records of it in the future so it’s basically already happened.’

She listens with her head cocked, nodding slightly, and when I finish the nod grows proper.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘That’s mostly true.’

‘What do you mean?’ I look away, annoyed, having prided myself on keeping up. ‘How could it be mostly true? And also...how do you *know*? It hasn’t happened to you yet. I should be the expert here.’

She leans back in her seat and props her feet up, with startling nonchalance, on the window ledge. The left half of my body itches with the need to be away from her, and it confuses me. It should be stronger. Why isn’t it stronger? Why don’t I feel like running?

Why doesn’t she feel like a villain?

*She feels like a friend.*

‘Well,’ she muses, ‘for one thing, I don’t know what you’re talking about with these snapshots, but I’m not behind them.’

‘Of course you’re not,’ I insist. ‘But you will be. When you’re older.’

‘No,’ she repeats. ‘Listen to me. What you’re describing, they feel like, what, dreams? You can’t touch anything, can’t be heard, but it still feels real?’

I nod emphatically, and raise my shorts to display my bruise. ‘I got this in the courtroom.’

But Dr Ross barely looks—her attention is focussed on the words flung between us, the words in waiting. ‘That isn’t my technology,’ she replies forcefully, her eyes wide. ‘That sounds like a Chrono-Preview.’

‘A...a what?’

‘An offset of I.R.I.S.’ Her feet return to the carpet, and she leans forward, her gaze burning. ‘It’s a version of time travel which leaves no footprint, and therefore no possibility of a POHS violation. No government supervision. Developed within Twelve, but not by me. Written and put into practise by Dr Juniper.’

‘Dr Juniper?’

‘Do you know her?’

‘I don’t think—oh!’

*You are cold, Dr Ross. I don’t care if I get fired for saying so. The POHS bill isn’t perfect, Dr Nasser told me that on my first day, but it does require us to have morals. It works because we are good people. Because we are trying to do something good with powerful technology, and that means that there are lines we don’t ever cross. But you—you’re a psychopath. And you’re not going to get away with it.*

I think of June in the office, so angry that she has to look down into her hands, to avoid an explosion which at most she can only delay. June in the elevator, who could not delay anymore. June, Dr Juniper, sending Apoch back through time and then looking straight at me, although now I know that her expression does not say *you’re welcome* so much as *so there you go. End of lesson. That is your mother and this is how she will not get away with it.*

Christ. It makes so much *sense*.

‘Okay.’ I look down and the fluffy tendrils of carpet spin towards me. I imagine them growing, snaking around my legs like mauve vines, and the thought sends me up out of the chair and across the room. Back again, to make sure the room’s not shrinking on me. I need something else to cling onto. Something easy.

‘Hold that thought,’ I say, ‘Now it’s my turn to ask a question. How old are you?’

It’s the first thing I think of, spurred by something that’s been nudging me ever since Dr Ross first turned up. But she doesn’t seem surprised by the question. Pauses only briefly, then says, ‘I’m twenty.’

‘But Apoch said you were born in 2013.’ She looks at me like a maths teacher, like Rachel would look at me. Waiting for me to find the answer within myself. Instead, I push. ‘So you should only be *six*.’

‘That’s right. The records say I’m six.’



The expectant gaze continued, and my cheeks flare in the frustrating knowledge that the pieces are all there, but I can't put them together. And—oh. And suddenly I can.

'Apoch never went to Sydney. He never checked for himself whether you were there. The records were faked.'

She smiles, pleased.

'But why would you fake your own childhood?'

'Well,' she says, 'if I'm going to explain this to you, you need to be aware of a couple of key assumptions you have made, based on what Apoch has told you. This is neither of your faults. Scientific fact will always begin as an impossibility. Fire was magic once.'

'Sure,' I say, because I can't think of anything substantial which doesn't involve some choice swear words and the escalation of my already sprinting pulse.

'What you know,' she continues, 'is that Dr Ross disappears from 2054, and you disappear from 2019. You believe they are correlated. Yes, they are. But not in the way you think.'

'And what do I think?'

'You think that, in terms of cause and effect, she is the former. She leaves to come find you, and then you disappear. This is an understandable assumption. But actually, it's the opposite.'

'I leave...to find her? I travel to 2054?'

'Yes. You go home, Elsie.'

*Home.*

'But then...where does she go?'

'Home as well, I hope.' She smiles. 'According to the records, you're the one who sends me home.'

'But that's impossible,' I tell her. 'I.R.I.S. isn't invented for decades. How do I time travel without the time machine?'

But as the words leave my mouth, something in my throat reaches desperately, yearning for the letters back. For what a waste of syllables and breath! What a waste of the effort put into a question, that rising tone of curiosity that stamps itself out almost immediately, before my mouth closes, before hers opens, before she unfurls like a magician to an audience who has caught the assistant in the trap door:

'Who says we don't have the time machine?'

She closes her eyes against the sun, and falls silent. Heart thudding, I glance over my shoulder, back into the bedroom, generic pastel doona and bare furniture. I can make out the

faint outline of the laptop I noted on my way through. Is I.R.I.S. on it? Waiting for us in a folder, looking for all the world as mundane as Excel? But if so, how the hell does she have it?

‘Where’s home, for you?’ I ask.

Eyes still closed, she smiles and says, ‘Ahh, you’ve finally found it.’

‘Found what?’

‘The *beginning*. The first big assumption.’ She twists her arm and turns the inside of her elbow towards me, and I know what’s happening even before I see it.

‘You’re not the first human EO,’ she says. ‘I am.’

#

‘I was born in 2062,’ says the first human EO to the second human EO. ‘I was sent back here to correct history—more accurately, to redirect the goals of Section Twelve, which had become...dangerously curious, you might say. Those particular details are not for you to concern yourself with; they contain facts you are not allowed to know. This is the story. I grew up a normal girl, just as you did. Then, when I was seventeen, I was called out of my class in school. Something trivial, they told me, it wouldn’t take long.’ She laughs, short and maniacal. ‘They drove me to a government facility and told me the history I’d been learning about, the dates I’d been memorising for my exams...they weren’t what had really happened. Not the first time around, anyway. The original timeline, I learned, was...oh God, it was amazing we were there at all. Proper evil scientist stuff. I’m not going to tell you about the atrocities that Twelve committed; I’m sure your imagination can fill in the blanks. Not to mention that I signed a waiver vowing that no information of the original timeline would remain in the past. And besides, you are so young; you don’t need to know.’

‘I’m four years older than you,’ I tell her.

‘I suppose,’ she says, and pauses her story to stare blankly at me for a couple of seconds. ‘God, I feel so *old*. I’ve been on this mission three years, I still have nineteen to go. I feel like I’m a thousand.’

‘Keep going,’ I say. She might not feel villainous, but I haven’t quite gained the ability to feel sorry for her.

‘Yes,’ she says, and straightens up. ‘You’re right. We don’t have much time left. The original timeline, let’s just say, had committed such awful sins that the consequences of those sins could not be reversed. No amount of positive action could bring us back to what we were

before. So a decision had been made, by the government of the original timeline. To rewrite it completely. To correct it.

‘But surely that would put their whole society at risk?’ I ask.

‘That’s what I said,’ she nods. ‘And it turns out that this is exactly what happened. They had the opportunity to return to when the world stood at a fork in the road. One road led to the dying world; one led to the thriving. And they shifted the world onto a new path, the path which did not lead to them, which erased everything they knew and likely even themselves. They did it by sending back an agent who would infiltrate Twelve and divert its aims, who would create the catalyst for that shift from old path to new. That agent succeeded, the timeline was changed, and the society that I grew up in was written over the society that had saved all of us.’

Then they told me that the scientist was me.

None of it matched up! That wasn’t even my name! I don’t know how you’ve managed with all these revelations, but stop for a moment, and imagine learning that your entire life has already happened without you—more than that, your entire *world* depends on you—and that everyone’s just waiting for you to catch up. I fought against it for a long time. I told them, how do you know? From our point of view, there’s nothing to fix! Why should you send me back in time to fix something that no longer needs fixing?! But of course, you’ve been learning about Else Objects all week, you understand where my angry logic falls apart.’

I nod vigorously; I *do* know this. ‘If you don’t do it, you don’t close the loop. You create a paradox. You’d seen yourself in the past, so it wasn’t that you had to do it, it’s that you’d *already done it*.’

‘Exactly. I didn’t have a choice—same as you. I’d saved the original timeline. If a version of me hadn’t survived into the new timeline, after the butterfly effect had changed so much, then I couldn’t have gone back in the first place.’

‘It’s a slightly twisted version of the grandfather paradox.’

‘The what?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ I mutter.

She gets to her feet, goes and sits at the end of the bed, staring at the laptop. A weariness laces through the rest of her story, as though she has told it to herself so many times that she is tired of it.

‘In twenty or so years,’ she tells me, ‘I’m going to start drip feeding discoveries about time travel into research projects involving myself and Dr Nasser. We’re going to patent it, and establish Section Twelve, but before then—before Twelve, before the patent—I’m going to

implant a false system in I.R.I.S. which will detect things out of place, thus necessitating a constant prioritisation of homing these out-of-place things. We will call them Else Objects.’

‘You created Else Objects.’ She nods, and I feel my mouth gaping open uncontrollably. ‘There really was no point to them at all.’

‘They’re going to be a tactical distraction,’ she smiles. ‘Harmless transportations, disguised as crucial ones. In reality, none of it makes any difference. Of course you can change the past. You just can’t expect to go back to your old life afterwards. The original version of me is proof of that. She came back not knowing what she was going back to—if she was going back to anything at all.’

‘Why didn’t you just go back and dissolve Section Twelve?’ I ask. ‘Or just not invent time travel at all?’

She looks over her shoulder at me, and in that moment she looks a thousand.

‘You know better than that,’ she says tiredly. ‘We needed time travel. We needed I.R.I.S. We just needed Apoch and Seph away from Twelve.’

‘Apoch as well? But he’s just a lawyer.’

‘The reason we know about the original timeline,’ she says, ‘is that the original me preserves certain records. I must have taken them back with me the first time around, so that something later exists to show as proof. Otherwise, of course you wouldn’t believe it. You’d make the same mistakes all over again. I.R.I.S. has a storage system, and in that system are documents about Section Twelve. Apoch may be a lawyer in this timeline, but in the last his role was much more pivotal. Without my infiltration, Seph and Apoch let their scientific curiosities get the better of them—and God, it’s not their fault, it really isn’t. I might have made the same mistakes in their shoes. My mission was never to punish them for their actions; I’ve been thinking of it like a quarantine. But now I need to pause my story and ask *you* a couple of questions.’

‘Ask...me?’

‘If Dr Juniper’s been using Chrono-Previews on you, then your witnessing of the events of 2054 are more vivid and reliable than my records. I only know what has been written down, and data can lie. I know that you are my daughter, and that Seph is your father. I know that sending you here was part of my mission. I also know that Apoch has followed you here out of some kind of need to protect you from me, but I’m not sure why he feels so strongly. It doesn’t make any sense. I wondered vaguely whether I’d seduced him and you were secretly his daughter, and that you were only recorded at Seph’s, but one look at the colour of your skin

blows that theory clean out of the water. The records don't tell me about human emotion. Please tell me everything. What have you seen?'

'Well, firstly,' I say, 'Apoch is motivated by love, but not paternal love. Well, not *his* paternal love, anyway. And you're going to have a very hard time seducing him. You're not his type.'

I tell her everything—what I remember of the trial, the specific details that until now have been vastly overshadowed by the *implications* of it all, the betrayal, the hurt and the cold and the distance that has grown, atom by atom, between me and everything I ever thought was mine. Now I let numbers drift to the surface, dates and facts and circumstances, to the best of my knowledge. When I tell her about Apoch and Dr Nasser, her mouth opens in an 'o', but not one of surprise, more of satisfaction. Something has clicked into place.

'God, the poor man,' she sighs. 'Loses everything he loves in a couple of months. I had my suspicions, but now I know that sending you back is going to be one of the hardest days of my life.'

'I forgive you.'

For a few seconds, I don't realise that I've said it. I almost look around me, expecting another presence in the room, another, more understanding version of me. But no. It turns out that I am the one who understands.

Not for the first time, I wonder what it was like. Was it the morning, the evening? Was it the very last thing she did for the day, or the very first—did she pull it off like a bandaid, or work her way up to it, distracting herself with menial tasks, hoping to accumulate courage with each meaningless action? Did she cry? Did I cry? Did the device hurt when it was inserted? Were our eyes on each other as I disappeared, or was I thinking of other things? Would it have mattered either way? Could there have been a way for it to hurt less, for either of us?

I don't think so. I sit on the window ledge, and I look at her and think about who she will turn into, or *what*—how the lines will age her face, the sun will stain her hair and her eyelids. How no matter what command she has of time, it will eventually catch up to her, in the way that it will catch up to me, to Apoch, to Seph, to Lace, to Mum and Rachel, to Jared, to the tattoo artist, to the construction worker on Donald Bradman Drive. How she will face the coming years, unlike everyone else in history, with an instruction manual, and as a result with no free will. What kind of life is that? I look at her and I forgive her for the thing she did to me, the thing she will do to me. But I will not tell her that I love her. This is not the time she needs to hear it the most. This is not the dying sun that needs resuscitating.

She injects the device back into the same crook of the elbow, a new scar tracing over the old, and she tells me what I need to do, in small, careful instructions. Far too many instructions for such a short amount of time—and yet she tells me reassuringly, because to her of course I am capable of this, because to her I have already done it. And after everything, after all this fuss, I discover that becoming an Else Object for the second time hurts no more or less than a Hep B vaccination. The needle slides out; the tattooed *EO* blurs dark grey through the transparent syringe. I feel no different afterwards. I half-expected to feel slightly dislodged from the present, somehow—for the early afternoon light to paint the carpet through my transparent fingers, or for the clock on the hotel wall to tick more slowly. I stand in front of it and try to remember how long seconds last for. I think that's still it. I think I'm still here.

'You learned the blueprints for I.R.I.S. from your own book,' I realise out loud. 'You only know how to do it because you do it later. There's no point of origin.'

She smiles, amused. 'I like to think that it was invented by time itself. A romantic, notion, I know. But everything else in the universe needs to be constantly reconstructing itself. Stars are dying and being born, planets are mutating. Cities are constantly being repaved, rebuilt, torn apart, and put back together. People are constantly rewriting their own histories. Who's to say time has no sentience? Who's to say time doesn't also think of itself as a city under construction? Maybe it got sick of waiting for us to figure it out ourselves.'

Below us, the sun has turned Melbourne into a mirage, roads gleaming, buildings blurring into windowless blocks of grey. Only the very tops of the buildings allow us to see them. Only the parts closest to us feel real.

Is this what time is like?

'I like that idea,' I say.

'Me too,' she smiles. 'Time is a fascinating thing, isn't it? Maybe I should consider it as a career. Speaking of time, we still have six and a half minutes. You might as well relax. Sit down.'

I do so.

'You remember what you need to do?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me.'

As I outline the next twenty or so minutes of my life, she nods in contentment, but the feeling stops just short of me; in its place is a niggling, a quiet voice submerged under the wave of data which has been drowning my brain. With the near future in place, it manages to reach me.

‘I understand what happens to me,’ I say, ‘but what about you? You’re not supposed to be twenty years old yet. What do you do?’

‘I Hitchhike too,’ she says absentmindedly, typing a few more keys, and then shutting her laptop. ‘There’s a window opening up in about half an hour. It will take me to September 2035, which is a few months before I start my physics degree. From there, I age naturally.’

‘But how do you get there? It takes two fingerprints to operate I.R.I.S. Did you manage a bypass?’

‘No, that’s impossible.’ She stands. Picks up the laptop. ‘You’re right. I need two fingerprints.’

‘But I won’t be here in half an hour.’ The words arrive sluggish, jet-lagged. I watch as she lifts up the side of the doona and slides the laptop under the bed, out of sight. A shiver crouches at the base of my spine, ready to pounce. *You’re missing something, Else. Find it find it find it find it*

‘No, Else, you won’t be here.’

*Find it*

‘Who helps you get there?’

She sits back on the edge of the bed and stares expectantly at the door.

*Find it*

‘Whose is the second fingerprint?’

*Knock knock.* The sound awakens the shiver; it leaps up my spine to my neck and reaches my brain, chemically reacts, swirls in a beaker until it becomes panic.

Dr Ross looks at me without a trace of surprise and replies, ‘It’s his.’

I take one small, tentative step, and then two, and then the need to know overtakes me, and the door is within arm’s length and the knob twists with a creak and Apoch pours into the room like a tsunami, *Else, are you alright, are you alright, I took the earliest possible flight,* and his arms wrap around me, and when I don’t return the favour he draws back in confusion, his hand brushing, then stopping, then *freezing,* at the second scar on my elbow, and only then does he cast his gaze around the room, corner to corner, but she’s been so still that she could have been furniture.

‘You’re too late,’ she says quietly, as though she were telling him the weather.

His face goes blank, closes shop for processing—and then it contorts horribly. He is ten years older now, greyer, creakier, but the expression is the same as it was in the elevator, the pain just as fresh.

‘Stop,’ I say, ‘Listen. I don’t disappear. I don’t die. *I go back.*’ I reach out, but I’m not strong enough to hold him back as he starts charging towards her, and I launch the last weapon in my arsenal: ‘She knows where Dad is!’

He stops just shy of the bed. Dr Ross hasn’t moved, and the calm expression hasn’t moved an inch from her face. It unnerves me, so physically close to the anger radiating from Apoch, and I step towards them.

‘Let me go back,’ I say, carefully, ‘and she’ll bring him to you. She told me where he is.’

‘Tell me,’ he growls, still staring at her. ‘Tell me, and then shut down I.R.I.S., and then *maybe* I’ll calm down.’

‘Not yet,’ I say, and when he whirls around to me I add, ‘you have to help her first. You have to be her second fingerprint. Otherwise she won’t get to 2035, and none of it will happen the way it has, and you know that that can’t happen.’

‘Why not?’ His eyes flare dangerously. ‘A chance to redo all of it without her? That seems pretty good to me. And besides, it doesn’t matter! I told you the other day, the timeline didn’t break down when I came back, and *I’m* not supposed to be here!’

‘Yes, you are,’ Dr Ross murmurs.

‘No, I’m not!’ he yells over her, his voice cracking on the last syllable. ‘June programmed an unofficial Hitchhiking! And I brought back your stupid book! That violates at least two POHS laws.’

Dr Ross moves to the bedside table, slides the drawer open, and pulls out a familiar block of not-paper.

‘You brought back this stupid book,’ she explains, ‘so that I could access it and build a version of I.R.I.S. from the information in Chapters 1 and 2. Without this book, I wouldn’t be able to fake any progress while working on the prototype with Seph, and we wouldn’t get the funding for Twelve. Apoch, you made all of this possible.’

‘The book...is an Else Object?’ He asks it like a question, but nobody answers it, and he doesn’t need confirmation. I watch him deflate horribly, the strength evaporating from his shoulders, and I think about how long it has been there, building up in his stomach, training for a war. I wonder how many times he thought about what he was going to say in this moment. If he thought it would ever arrive. Whether he rehearsed words in front of a mirror—maybe the one in the shop that’s never sold—and whether he debated certain words over others, certain sounds. Now the only sound he makes is an intake of breath, stuttered, broken.

Dr Ross makes a different sound. Says, ‘Else, you have fourteen seconds.’



‘Oh.’ I look over to the clock, and the reality of what’s about to happen returns, in technicolour, in lurid construction yellow. ‘Oh, Christ, okay.’

‘Shut it down,’ pleads Apoch. ‘She can go later, can’t she?’

Dr Ross shakes her head. ‘I’m sorry. It’s past the threshold for deactivation. And besides, the next window isn’t for seventy-seven years. She’d be almost a hundred, Apoch.’

‘Why couldn’t you send me instead?’

‘Because you *have* to be here.’

‘But why?’

‘Stop,’ I say. They both turn to me; their blurred outlines make my heart beat faster. ‘Please.’

*I don’t want this. I don’t want this to be the last memory of my first life.*

The shape of Apoch grows larger, strides nearer, and I can’t quite tell if he’s blurring because I’m crying or because I’m disappearing.

I find out as the clock ticks over.

He never reaches me.

#

A collection of homes, held together with twine, strapped to the ribcage in case of emergency.

A bedroom in Norwood; a white boxer curled on the bed, leaving enough space beside her for the weight of a human.

An antiques store on Grote St; open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, donations welcomed.

A bedroom, airlifted from Adelaide and refitted into a share house in Melbourne, altered slightly by time and new friends. A bed with a girl asleep on top, hungover, her shoes still on, the right heel caught up in the doona.

A year: 2054.

## *Wednesday*

Hitchhiking feels exactly the same as every other time I've visited the future. I close my eyes to steady the dizziness; underneath me, the cheap, hard hotel carpet exists for an instant longer and then disappears. My first instinct, of all things, is to direct all my senses to my elbow, as if I will be able to feel the device imploding. Of course, it has likely happened instantaneously, long before I even thought to focus on it.

I give up. I open my eyes.

## *Five*

Dr. Ross is looking at me.

It seems so obvious, now, that she has evolved from Jared's bandmate, that the only real difference is time—her hair is different, her context is wildly different, but her eyes are the same. Her cheekbones are the same. Her hands, which I find myself drawn to, are the same hands which only moments ago sent me here, from a time which already seems so far away, a hazy collection of sounds, smells, names.

And she's looking at me. This is not a Chrono-Preview; for the first time, I can touch the future. Be heard by it. Be seen by it. Be a *part* of it.

'You finally decided to turn up,' she says, instead of saying hello.

And instead of saying hello back, I wipe the tear off my cheek, take a deep breath, and say: 'We have five minutes.'

'Yes,' she says simply, and I have heard her voice many times before, but it is the strangest thing to be here and have it directed at me—it is almost shocking to have her look at me and not see right through. We're in one of the laboratories—possibly the one that Apoch disappeared in, although they must all look fairly similar, so I can't be sure. She goes over to the computer and types a few frantic keys, then beckons me over for the fingerprint scan. The device is already in her arm; just below her rolled-up sleeve the scar from her first time travelling experience is partly covered by the new scar, the small red square.

'Do you remember everything?' she asks.

'Of course. I just recounted it back to you. Your memory is getting worse.'

She smiles at the quip, and then points to a section of the screen, where I press my finger lightly. In the moment before the beep, I feel her staring. I'm not sure if she realises she's doing it, or if her eyes are betraying her. I think about the years that have passed, from

her point of view, since she's seen me last. Did she do it all the way she wanted? Did she ever want to stop?

'I called him a few minutes ago,' she says. Her breath stops just short of my skin.

*You'll have five minutes before my Hitchhiking window. I'm sorry it's not longer. I'm sure by that point I'll want to pull the timeline apart just to stay a while and look at you.*

My finger drops from the screen, and I turn to look at her. It's all far, far too quick, and I want more. I want to take this moment and stretch it out ahead of us, take all the unwanted time, all the wasted time, and recycle it here and now—and God, she invented time travel, why the fuck can't she just *do this?*—but time is its own self-paving, self-constructing city, and all she really did was notice, and she is only a person like everyone else.

Footsteps in the hallway, closer, closer, and then the door clicks open, the frame swinging towards us.

#### *Four*

His gaze snaps on to me first; he didn't expect anyone else to be here, especially someone he hasn't seen before—or, more accurately, hasn't seen in twenty years.

'Who are you?' he asks, with only mild curiosity.

*I'm your daughter.*

'Dr Nasser, could you come here please?'

Our reunion is interrupted; he looks over to Dr Ross, and I watch his face harden. Internal barriers shifting into place, weapons readied and aimed.

'You said you wanted to show me something,' he mutters darkly. 'This is your last chance before you get thrown out, so fine, I'm here. What is it?'

'I've noticed something strange in the system,' she tells him.

'Yes, I believe it got a bit fucked when you started using it on people.'

'Could you please come over and take a look?'

'Who is she?'

'She's one of the new interns. I don't know her name. What's your name?'

'Larissa,' I say.

'That's right. Anyway, Seph, *please* come over here.'

He stares at me for a couple of seconds. I wonder if, in the very back of his head, a couple of long-dormant wire ends are sparking—if there's a voice, pushing, squeezing its way through the masses, begging him to look more closely at the colour of my skin, at the crook in

my elbow. I wonder if the voice is mine. But he must decide not to listen, because he turns and walks over to the laptop.

And the same voice, from inside my head, screams at him. *Don't do it. We're all here now, we fixed it, we don't have to do anything else!*

'What's wrong with the system?'

*He arrives in the hotel lobby at 1:03pm. Twenty-eight minutes after you leave. Security cameras show him walking up to the counter, distinctly ruffled and out-of-place, and asking a question. Before the receptionist can answer the question, he turns like he's heard someone talking to him. He walks quickly out of sight and doesn't reappear.*

'Nothing. The system is perfect.'

*Ruffled? Why is he ruffled?*

*Why do you think? You think he's going to just let you do it?*

Dr Ross must have been training for this moment, because she executes it perfectly. One moment Seph is standing there, studying the screen in puzzlement, and the next he is on the floor, Dr Ross straddling his waist and pushing hard on his shoulders to keep him down. She's done it smoothly, but he is still gasping for air, a disoriented body with a brain diseased by jet lag, a few clicks behind.

'Syringe,' she yells.

I lunge for the needle on the desk and bring it to her. Kneeling down beside her, I hold Seph's wrist down so that the inside of his elbow is stretched out, and she injects the device with the confidence of someone who has done it a hundred times before. Under my index finger, his pulse starts to race like machine gun fire—he's not quite caught up yet, but he helped develop the technology and so he knows exactly what the sharp pain means.

'Everything is fine,' I tell him forcefully, and to distract us both from our rising panic, I keep talking. 'We're not going to hurt you. We're sending you to Apoch. He's a little older now, he's grey around the edges. Still looks pretty good, though. He's got an antique shop. Maybe you can pack it up and shift it to Melbourne, like you always wanted to.'

His eyes lock onto me, wide and seizing.

'But I don't understand. I saw him this morning—he's on his way here! And how do you *know* that? You're not an intern! *Who are you?*'

His questions go unanswered; a realisation has hit me, loud and violent, and for a moment our pulses dance in ragtime.

*Shit.*

### Three

‘Where’s his phone?’

Dr Ross looks over. ‘What?’

‘*His phone!*’

She flinches at the volume, then rearranges her hold on him so that she has an arm free, and starts patting him down.

‘He usually—*here*, it’s here.’

She fishes it out of his coat pocket, and I lunge for it.

‘How long do we have?’ I ask.

She looks at the clock. ‘Thirty-eight seconds. What are you doing?’

‘That will have to be enough.’ I scroll through the Contacts list; but thankfully, his name is at the beginning of the alphabet. I press call, and, like I knew it would, Apoch’s voice recording launches. He’s still driving.

I push the phone against Seph’s ear and say, ‘Leave a message. Say goodbye.’

‘No!’

‘Do it or the timeline falls apart.’

The recording beeps faintly next to his ear. He takes one deep, shaky breath and squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them again, he stares dully at the ceiling like a corpse, and beside me, Dr Ross looks down at her hands. I don’t need to ask. She knows all too well what he is going through. Did she numb herself as well, as she was saying goodbye to me?

‘Hey, it’s—it’s me,’ he murmurs. ‘I don’t know what’s going on, but I have to go. I love you. Please don’t worry. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m sure it’s just somewhere...else.’

Dr Ross falls forward; her hands, once pressed to tailored suit shoulders, hit the floor. My hand suddenly discovers that there is no wrist to hold. The phone clatters and settles face-up. *End of message. Please press 1 to send, or 2 to re-record.* I think about a similar phone, smashed in a nearby elevator. I think about Apoch, still driving, or maybe with his phone on silent. No need for the sound to be on; no need for important phone calls today.

I look at the space where my father used to be, and I realise what has just happened in the final sentence of Seph’s message. He didn’t pause to search for a reassuring last word. He paused because in that instant his gaze had wandered from the ceiling to my face, and from my face to my arm. From my arm to the crook of my elbow—the tattoo, and the two scars.

The Else in his sentence was capitalised. He realised who I am.

Two

‘What do I do now? What happens?’

*After you’ve sent Seph here, and me home, the mission is considered complete. Permanent quarantine has been established and the agent returns home to read about herself in textbooks. She has some studying to do; she never did pass that high school exam.*

‘They’ll be here in a couple of minutes,’ she muses. We stay on the floor; neither of us has the energy to stand. ‘Two Hitchhikings in such a short time is suspicious, and they monitor the logs, they’ll have seen it by now. No Twelve employee pass, plus the unofficial use of equipment. You’ll probably be arrested. Of course, when they figure out who you are, you’ll be a sensation. They’ll talk about you far more than they ever talked about me.’

‘In the Chrono-Preview, people were *everywhere*. I thought it was just because you’d disappeared.’

‘I daresay it’s half my fault, and half yours.’

‘Yes, but...That doesn’t answer my question. What am I *supposed* to do?’

‘I don’t know. But I also don’t know what *I’m* supposed to do when I get home. I don’t know anything about what’s waiting for me, or even if it’s there at all. But isn’t that the whole point?’ When I don’t respond, she cocks her head to the side and thinks, then adds, ‘There are, of course, several options. Here, you could use your fame to your own advantage. You’re as close to being the heir of Section Twelve as anyone could possibly be. You could do some good work here, with some technical training. You could even clear my name, if you wanted to, and if you could get through Dr Juniper. Although I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t. In the grand scheme of things I guess it doesn’t matter.’

‘Of course it matters.’

She smiles.

One

‘You know, you could also just go home.’

‘*Home?*’

‘I was doing some research a few months ago,’ she says, ‘and I came across a connection you might be interested in. Links a Tuesday six months from now to December 2,

2019. If you could convince someone to be your second fingerprint for I.R.I.S., there's always that.'

Home. A house in Norwood. An adopted mother, a white Boxer. A bedroom in Melbourne. An accountant with semi-corrected scoliosis and a newly tattooed ribcage. An antiques store, run by two time travellers who can never go back home, and so will build home around them.

'You know,' she murmurs, 'I met you once. When I was a little girl, in my own timeline. You'd changed a lot, so it's taken me a long time to realise, but I'm sure it was you.'

'How old was I?'

'I'm not sure.'

'*Guess.*' I lean forwards, desperate—if I know my age at a fixed point, I can work backwards and figure out whether I leave or stay...

'No,' she insists. As ever, she is one step ahead. 'I'm not telling you that. You have to decide how old you're going to be. Just...promise, okay? Promise you'll come?'

I imagine her: three or four years old, me forty, full of the future.

I imagine her: three or four years old, me seventy-five, full of the past.

I remember her: twenty years old, me twenty-four.

I see her now: thirty-eight years old, me twenty-four.

And I say, 'I promise.'

Her eyes turn the words to water; controlled, at first, but then the tears find her cheeks, her neck, the top of her collar. She doesn't say anything back, but she doesn't have to. Her mission is over, after all, and I forgive her, and I told her so in a hotel room in 2019, and when I meet her again, I will tell her again, no matter how old she is, no matter how old *I* am, no matter if she knows what it is for or not.

On the wall, the clock ticks away the fifth minute. Neither of us can see it happen, but neither of us have to. All at once, she disappears. No atom left behind—like the toy horse in Denmark, like three year old me, oblivious, unprepared, shifted quietly into place.

The first Else Object, and the last.

*The End*

## **Exegesis**

*The Female Time Traveller: Shadows, Spotlights and Otherness*



## Introduction

Time travel narratives commonly explore the relationship between what is and what could be, through a deconstruction of political structures, cause and effect, linearity and free will. In doing so, these fictions can be a place for the prioritisation and celebration of identities that have often been excluded from the narrative of history, among them women, people of colour, queer people, and often a combination of all three. This thesis, implementing the framework of Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the Other<sup>1</sup>, defines these excluded narratives as "shadow histories", and their dominant counterparts as "spotlight histories". In turn, it argues that the nature of the science fiction time travel narrative, with its unique connections between past, present and future, empowers Othered identities to both bring shadow histories into the light, and to project new, inclusive narratives forwards into visions of the future.

This exegesis, presented in three chapters, discusses the time travelling woman as Other, and goes on to develop this discussion in the close readings of two selected time travel novels: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). This analysis interweaves with reflections upon the creative component of the thesis: a novel entitled *Else*. In all these texts—Butler's, Piercy's, and my own—the female protagonists use time travel to illuminate shadow histories, but not without great personal cost to their physical and emotional selves. My analysis of these texts concludes that for the Othered identity, time travel is an unavoidably painful process, but this pain is the price that author and reader must also pay, in order to bring shadow histories to light, and in order to carve positive spaces in the future.

In 1988, Lefanu wrote in *In The Chinks of the World Machine* that '[f]or all its speculation on the consequences of scientific development, science fiction has been notably silent on the concomitant subject of social development, particularly as regards the personal and political relationships between men and women'<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note that, over thirty years later, this is no longer entirely accurate. The twenty-first century has seen a multitude of positive representations of women (both white and of colour) interacting with time in science fiction. Though they may not always be time travellers explicitly, these heroines interact with linear time in ways which illuminate their cultural and gendered identities. Karen Lord's

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Vintage Books, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> S. Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*, London, The Women's Press, 1988, p. 3.

*Unraveling* (2020),<sup>3</sup> for instance, is a combination of murder mystery and Caribbean myth, wherein forensic therapist Dr Miranda Ecouvo is thrown out of time and into a realm of labyrinths and spirits who have taken an interest in the murder. Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002)<sup>4</sup>, meanwhile, depicts an ageless female character who shapeshifts between nineteenth-century China and a future Pacific northwest, in a fashion comparable to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*<sup>5</sup>.

There has been an explosion of time travel narratives which depict scientific women and women in positions of authority. As Chapter One touches on briefly, the notion of women in scientific realms contradicts the perpetuated cultural belief that women are emotional and irrational, so these recent texts are crucial to unravelling that belief. Connie Willis' Hugo and Nebula-winning *Doomsday Book* (1992)<sup>6</sup> and its sequels, in which Oxford historians conduct field work by travelling in time as observers, can be seen as a famous forerunner to the novels of the past few years. Recent works which feature scientific women time travellers include Kelly Robson's *Gods, Monsters and the Lucky Peach* (2018)<sup>7</sup>, wherein an eco-scientist in an environmental dystopia travels back to survey the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; Annalee Newitz's *The Future of Another Timeline*<sup>8</sup>, wherein a geoscientist is a member of the Daughters of Harriet (Tubman) which manipulates history to carve a better future for women; and Kate Mascarenhas' *The Psychology of Time Travel* (2019)<sup>9</sup>, which describes the invention of the time machine by four women, and one's subsequent exiling from known history.

Other recent texts have celebrated women shifting into spaces of war, physical violence, aggression, and piracy, which in many ways have been seen as traditionally masculine spaces. Joyce Carol Oates' *Hazards of Time Travel* (2018)<sup>10</sup> depicts a teenage girl in a dystopian future who, after delivering an incendiary graduation speech, is sent back to 1959 to be re-educated. *This Is How You Lose the Time War* (2019)<sup>11</sup>, by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, tells the star-crossed love story of female agents Red and Blue, who operate for opposing factions in a war spanning the breadth of human history. Kate Heartfield's *Alice Payne* series,

---

<sup>3</sup> K. Lord, *Unraveling*, New York, DAW Books, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> L. Lai, *Salt Fish Girl*, Ontario, Thomas Allen Publishers, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> V. Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, Surrey, Hogarth Press, 1928.

<sup>6</sup> C. Willis, *Doomsday Book*, New York, Bantam Spectra, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> K. Robson, *Gods, Monsters and the Lucky Peach*, New York, Tor Books, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> A. Newitz, *The Future of Another Timeline*, New York, Tor Books, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> K. Mascarenhas, *The Psychology of Time Travel*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Oates, *Hazards of Time Travel*, New York, Ecco Press, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> A. El-Mohtar and M. Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

comprised of *Alice Payne Arrives* (2018)<sup>12</sup> and *Alice Payne Rides* (2019)<sup>13</sup>, follows the rather swashbuckling adventures of a Jamaican-English gentlewoman in the eighteenth century, her girlfriend inventor, and a time traveller from the twenty-second century. This series is notable not only for its female-dominant time travelling cast, but for its intersection of queerness and race in its protagonist.

Furthermore, the *D.O.D.O.* series—began by Neal Stephenson and Nicole Galland, and continued on by Nicole Galland—is a gallivanting depiction of women from all cultural backgrounds in scientific roles, in authority, in political situations, and in powerful antagonistic positions. A combination of fantasy and science fiction, *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.* (2017)<sup>14</sup> follows the founding of the Department of Diachronic Operations (D.O.D.O.), which recruits witches from history who are able to simulate the space in a Schrodinger’s Cat-like experiment and send operatives through time. This text and its sequel, *Master of the Revels* (2021)<sup>15</sup>, features two female protagonists who utilise their academic knowledge of languages and Shakespearean theatre respectively to conduct missions for the good of history, and to prevent the treacherous Irish witch Gráinne from shaping this history to her own will. The combination of good and evil women in these books acknowledges the importance of a spectrum of representation – of strong, layered women being represented in all literary roles, not just the virtuous ones.

In the adjacent world of short stories, I found it quite difficult to pinpoint time travel stories by minority voices, and by women of colour in particular. This indicates not the lack of women of colour writing short stories, but instead it proves the overwhelming sea of short stories by men, and particularly by white men, which have been celebrated and retold across the last hundred years. It seems that Western white male perspectives on time travel dominate comprehensive anthologies such as Ann and Jeff Vandermeer’s *The Time Traveller’s Almanac* (2014)<sup>16</sup>, which won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology. In this collection, Vandana Singh’s ‘Delhi’ and Alice Sola Kim’s ‘Hwang’s Billion Brilliant Daughters’ are two of the only stories by women of colour, and both these stories oddly have male protagonists. In recent years, however, new more inclusive spaces for the time travel short story have been opening up. In 2016, for instance, the *Fiyah Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction* was founded, which can be seen as a response to the lack of black writers featured in short story collections such as

---

<sup>12</sup> K. Heartfield, *Alice Payne Arrives*, New York, Tor Books, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> K. Heartfield, *Alice Payne Rides*, New York, Tor Books, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> N. Galland and N. Stephenson, *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.*, New York, William Morrow, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> N. Galland, *Master of the Revels*, New York, William Morrow, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> A. VanderMeer & J. VanderMeer, *The Time Traveler’s Almanac*, New York, Tom Doherty, 2014.

*The Time Traveller's Almanac*, and calls itself a place to celebrate and advocate for black speculative voices. This is a promising home for time travelling women of colour to be preserved and brought to the forefront in future narratives. Indeed, *Fiyah's* mission statement refers to Octavia Butler as a direct inspiration for the journal's founding:

What does it mean to be Black and look at intersectional issues of equality through the lens of science fiction and fantasy? Where are those stories in the canon? There is Black excellence out there waiting to be discovered and not tokenized. Octavia Butler is our past and she is an amazing storyteller, but she should not be our only storyteller. This is the future of Black SFF.<sup>17</sup>

From the above examples, and from the wealth of other texts which punctuate this thesis, it is evident that the past has been repressive in its depictions of time travellers, but also that science fiction is on the right path to a future of diverse representation. This thesis is not a general investigation into the history of time travel fiction, and its focus is not on whether this fiction is problematic in its representations of minority characters. Instead, this thesis argues that the structure of the time travel narrative itself is a uniquely powerful literary vehicle for recovering and promoting what I am terming shadow histories. To best define "shadow history" and its counterpart "spotlight history", I am introducing the metaphor of the past as a stage in a theatre, facing an audience. The stage encompasses all lived experience, recorded and unrecorded, and the audience represents consumers of the historical narrative: readers of history books, watchers of film, and vessels for cultural memory. As the show begins and the spotlight is turned on, only a portion of the stage is illuminated to this audience. This is "spotlight history", the parts of the past that are highlighted in order to be consumed. "Shadow history" encompasses the rest of the stage; the audience is aware that these sections of the stage exist, but they are in darkness. The audience is manipulated into focussing on the portion of the stage—of the "past"—under the spotlight. These two types of history are not always completely distinct from each other; the light shining on the spotlight history can sometimes partially illuminate the shadow history, but only tangentially.

Shadow histories are developed partially from the concept of the ahistorical. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *ahistorical* as 'not historical; unrelated to or unconcerned

---

<sup>17</sup> "The Mission", *Fiyah Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction*, <https://www.fiyahlitmag.com/the-mission/> (accessed 18 May 2021).

with history or historical events'<sup>18</sup>. This thesis builds upon and clarifies this concept of *ahistorical* by illustrating a distinction between “history” and “the past”; whilst these two terms both describe events that take place in a time before the present, they are understood and approached in different ways. Amal El-Mohtar, in celebrating the restorative power of narrative, acknowledges the separation of these terms:

Every time we recover a female author, scientist, doctor, activist, every time we affirm that black people lived in medieval Europe, that queer people have always existed and often led happy lives, we change history...not the past, crucially, but *history*, our story about the past, our narratives and paradigms. And as we change history, we change the future.<sup>19</sup>

Here, El-Mohtar distinguishes between “the past” being events in their true, diverse, messy form, and “history” being the man-made representation and condensing of those events into a cohesive plot. Building upon this distinction, the traditional meaning of *ahistorical* can take on a more abstracted meaning, and contribute to the notion of shadow histories. Calling a person ahistorical in this context is not to say that they do not exist within a recorded period in the past, but instead that they have been *written out* of the historical narrative which represents that past in the present. In other words, this ahistorical person is the inhabitant of a shadow history. Their life is part of the past which exists on the stage, but is made invisible to the audience by the director of the spotlight—the writer of the historical narrative. Through science fiction, the time travel narrative brings that previously unwritten protagonist into direct contact with the authentic past, and thus allows readers to consume a shadow history that not only includes such identities, but highlights them.

Beauvoir’s interpretation of the Other also informs the conceptual framework of shadow histories and spotlight histories, as they apply to the historical narrative of womanhood. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes of womanhood as ‘determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential’<sup>20</sup>. Chapter One draws parallels between the Othered identity and the time traveller. Given that

---

<sup>18</sup> “ahistorical”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2012, Retrieved from <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/view/Entry/4284?redirectedFrom=ahistorical#eid>

<sup>19</sup> A. El-Mohtar, ‘Why are there so many new books about time-travelling lesbians?’, *The Guardian*, 9 August 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/aug/09/why-are-there-so-many-new-books-about-time-travelling-lesbians>, (accessed 21 October 2019).

<sup>20</sup> S. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 26.

the subsequent chapters of this exegesis analyse women of colour as protagonists of time travel narratives, it must be acknowledged at the outset that second-wave feminism is a far from perfect analytical lens. In *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2016), Maylei Blackwell writes that ‘the dominant narrative of the second wave has overshadowed Other forms of the feminisms...elaborat[ing] the history of feminism and generat[ing] historical paradigms of feminism as if white women were the only historical actors’.<sup>21</sup> Adding to this criticism, bell hooks laments that ‘black women could not join together to fight for women’s rights because we did not see “womanhood” as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us...to deny a part of ourselves’.<sup>22</sup>

Blackwell and hooks’ critique on the whiteness of second-wave feminism echoes the critique found in Kimberle Crenshaw’s foundational paper, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics’ (1989). Writing on the exclusionary structure of anti-discrimination law, Crenshaw explains that black women are not adequately represented and protected by these laws as ‘often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex’.<sup>23</sup> Crenshaw determines that for the feminist movement to represent the interests of all women, it must include a consideration of race and create a space where the additional oppressions suffered by women of colour are taken into account. Otherwise, she warns, ‘feminist theory remains *white*...[because] not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*’.<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw ultimately argues for an intersectional approach, which acknowledges that systemic hierarchies of oppression based on racial, gendered, sexual and class-based identities are in constant interplay with each other, and cannot be accurately examined on their own. Over thirty years later, looking back on this paper, Crenshaw more simply defines intersectionality as ‘a lens, a prism, for seeing the ways in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other’.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> M. Blackwell, *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2015, pp. 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> b. hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, South End Press, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Issue 1, 1989, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> K. Steinmetz, ‘She Coined the Term ‘Intersectionality’ Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today’, *TIME*, February 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>, (accessed 21 March 2021).

I have spent a long time weighing the problematic characteristics of second-wave feminism against the monumental cultural importance of Beauvoir's writing, to determine whether *The Second Sex* is an appropriate framework for this thesis. In her 2010 introduction to *The Second Sex*, Judith Thurman writes that 'the millions of young women who now confidently assume that their entitlement to work, pleasure, and autonomy is equal to that of their brothers owe a measure of their freedom to Beauvoir'.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Sandra Dijkstra lauds *The Second Sex* as 'the only thorough attempt to fathom the situation of modern women from a historical, economic, psychological, sociological, and literary perspective'.<sup>27</sup> This was a difficult consideration, as, being a white Australian woman writing about women of colour in America, I did not feel inherently qualified to make this decision, and knew that whatever I wrote about intersectionality, I would be writing it from an inescapable position of white privilege.

The conclusion I have arrived at is a compromise of sorts. I believe that the cultural significance of Beauvoir does not atone for or exonerate the inherent "whiteness" of the feminism pioneered by *The Second Sex*. But I also believe that the notion of the female Other is complementary to more inclusive models of feminist thought, as a starting point for considering how different identities relate both negatively and positively to each other. This thesis reflects that complementary relationship by interweaving Beauvoir with intersectional feminists such as Crenshaw, Sara Ahmed, bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Patricia Hill Collins. I have judged this combination to be the most accurate framework for analysing *Kindred* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Whilst second-wave feminism is the cultural-political context for the writing of these novels, intersectional feminism is the only lens which pays respect to the race as well as the gender of their heroines. As Crenshaw concludes, 'feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women'.<sup>28</sup> This thesis takes notions borne of second-wave thinking and combines them with more contemporary criticism from a range of interdisciplinary feminist scholars; in addition to the intersectional scholars mentioned above, this includes Ivana Milojević, Marleen S. Barr, Noëlle McAfee and Lisa Yaszek. This thesis has taken every opportunity to draw from a diverse array of feminist scholars in order to best reflect the authors and heroines under discussion. To

---

<sup>26</sup> J. Thurman, 'Introduction' to S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Borde, C. and S. Malovany-Chevallier (trans.), New York, Random House, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> S. Dijkstra, 'Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, Summer 1980, p. 290.

<sup>28</sup> Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', p. 166.

do otherwise would result not only in an incomplete and disrespectful analysis, but also imperfect conclusions about the thesis' relevance to contemporary feminist discourse; after all, as Blackwell articulates, '[w]e cannot understand our feminist futures without a better understanding of the multiple origins of our feminist pasts'.<sup>29</sup>

Chapters Two and Three examine the protagonists of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) respectively, considering firstly how women of colour are depicted interacting with the past in fiction, and secondly how these characters react to the future. Both these texts demonstrate the power of time travel narratives, as 'a site for considering contemporary debates about the relationship between pasts and futures in feminism'.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, they show the relationship between the time travelling heroine and what Marleen S. Barr calls the continuum of womanhood, or the procession of mothers, daughters and sisters throughout time: '[s]peculative fiction's female time travellers...remind women that they should look to the past—and to the future—and view themselves as a part of a female continuum'.<sup>31</sup>

These two novels have been chosen because their protagonists, who are both underprivileged women of colour, are strong examples of characters with 'shadow histories' who are presented with the opportunity to write themselves back into the 'spotlight' narrative. Butler's heroine, Dana Franklin, is African-American, whilst Piercy's Connie Ramos is Latina; Dana travels backwards in time to the bleak reality of her ancestors, whilst Connie travels forwards to an unknown utopia. Both texts, published in North America in the 1970s, can be considered within the framework of second-wave feminism, or at least can be thought of as the product of a culture that has fostered the second-wave. Viewing these texts as explorations of Beauvoir's Subject/Other is thus a logical first step in the exploration of these characters. Given that these novels were published in the 1970s, it is important to examine critical scholarship from literary and feminist discourses from that period and to discuss them alongside twenty-first century works.

Chapter Two, 'Backwards: *Kindred* and Shadow Histories', turns to scholars of Afrofuturism and neo-slave narratives. This chapter hypothesises that when time travelling backwards, Othered identities have the power to recover their own narratives from the shadows

---

<sup>29</sup> Blackwell, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> S. McBean, 'Feminism and Futurity: Revisiting Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*', *Feminist Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, July 2014, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> M. S. Barr, *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 1987, p. 46.



of white, male-dominated history, and to shine a spotlight on them within the context of familiar historical events. Chapter Three, ‘Forwards: *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Spotlight Futures’, explores how women interact with the future, and particularly with a future which is beneficial to her. *Woman on the Edge of Time* suggests how women may be liberated by experiencing forwards time travel, but the text’s use of unreliable narration also encourages us to focus on carving positive spaces in the present, rather than attempting to control the future.

In this thesis, I also explore these key questions about time and the Othered, ahistorical identity creatively. My novel, *Else*, centres around a female physicist, Dr. Ross, who in the year 2046 invents the time travel technology I.R.I.S. This machine is able to identify “Else Objects”, seemingly random everyday objects that bear the signatures of different time periods. Dr. Ross’ goal, and the goal of her government-funded organisation Section Twelve, is to source these objects and deliver them to their relevant time periods, in order to avoid paradoxes. Not even Dr. Ross knows why these particular objects are important, only that they are, and that placing these exact objects in the past means maintaining the proper order of cause and effect on the timeline. The narrative follows her daughter, Else, who learns that she is one of these Else Objects, and that she has been irreversibly sent back in time by her own mother.

The majority of the novel takes place in present-day 2019, in which Else has grown up in an adoptive family in Adelaide, completely unaware of her true origins. Living a stagnant life, separated from the girl she loves, Else suddenly finds herself whisked through time to 2054, where she learns the story of how—and when—she came to be. Through Else’s episodic time travelling, the reader witnesses the disintegrating relationship between her biological mother, Dr. Ross, and Section Twelve when, in the fallout of her sending her own daughter back in time, Dr. Ross is very publicly put on trial for ethics violation, and villainised as a failed mother. Furthermore, the novel follows the actions of Else’s biological father, who is desperate to find her and bring her home.

*Else* explores the direct act of writing women into the historical narrative through time travel, and the transformation that occurs when Othered, ahistorical identities such as Else are able to take narratorial control of their own shadow histories. By manipulating how Dr. Ross is presented to both the reader and Else, the novel also aims to deconstruct the stereotypes that women are biologically irrational, and that female scientists are by necessity cold and unfeeling. In doing this, the primary goal is to shift both female protagonists from Other to Subject. Additionally, the act of educating Else about her origins, and liberating her—as a queer woman of colour—from the systems of oppression within her time period, aims to illustrate

the powerful space Othered characters occupy. On the stage of the past, both Else and Dr. Ross become not only inhabitants of spotlight history, but the directors of the spotlight itself.

## Chapter One

### Time Travel and Otherness

Time as a dichotomy is a prominent feature in, and is perhaps necessary to, our relationship with time travel narratives. These stories rely on the reader's understanding that history can be experienced in multiple ways: the linear way in which ordinary people experience their own lives, and the idiosyncratic experience of the time traveller, who is able to jump back and forth between different points of the past, present and future. This fragmented perspective of history gives the lone time traveller a tangential worldview they would find almost impossible to share with anyone else, even a fellow time traveller. This thesis asks what happens when that person's identity is marginal even before their introduction to time travel; if, within their ordinary lives, they are oppressed by sociocultural hierarchies on the basis of their gender, their race, and in the case of my novel *Else*, their sexuality. I contend that time travel narratives featuring these marginal identities are crucial works of literature because they shift voices who have historically been excluded from dominant narratives to the forefront.

The first section of this chapter charts how the concept of time travel has shifted from a purely fantastical device—in stories by Dickens, Twain and, most seminally, Wells—to a scientific possibility demonstrated by Albert Einstein and Kurt Gödel in the early twentieth century. Despite being legitimised by theoretical physics, the time travel narrative inhabits a space in between fantasy and science fiction, which is popular for its magical qualities alongside its scientific basis. This creates a sense of in-betweenness about the subgenre, which parallels the role of time travellers within these narratives, whose journeys between and across time periods means that they are never fully part of any of them. Sean Redmond writes that the time travel narrative 'provides the necessary distancing effect that science fiction needs to be able to metaphorically address the pressing issues and themes that concern people in the present'.<sup>32</sup> Here Redmond suggests what I argue more overtly in this thesis: that the necessary in-betweenness of the time traveller affords them a unique perspective for analysing socio-political systems, and the people living within those systems.

The second half of this chapter discusses how this idea of being separated from history also exists for people who aren't inherently time travellers, but who are distanced instead on the basis of their identities. In this section I bring together three different but cohesive notions,

---

<sup>32</sup> S. Redmond (ed.), *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, New York, Wallflower Press, 2007, p. 114.

connecting second-wave feminism, philosophy and time travel theory, to illuminate parallels between how minority identities and time travellers inhabit time. Firstly, Julia Kristeva's paper 'Women's Time' (1986) conceptualises cursive time: the cyclical, repetitive nature of the female life, which is shaped by circles of reproduction, menstruation, and domesticity, and which is separated from the monumental, history-making time inhabited mostly by men. Cursive time is then used as a retrospective framing device for Simone de Beauvoir's Other, laid out in *The Second Sex* (1949). I argue that defining women as Other—as inferior to, and only ever in relation to, the Subjective male identity—also defines her as an inhabitant of Kristeva's cursive time. This makes the thesis's first significant connection between gender and time, arguing that women who are marginalised due to their gender live their lives within a similarly restricted temporal space. This is crucial for analysing the effect that the power of time travel has on these women.

Finally, David Lewis's writings on personal versus external time in 'Paradoxes of Time Travel' brings the chapter back to the identity of the time traveller, whose sense of time becomes distorted and idiosyncratic in comparison to the linear, everyday time kept by the rest of the world. I am drawing on Lewis's concept of personal time because it has a similar design to that of the Other and cursive time, which the later parts of the chapter will discuss in full. Because they witness the past, present and future out of order, time travellers have a unique and marginal perspective on history, which I argue can be thought of as an Othered perspective. Additionally, there are parallels between cursive time and the paths taken by time travellers, particularly those time travellers who jump frequently between different points on a timeline. On graphs displaying linear time, the back-and-forth trajectories can be represented by circular loops, which are reminiscent of the more abstract cycles of cursive time. Ultimately, all these similarities create a parallel between the Othered identity and the time traveller, which I elaborate on further in Chapters Two and Three. There, I explore through literary analysis the metamorphosis that occurs when these identities become one: when the woman of colour, who has predominantly been written out of history, is given access to the history-changing and future-making powers of time travel.

In the same way that all art reflects life, any controversies of gendered representation in time travel fiction are reflective of the real-world misrepresentations of women in scientific fields. It is worth bringing a few specific examples to light, to illuminate why it is so important that women of colour be the protagonists of time travel narratives. This chapter explores how the female identity has been consistently manipulated away from history-making spheres, and meanwhile rewarded for entering domestic and romantic spheres. In *The Feminine Mystique*

(1963), for instance, Betty Friedan writes about this troubled relationship between women and the idea of science-minded careers. She describes the call NASA had recently put out for more female recruits, something they viewed as an untapped source of potential in a space race America was losing. Friedan laments, however, that ‘girls would not study physics: it was “unfeminine”...[a] girl refused a science fellowship at John Hopkins [because] all she wanted, she said, was what every other American girl wanted—to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb’.<sup>33</sup> Even Friedan herself claimed to have given up a prestigious PhD fellowship to save a threatened romantic relationship.<sup>34</sup>

This uneasy relationship between women and scientific fields can still be seen today, in both real-world and science fiction circumstances. In April 2019, the Event Horizon Telescope Project completed a two-year project, achieved via ‘a global collaboration of more than 200 scientists’, and a scattered array of observatories collecting ‘more than a petabyte of data’,<sup>35</sup> to assemble the first ever photograph of a black hole. Algorithm development leader Dr Katie Bouman, whose reaction to the achievement was captured in a now famous photograph, was subsequently attacked online by ‘[a]nti-feminist trolls...[who] suggest[ed] she was only getting public attention because she was a woman, when men did all the real work’,<sup>36</sup> and that she was ‘being felicitated as part of an anti-male agenda’.<sup>37</sup> Bouman’s colleague Andrew Chael, who was claimed by the trolls to deserve more credit, fiercely responded on Twitter that ‘Katie was a huge contributor to the software; it would have never worked without her’.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, when Canadian physicist Donna Strickland won the Nobel Prize for physics in 2018, the reception was one of confusion as she had not been ‘deemed significant enough to

---

<sup>33</sup> B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1963, pp. 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> J. Schuessler, ‘Criticisms of a Classic Abound’, *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/books/50-years-of-reassessing-the-feminine-mystique.html>, (accessed 19 September 2018).

<sup>35</sup> N. Drake, ‘First-ever picture of a black hole unveiled’, *National Geographic*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/04/first-picture-black-hole-revealed-m87-event-horizon-telescope-astrophysics/>, (accessed 4 May, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> J. Filipovic, ‘The misogynist trolls attacking Katie Bouman are the tip of the trashpile’, *The Guardian*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/17/katie-bouman-black-hole-image-online-trolls>, (accessed 2 June 2019).

<sup>37</sup> G. D’Mello, ‘Woman Who Took 1<sup>st</sup> Photo of Black Hole Is Wrongly Accused of Stealing Credit By Male Trolls’, *India Times*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.indiatimes.com/technology/science-and-future/sexist-trolls-accuse-katie-bouman-of-stealing-credit-from-male-colleague-get-schooled-online-365360.html>, (accessed 2 June 2019).

<sup>38</sup> M. Lenthang, ‘Male scientist who helped capture the first photograph of a black hole defends Katie Bouman after she was attacked by sexist trolls who say she took the credit for her team’, *Daily Mail*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6917089/Male-scientist-helped-capture-black-hole-photo-defends-Katie-Bouman-sexist-trolls.html>, (accessed 2 June 2019).

merit her own [Wikipedia] page',<sup>39</sup> despite the fact that her male colleague, Gérard Mourou (with whom she shared the award), has had a page since 2005.<sup>40</sup> Discussions about Bouman and Strickland focus on their gender almost as much as, if not more than, their scientific achievements.

The deep-seated suspicion of scientific women has also been publicised in recent fictional spaces. When it was announced in July 2017 that Jodie Whittaker had been cast in BBC's long-running science fiction series *Doctor Who* as the first female Doctor, the explosive responses from (mostly male) viewers ranged from declarations of 'political correctness gone mad'<sup>41</sup> to the emergence of Twitter hashtags such as #NotMyDoctor and #NurseWho.<sup>42</sup> The conversation surrounding Whittaker's casting illuminates the limited expectations for women within science fiction, and within time travel narratives in particular. Why are the dichotomies of gender and race still so attached to science fiction, and why so much outrage at a female time traveller, who, as the BBC acknowledges in their response to criticism, is not even human?<sup>43</sup>

Marleen Barr writes that 'feminist science fiction [in particular] presents blueprints for social structures that allow women's words to counter patriarchal myths'.<sup>44</sup> Science fiction as a genre has played host to the breaking down of expectations, and to challenging existing political, environmental and cultural structures. In recent years *Doctor Who* has demonstrated a positive acknowledgement of these responsibilities of genre. Alongside Whittaker, in 2020 Jo Martin made history by becoming the first woman of colour to appear as the Doctor, after 56 years of runtime. This character, however, is shrouded by several theories on how she fits into the show's timeline; whether she predates the show entirely, whether she exists between established incarnations of the Doctor but was not shown at the time, or whether she is not an incarnation of the Doctor at all.<sup>45</sup> These theories all have negative connotations, suggesting a

---

<sup>39</sup> The Guardian (ed.), 'Donna Strickland: the female Nobel winner deemed not important enough for Wikipedia entry', *South China Morning Post*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/2166890/donna-strickland-female-nobel-winner-deemed-not>, (accessed 12 July 2019).

<sup>40</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%A9rard\\_Mourou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%A9rard_Mourou).

<sup>41</sup> G. Crawley, 'Doctor Who fans react to Jodie Whittaker's appointment as 13<sup>th</sup> doctor', *Express: Home of the Daily and Sunday Express*, 16 July 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/829419/Doctor-Who-13th-doctor-Jodie-Whittaker-female-appointment-time-lord>, (accessed 30 November 2018)

<sup>42</sup> H. Nguyen, 'Doctor Who: Jodie Whittaker Casting Complaints Prompt BBC Response: 'The Doctor Is An Alien'', *IndieWire*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/07/doctor-who-jodie-whittaker-casting-complaints-bbc-1201857106/>, (accessed 30 November 2018).

<sup>43</sup> See H. Nguyen, 'Doctor Who'.

<sup>44</sup> M. Barr, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> M. Belam, 'Doctor Who: Jo Martin becomes first BAME actor to play the Doctor', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jan/28/doctor-who-jo-martin-becomes-first-bame-actor-to-play-the-doctor>, (accessed 4 February 2020).

certain distance carved between Martin and the narrative of the Doctor: whether it be an exclusion from the mythology of the show, or from the external narrative of *Doctor Who* as a television product. Whilst it is positive to see these representations, the casting of two women in *Doctor Who* is ultimately still laced with problems, and surrounded by critical controversy.

These controversies have not only been constant in the representation of women in science fiction, but a similar tone has applied to reactions to the time travel narrative, since its popularisation in the late nineteenth century. To illustrate this, I will delve briefly into the journey time travel has taken from a magical fiction to a scientific possibility. Time travel's marginal status as both science fiction and fantasy is crucial for considering marginal identities within those narratives.

### *The Science and the Fiction*

Time travel fiction as a subgenre of science fiction has received a mixed critical response in the decades since its inception. Paul J. Nahin suggests that its controversy lies in the fact that the basic concept of time travel is unproven, and therefore 'appears to violate a fundamental law of nature; every effect has a cause, with the cause occurring before the effect', whereas backwards time travel in particular 'seems to allow, indeed to *demand*, backwards causation'.<sup>46</sup> Nahin uses the example of a time traveller journeying backwards in their time machine. For the traveller themselves, the activation of the machine must occur before they arrive in the past, as the activation is the cause of the travel. A linear timeline, however, will show the arrival of the traveller in the past occurring *before* the activation; and thus the effect has preceded the cause.<sup>47</sup> Time travel fiction becomes a realm of infinite possibility where event and consequence are flipped: where child is able to exist before parent, all within the frame of (albeit theoretic) scientific explanation.

Before any such theoretical science was published, however, the cultural cynicism towards time travel as a science is evident in reactions to the publication of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895). Whilst Wells himself is not of specific interest to this thesis, *The Time Machine* is a brief but necessary case study, for its foundational place within time travel fiction as well as for its critical context. Time travel had been used as a narrative structure before 1895;

---

<sup>46</sup> P.J. Nahin, *Time Machine Tales: The Science Fiction Adventures and Philosophical Puzzles of Time Travel*, Cham, Springer, 2017, p. xxvii.

<sup>47</sup> Nahin, p. xxvii.

the more notable examples are Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*<sup>48</sup> and Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.<sup>49</sup> In the words of Brian Clegg, however, 'Wells sets us on the path of something more concrete, the product of the new, all-powerful science and technology that were transforming the real world...Wells brought us the time *machine*'.<sup>50</sup> Wells's text is ground breaking not only for popularising the time machine as a physical object and vessel for the traveller, but also for its scientific basis, about which it is entirely unambiguous. As the Time Traveller himself expounds in a speech to his dinner guests at the novel's beginning, 'I have been at work upon this geometry of Four Dimensions...three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time'.<sup>51</sup> The Time Traveller himself, furthermore, is commonly speculated to be based on Thomas Edison.<sup>52</sup>

Nahin writes, however, that despite its scientific exposition, 'even those readers who loved it...were still quick to dismiss it as *romantic fantasy*'.<sup>53</sup> This is evident in reviews printed by various newspapers in the months following *The Time Machine*'s publication. In the *Spectator*, for example, R. H. Hutton describes the time machine itself as 'some hocus-pocus', and the overall text as a 'fanciful and lively dream well worth reading'. Similarly, Israel Zangwill writes in *Pall Mall Magazine* that Wells' text is a 'brilliant little romance', before declaring the 'absurdity of any attempt to grapple with the notion of Time'.<sup>54</sup> The tone of both these reviews makes *The Time Machine* sound scientifically implausible; the strong implication is that the text is better suited to fantasy rather than science fiction. In 1895, ten years before the first of Albert Einstein's papers on special relativity, it is understandable that quantum physics should appear more magical than probable, especially as even Wells himself attacked the plausibility of *The Time Machine*. In the preface to *Seven Famous Novels*, a collection of his longer narratives, he makes the disclaimer that '[t]hese stories of mine collected here do not pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination...They are all fantasies; they do not aim to project a serious possibility; they aim indeed only at the same amount of conviction as one gets in a good gripping dream'.<sup>55</sup> Eleven years later Wells wrote

---

<sup>48</sup> C. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, New York, Global Classics, 1859.

<sup>49</sup> M. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, New York, Charles L. Webster and Company, 1889.

<sup>50</sup> B. Clegg, *How to Build a Time Machine: The Real Science of Time Travel*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1895.

<sup>52</sup> See M. Willis, 'Edison as Time Traveller: H.G. Wells' Inspiration for His First Scientific Character', *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, July, 1999, pp. 284-294.

<sup>53</sup> Nahin, *Time Machine Tales*, p. xxvii.

<sup>54</sup> The excerpts from Hutton and Zangwill's reviews can both be found in P. Parrinder, *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Books, 1972.

<sup>55</sup> H.G. Wells, Preface to *Seven Famous Novels*, New Jersey, Between the Covers—Rare Books, Inc., 1934.



a parody autobiography essay under the pen name of Wilfred B. Betterave in which he describes the depiction of time travel as ‘a tissue of absurdities...[which] the plain-thinking mind apprehends...in spite of all the Wellsian mumbo-jumbo and is naturally as revolted as I am by the insult to its intelligence’.<sup>56</sup>

With the first half of the twentieth century came advancements that challenged this dubious response, shifting time travel into a theoretical possibility. In particular, time travel as a serious field of research owes its biggest debts to Einstein and Kurt Gödel, who respectively established that time travel was firstly possible, and secondly that it was possible in the sense of travelling *backwards*. Einstein’s papers on general and special relativity (1905-1915) respond in part to Isaac Newton’s writings on gravity in *Principia* (1729), which maintains—based on the comparatively sparse scientific knowledge of the seventeenth century—that time and space are not connected: that ‘time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external’.<sup>57</sup> Einstein, however, writes that:

The laws of physics must be of such a nature that they apply to systems of reference in any kind of motion...[i]n the general theory of relativity, space and time cannot be defined in such a way that differences of the spatial co-ordinates can be directly measured by the unit measuring-rod, or differences in the time co-ordinate by a standard clock...So there is nothing for it but to regard all imaginable systems of co-ordinates, on principle, as equally suitable for the description of nature.<sup>58</sup>

Einstein goes on to explore these findings through several equations and with regard to other hypotheses. For the purposes of this thesis, the above extract can be condensed to the conclusion that for general relativity to be correct—for gravity to exist and function in the universally understood manner—objects within a gravitational field will move more slowly than objects outside of it. Einstein concludes that for this dilation to occur there *must* be a constant, relative connection between measurements of space and time, and that this connection must be malleable in response to certain masses of energy. Einstein calls this relationship “spacetime”.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> H.G. Wells, ‘The Betterave Papers’, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, Summer, 1945, <https://www.vqronline.org/essay/betterave-papers>, (accessed 23 February 2017).

<sup>57</sup> I. Newton, *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, trans. A. Motte, New York, Daniel Adee, 1729, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> A. Einstein, *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein, Volume 6: The Berlin Years: Writings, 1914-1917*, trans. A. Engel, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 149, 153.

<sup>59</sup> Einstein, p. 153.

A commonly used example of time dilation is that, for a rocket positioned outside of the Earth's gravitational pull, time will pass more slowly than it does for the Earth's inhabitants. The astronaut will consequently return to Earth slightly younger than he would have been, had he remained within the planet's orbit. Time dilation plays a significant role in contemporary films such as Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*,<sup>60</sup> in which astronaut Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) spends so long in space that when he returns to Earth his own daughter is significantly older than him. In a very real sense, one can interpret this as Cooper time travelling a few decades into his own future. Einstein's papers, therefore, transform time travel into a theoretical possibility, but only with regard to travelling into the future.

The possibility of travelling *backwards*—the much more complicated scenario—was a highly popular creative exploration of the mid-twentieth century. Science fiction novels and short stories abounded with tales of the past as a hiding place from modern life,<sup>61</sup> as a dumping ground for criminals,<sup>62</sup> as a method of experiencing famous events and meeting historical characters,<sup>63</sup> or even as a way of meeting oneself.<sup>64</sup> Roy A. Sorensen writes of these narratives' abilities to appeal to 'our general fascination with the exotic and the childlike frustration we sometimes feel at being confined to the present'.<sup>65</sup> Backwards time travel, however, would not be considered seriously until the publication of Gödel's 'An Example of A New Type of Cosmological Solutions of Einstein's Field Equations of Gravitation' in 1949.<sup>66</sup> This paper offers solutions to Einstein's field equations for general relativity, purporting the existence of closed time-like world lines (or curves) in spacetime which are connectible at all points. Later that year, Gödel would add that 'by making a trip on a rocket ship in a sufficiently wide course, it is possible in these [simulated] worlds to travel into any region of the past, present, and future, and back again, exactly as it is possible in other worlds to travel to distant parts of space'.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> *Interstellar*, dir. C. Nolan, USA, Paramount Pictures, 2014, [film].

<sup>61</sup> See R. Bradbury, 'The Fox and The Forest', *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, pp. 131-143; J. Gunn, 'The Reason Is With Us', *Satellite Science Fiction*, Vol. 2, No. 4, April 1958, pp. 112-121; H. B. Piper, 'Flight from Tomorrow', *Future Combined with Science Fiction Stories*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September/October 1950, pp. 36-49.

<sup>62</sup> See P. Anderson, 'My Object All Sublime', Groff Conklin (ed.), *12 Great Classics of Science Fiction*, New York, Fawcett Gold Medal, 1973, pp. 48-57; I. Watson, 'In the Upper Cretaceous with the Summerfire Brigade', *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Vol. 79, No. 2, August 1990, pp. 4-25.

<sup>63</sup> See W. Tucker, *The Lincoln Hunters*, New York, Rinehart & Company, 1958; M. Shaara, 'Man of Distinction', *Galaxy Magazine*, Vol. 12, No. 6, October 1956, pp. 59-65.

<sup>64</sup> See R.A. Heinlein, 'All You Zombies', *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, New Jersey, Mercury Press, Inc., 1959, pp. 5-15.

<sup>65</sup> R. A. Sorensen, 'Time Travel, Parahistory and Hume', *Philosophy*, vol. 62, no. 240, April 1987, pp. 227-236.

<sup>66</sup> K. Gödel, 'An Example of a New Type of Cosmological Solutions of Einstein's Field Equations of Gravitation', *Reviews of Modern Physics*, vol. 21, no. 3, July, 1949.

<sup>67</sup> K. Gödel, 'A Remark About the Relationship Between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy,' in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein, Philosopher-Scientist: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume VII*, La Salle, Open Court, 1949, p. 560.

Time travelling along backwards trajectories becomes possible within a Gödelian universe, but must be undertaken within the confines of a machine.

As has been alluded to, however, backwards time travel is complex, riddled with paradox, and inconsistency. Einstein penned a response to Gödel's solutions in which he considered 'those paradoxes, regarding the *direction* of the causal connection', and in which he concluded simply that '[i]t will be interesting to weigh whether these are not to be excluded on physical grounds'.<sup>68</sup> In response to paradoxes, Gödel appears to lose his nerve, concluding that 'the velocities which would be necessary in order to complete the voyage [of backwards time travel] in a reasonable time are far beyond everything that can be expected ever to become a practical possibility'.<sup>69</sup>

Within the framework of Einstein and Gödel, time travel does become possible, but only after a multitude of physical conditions have been established. These conditions are in turn equally convoluted, specific, and highly unlikely to occur together naturally. It is more accurate, then, to say that time travel is not a theoretical possibility so much as a theoretically possible *side effect* of other synonymous theoretical possibilities. With this lengthy description in mind, it becomes understandable why in 1970 John Earman asks, with not a little cynicism: 'Have physicists decided to set up in competition with science fiction writers and Hollywood producers?'<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, he questions the ability of time travel fiction to conduct scientifically relevant explorations:

Most of the [time travel] literature focuses on two matters, backward causation and the paradoxes of time travel. Properly understood, the first is irrelevant to the type of time travel most deserving of serious attention; and the latter, while always good for a chuckle, are a crude and unilluminating means of approaching some delicate and deep issues about the nature of physical possibility.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to Earman's criticism, writer James Blish views science fiction as 'a conscientious attempt to be faithful to already known facts...and if the story was also to contain a miracle, it ought at least not to contain a whole arsenal'. These excerpts both suggest that while time travel

---

<sup>68</sup> A. Einstein, 'Remarks to the Essays Appearing in this Collective Volume', in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein, Philosopher-Scientist: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume VII*, La Salle, Open Court, 1949, p. 687-688.

<sup>69</sup> K. Gödel, *Albert Einstein*, p. 561.

<sup>70</sup> J. Earman, 'Recent Work in Time Travel', in S.F. Savitt (ed.), *Time's Arrows Today: Recent Philosophical Work on the Direction of Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 268.

<sup>71</sup> Earman, p. 268.

fiction does have an established place within science fiction, these narratives are still seen to maintain a sense of the fantastic.

Where time travel fiction sits on the bridge between science fiction and fantasy—whether it is more one than the other, or a perfect amalgamation of the two—is an exploration which could fill an entire second thesis. My focus, however, is less on the status of time travel narratives as a genre, and more on the characters within those narratives. This chapter thus far has provided a historical overview of time travel fiction, as a stepping stone for analysing the time travellers themselves. Before embarking on this analysis, it is necessary to move into a feminist discussion of how the heroines of time travel narratives relate to time and space before they encounter time travel, which allows us to see more clearly how that narrative has changed them. Kristeva's cursive time and Beauvoir's Other cover the strained relationship between the marginalised woman and time, whilst Lewis's personal time brings the discussion back to the time traveller in preparation for Chapters Two and Three. Cursive time will be considered first, as by categorising a female sense of time, Kristeva provides a smooth transition between talking about time and talking about women.

### *The Monumental and the Cursive*

It is interesting to note first that Kristeva's writings are not intended to be applied directly to feminist thought; in her own words, 'I don't consider myself a theorist of feminism'.<sup>72</sup> However, as Birgit Schippers articulates, this may be exactly why Kristevan theory so inspired feminist writers, as 'it is paradoxically this conceptual ambiguity that facilitates a feminist appropriation of her ideas'.<sup>73</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I am drawing upon Kristeva precisely because her writing can be applied to discussions of both time travel theory and feminist theory, and so she provides a useful transition between them.

Published in 1981, Kristeva's article 'Women's Time' introduces the notion of monumental time versus cyclical time. Beginning within the context of European colonialism, Kristeva describes the duality of what she calls 'sociocultural ensembles', which arise when different cultures are brought into close contact and form an oppressor/oppressed dynamic. The oppressed culture, she writes:

---

<sup>72</sup> J. Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, trans. B. O'Keeffe, Los Angeles, Semiotext[e], 2002, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> B. Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 3.

[is] constantly faced with a double problematic: that of [the culture's] *identity* constituted by historical sedimentation, and that of their *loss of identity* which is produced by this connection of memories which escape from history only to encounter anthropology. In other words, we confront two temporal dimensions: the time of linear history, or *cursive time* (as Nietzsche called it), and the time of another history, thus another time, *monumental time* (again according to Nietzsche), which englobes these supranational, sociocultural ensembles within even larger entities'.<sup>74</sup>

The terms “cursive” and “monumental” time are used in the 1981 translation collaborated on by Jardine and Blake; they have also been translated by Noëlle McAfee as “linear” and “cyclical” time respectively.<sup>75</sup> As this chapter relies on excerpts from the Jardine and Blake translation of ‘Women’s Time’, it will also be using the terms “cursive” and “monumental”. Kristeva connects cursive time to an oppressed race as well as an oppressed gender. The intersectional relationship between gender and race means that a person can be oppressed by both identities at once, but in different and accumulative ways: a woman of colour is oppressed because of her gender and her race, for instance, which is more extreme than a white woman being oppressed only due to her gender. This distinction is integral to talking about Kristeva, and also to my analysis of Dana in *Kindred* and Connie in *Woman on the Edge of Time* in later chapters. At this point, however, it is necessary to first distinguish Kristeva’s two temporal dimensions, and how they relate specifically to gender and to the notion of Otherness.

Kristeva defines “linear history”, or cursive time, as the narrative belonging to the oppressor: ‘project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival—in other words, the time of history’.<sup>76</sup> One can read this as the dominant version of the historical narrative, written by the victors (as the saying goes). Cursive time—which centres around the history participated in by white, generally European men, and which reduces the involvement of other identities—sets the stage for what will be recorded and learned in history books centuries later. I argue that in this way, if one focused explicitly on gender, cursive time—or what Kristeva referred to in the previous extract as *identity*—can be seen as a masculine form of time.

---

<sup>74</sup> J. Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. A. Jardine and H. Blake, *Signs*, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn, 1981, p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> See N. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, London, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>76</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p. 17.

In contrast, monumental time (or *loss of identity*) can be distinctly perceived as more feminine than masculine. Kristeva describes this time as visually indicative of the cycles of women's reproductive role in the human species. Whilst men are forging new paths forward in history and society, women's identities are condensed to function within the repetitive space of the home: the Groundhog Day-like existence of the domestic housewife. The rhythm of femininity, Kristeva writes, 'would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity*'.<sup>77</sup> Compared with masculine time, which is tied much more to society and culture, feminine time is aligned with the natural female body, her menstrual cycle, and the gestation period of her womb; in other words, to all the elements that make her different from men. Thinking of time as cyclical and repetitive is crucial to my argument, as it is similar to the paths time travellers follow in science fiction narratives, including my own creative piece, *Else*. The protagonists of these novels undertake journeys from past to present (or from present to future) and back again in ways that are often cyclical in nature. For these women, cyclical time bears a literal meaning.

Kristeva writes that this form of time is so integral to the human species itself, that perhaps 'time' is fundamentally an inept definition:

[O]n the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature [and which] is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time...[o]n the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word "temporality" hardly fits: All-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space.<sup>78</sup>

One is prompted, at this point, to question the binary nature of all the aforementioned notions of time and gender identities, and to ask: why must women inhabit monumental time *instead of*, rather than *as well as*, cursive time? Biologically, the childbearing ability of the female body aligns her more naturally with monumental time, and it is healthy and understandable that she glory in her role in the continuity of the species. But why must she inhabit monumental time at the expense of cursive time? Why can she not be a part of both?

---

<sup>77</sup> Kristeva, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Kristeva, p. 16.

It is a basic question, reshaped and re-asked in thousands of different ways, that feminists have been posing for centuries. *Why can't a woman be whatever she wants?* First-wave feminists, writes Kristeva, 'wanted out of circular time and into the history-making possibility of linear time'.<sup>79</sup> This is interpreted with direct regard to female suffrage, and to sharing the power of electing history-makers. Ivana Milojević goes further, writing that first-wave feminists 'critiqued the interpretation of history in which men became recognised as 'subjects' of history while woman was delegated to an ahistorical, biological sphere'.<sup>80</sup> The term "ahistorical" is a crucial one here, as it suggests a complete removal from history, which Kristeva also describes. By the time of second-wave feminism, Kristeva writes, the question had evolved into a philosophical one, which demands space for women not within the realm of monumental time, but outside the monumental/cursive dichotomy altogether. Kristeva describes how second-wave feminists celebrated the female identity as simply too large, too diverse and too transcendent for one specific rung on a hierarchy, and even for one specific type of time:

by demanding recognition of an irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex and, as such, exploded, plural, fluid, in a certain way nonidentical, [post-1968 second wave feminism] situates itself outside the linear time of identities...[s]uch a feminism rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements.<sup>81</sup>

This suggests that second-wave feminists seek not to be assimilated into the male, monumental identity, but instead to redefine their own identity and to become something else entirely, something existing outside of that dichotomy. This can be read as a natural response to woman's sociocultural situation, which—having exempted her from the historical masculine narrative—can be interpreted as having already pushed her outside of time.

Considering cursive and monumental time raises a second consideration of the relationship between minority identities and history, which can be condensed, very simply, to the hypothesis: *If men dominate historical time, then women have been made exempt from time itself.* This contention is a generalisation, which inspires the assumption that no woman has

---

<sup>79</sup> McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 94.

<sup>80</sup> I. Milojević, 'Timing feminism, feminising time', *Futures: the journal of policy, planning and futures studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, May, 2008, p. 336.

<sup>81</sup> Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' pp. 19-20.

made history, and no man has been written out of history. This is, of course, inaccurate. It also ignores the question of race and shelves the very real notion that the voices of white women, whilst erased from history when compared with white men, are still given more historical space than the voices of people of colour. Women of colour are inhabitants of the shadow history within both racial and gendered narratives; they are given the least space for self-representation, and for the authentication of experiences from a doubly marginalised perspective.

Shifting this shadow history into the spotlight involves thinking not only about how the woman of colour interacts with her surroundings, but also how she reacts to her dominant historical counterparts: those identities who dominate the historical narrative, most often white people, men, wealthy people, or a combination thereof. Bringing Kristeva's cursive time into step with Beauvoir's second-wave feminist notion of the Other adds a new level of consideration about the relationship between spotlight histories and shadow histories, and between the people who inhabit them. I argue that if a person's identity can be considered Other, then that person can also be called an inhabitant of cursive time. Through time travel, that person can illuminate their own shadow history, freeing themselves not only from the culture labelling them Other, but also from the repetitive cycles of cursive time which have shaped their lives.

### *The Subject and the Other*

The Subject and the Other can be traced back to Hegel's Master and Slave, or Lordship and Bondage dialectic. Outlined in Hegel's 1807 work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the Master and Slave are explained through the anecdote of two self-consciousnesses recognising each other for the first time, and in turn realising that despite being familiar to themselves, in the eyes of the other they are a foreign object, and that these two identities are simultaneous. 'On approaching the other,' writes Hegel, '[the self-consciousness] has lost its own self,' and simultaneously 'sees its own self in the other'; the self-consciousnesses engage in a deathly struggle to assert their individual will, as they have done over their own body.<sup>82</sup> For Hegel, the only way they can coexist is by adopting the hierarchy of Master and Slave, in which the Slave is subservient to the Master, and the Master is dominant over the Slave.

---

<sup>82</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 111.



Robert Brandom views this anecdote as ‘an attempt to show that asymmetric cognitive relations are metaphysically defective, that the norms they institute aren’t the right kind to help us think and act with’.<sup>83</sup> In this thesis, however, I am more focussed on existentialist philosopher Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation because it is credited with inspiring Beauvoir. In *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève writes that ‘[i]f the human reality can come into being only as a social reality, society is human—at least in its origin—only on the basis of its implying an element of Mastery and an element of Slavery, of “autonomous” existences and “dependent” existences...if the revealed human reality is nothing but universal history, that history must be the history of the interaction between Master and Slavery’.<sup>84</sup> Kojève argues here that history begins with the establishment of the Master and Slave, and human society is so intrinsically connected to the struggle between these two roles that if a synthesis ever took place between them, history itself would come to an end.

Beauvoir’s Subject/Other dichotomy approaches this relationship between Hegel’s two consciousnesses, and considers it through the lens of gender. Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* famously distinguishes sex from gender with the statement: ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, woman’<sup>85</sup>. In addition, it has been lauded by Camille Paglia, among others, as ‘the supreme work of modern feminism’<sup>86</sup> (although one can assume that Paglia’s praise, having been written in 1993, is not intended to refer to third-wave feminism or any thinking we might now call “modern”). Beauvoir discusses the notions of Subject and Other, two constantly shifting and relative self-imposed identities, and posits that women have traditionally been made Other (or in Hegelian terms, Slave) through the existence and dominance of men. In the realm of the familiar—at home, to give a simple example—a person will think of themselves as Subject, and reflexively cast the Other identity onto any newcomers or visitors. When that same person travels, however, they become the visitor. On arriving in another’s home, the homeowner then sees the visitor as unfamiliar and naturally shifts them into the realm of Other, revealing Otherness as a transient and relative term.

It is crucial to pause here and acknowledge that Beauvoir’s work on the Other has been criticised for excluding the unique experience of the woman of colour. As Kathryn T. Gines

---

<sup>83</sup> ‘Interview with Robert Brandom on “Making It Explicit” Part 1’, [online video], 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdIPuERVjk0>, (accessed 17 August 2019).

<sup>84</sup> A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. J. H. Nichols, Jr., London, Cornell University Press, 1969, pp. 8-9.

<sup>85</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> C. Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*, New York, Penguin, 1993, p. 112.

explains: “the analysing of racial oppression with gender oppression problematically codes race as Black male and gender as white female, erasing the ways in which Black women experience racism and sexism—or racialized sexism and sexualized racism—simultaneously.”<sup>87</sup> This thesis acknowledges this erasure of women of colour; in response, it puts forth the time travel narrative as a specific mode of writing in which women of colour may be able to reclaim their own narratives of Otherness, and ultimately to break free from them. In short, the time travel narrative may be used as a *direct response* to the exclusion of women of colour from much second-wave feminism.

Applying the Subject/Other dichotomy to gender, Beauvoir contends that man, having identified himself as Subject across the broad historical narrative, has consequently shifted women into the position of Other. Beauvoir writes of this relationship as being both unchanging and unbalanced. ‘The relation of the two sexes,’ she hypothesises, ‘is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter... Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation’.<sup>88</sup> In articulating this claim, Beauvoir uses a Biblical allegory; in the same way that Eve is fashioned from Adam’s rib, so is all womanhood defined by what she relates to, and what she is not, instead of what she is. ‘[He is the Subject,’ Beauvoir writes: ‘he is the Absolute. She is the Other’.<sup>89</sup> This analogy satisfies the first psychological rule of the Subject/Other; the Subject (Adam) is named first, and the Other (Eve) is named by default, and in direct relation to the Subject. But what of the second rule, of women being complicit and submissive to this Othering? Do women on some level consent to being made relatively secondary? And if so, why, and where does this leave the female identity? Nancy Bauer’s interpretation is that ‘aspiring to be a fully realized human being requires that a person, man or woman, develop a consciousness of himself or herself as inevitably—and simultaneously—both a subject and object [other]’.<sup>90</sup>

Beauvoir stresses that two things must occur psychologically, before this dichotomy can be settled. First, the Subject is always defined before the Other, as ‘[n]o subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as

---

<sup>87</sup> K. T. Grimes, ‘Simone de Beauvoir and the Race/Gender Analogy in *The Second Sex Revisited*’, L. Hengehold and N. Bauer (eds.), *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, New Jersey, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, p. 47.

<sup>88</sup> Beauvoir, p. 25.

<sup>89</sup> Beauvoir, p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> N. Bauer, ‘Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism’, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 81.

One.’<sup>91</sup> Secondly, ‘in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view.’<sup>92</sup> In other words, just as there is an automatic tendency towards thinking of oneself as primary, there must always be an act of complicity—conscious or otherwise—towards being defined as secondary by another being.

My use of the word “complicity” is not intended to suggest that identities are happily acquiescing to being Othered, or that they take pleasure in it. The Subject/Other in practice is a greyer, more complex mindset than Beauvoir’s writing may allow. Predominantly, the “complicity” of the Other can be represented by physical repressions on that identity by a racist or patriarchal society; within interpersonal relationships, this might historically mean slaves forced into obedience by threat of being beaten or killed by their masters, or women pressured to faithfully serve their husbands and families, under threat of domestic abuse or legal retribution. Women are also complicit in their Otherness as a result of internalised patriarchy; having been repressed for so long, she is unfamiliar of other ways to live, and does not question her own lack of subjectivity.

If women do indeed contribute to their Otherness, through internalised patriarchy or through external repressions, how does this affect their relationship with race? As stated in this exegesis’ Introduction, my own Caucasian identity makes acknowledging white privilege absolutely critical in the construction of this thesis. Beauvoir compares the gendered Subject/Other with the racial Subject/Other, looking particularly at the oppressive dynamic between the white American and the African American. The Othered woman, she explains, can be paralleled with the Othered person of colour:

In both cases, the ruling caste bases its argument on the state of affairs it created itself. The familiar line from George Bernard Shaw sums it up: The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes...when an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they *are* inferior. But the scope of the verb *to be* must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: *to be* is to have become, to have been made...<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Beauvoir, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Beauvoir, p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 23.

Here she concludes that in both cases, the Subject relegates the Other to a secondary, inessential position, and then over time assumes that, because they are currently secondary, that they must always have been secondary.

Beauvoir acknowledges that women are complicit in their own Othering, and perhaps their reasons for remaining complicit lie in the financial, biological and socio-politically oppressive states they have been in for so long that they don't remember anything else. 'This is the fundamental characteristic of woman,' Beauvoir laments: 'Woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity.'<sup>94</sup> Somewhere in the historical narrative, women lost the memory of being relegated to the Othered state. As a result, the current predicament of being female is a unique one, rife with contradictory identities:

what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence...drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential.<sup>95</sup>

A contradiction emerges here between authentic womanhood and conditioned womanhood. When these two identities converge effectively enough, woman is in danger of habitually acting out an internalised misogyny. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* defines 'The Problem That Has No Name', an overwhelming sense of unfulfillment and boredom in the minds of American housewives and mothers. These women 'heard in voices of traditions and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity'.<sup>96</sup> The female psyche, conditioned to want nothing more, became trapped by the limitations of the nuclear family, and '[a]s she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material...lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even herself the silent question—"Is this all?"'<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Beauvoir, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>95</sup> Beauvoir, p. 37.

<sup>96</sup> Friedan, p. 16. Sandra Dijkstra describes how Friedan's text makes Beauvoir more accessible for American audiences, rewriting a more academic, philosophical style into 'less radical, more readable journalese, so that its message could be transmitted to the masses, at least partially'. Dijkstra, S., 'Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, Summer, 1980, p. 293.

<sup>97</sup> Friedan, p. 16.

But what must occur for women to transcend this Otherness, both in science fiction and real-world narratives? For Beauvoir, the answer is a complete dismantling of the Subject and Other dichotomy. She writes that ‘Adam was only a rough draft, and God perfected the human being when he created Eve...one needs to get out of these ruts; these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded in order to start anew’.<sup>98</sup> In an interview with Margaret Simons in 1979, she expounds on this belief, proclaiming that for women to separate from this Otherness will involve a metamorphosis of identity, and that ‘both parties [men and women] must consider each other reciprocally as subjects...they must find a reciprocity’.<sup>99</sup> A narrative which allows a woman to travel in time — to escape the oppressions of her contemporary society, and to bring the empathies and understandings of her identity to both past and future — may be the key to discovering this reciprocity, and to breaking free not only of Otherness but the whole dichotomy of Subject and Other.

### *The External and the Personal*

By combining Beauvoir with Kristeva in this analysis, I am setting the stage for considering the ways women inhabit linear time, and the ways women are Othered, by time and by patriarchal social structures, within time travel narratives. All time travellers, when travelling between two distinct points in history, would arguably operate within Kristeva’s cursive time, while the rest of humanity inhabits monumental time. The repetitive, cyclical nature of cursive time becomes a literal notion for all time travellers, whose journeys from past to present (or from present to future) and back again, if drawn along a straight line representing a linear timeline, would resemble circular loops.

This parallels Lewis’ articulation of two ‘independent dimensions’ in his 1976 paper ‘The Paradoxes of Time Travel’. Despite the date of publication, Lewis’ conceptualisation of two differently functioning types of time provides an important parallel with the Subject/Other dichotomy, and is particularly useful for discussing how female time travellers relate to their own linear histories. Lewis defines these dimensions as external time—‘time itself’—versus personal time, ‘that which is measured by [the time traveller’s] wristwatch’.<sup>100</sup> Whilst external

---

<sup>98</sup> Beauvoir, p. 35.

<sup>99</sup> M. A. Simons, J. Benjamin and S. Beauvoir, ‘Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview’, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1979, p. 344.

<sup>100</sup> D. Lewis, ‘The Paradoxes of Time Travel’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, April 1976, p. 146.

time represents the linear, forward time which applies to the rest of the world, personal time follows the time traveller; whilst two hundred years may have passed on the calendar, for the time traveller only two may have passed, depending on how long it takes them to travel. I argue here that time travelling can be considered an Othered experience, as it is tangential to the dominant experience of history, and conceived of purely in relation to that primary, subjective experience.

Like an inhabitant of cursive time, the time traveller experiences a vastly secondary, chronologically misshapen form of the historical narrative. The difference is that whilst cursive time represents an abstract structure, driven by society's need for women to stay within domestic and reproductive spheres, personal time is a concrete experience triggered by the physical act of disappearing from one point in time and appearing in another. When inhabitants of cursive time undertake time travel, they break the cycle of abstract Othering. By physically stepping out of time—their personal experience of time, as well as the one society has imposed upon them—they are given the chance to act and enact change in a different historical sphere. Their role as Other shifts with these movements in time, which gives them a unique opportunity to navigate, challenge, and potentially heal from the restrictions they've previously endured.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which I analyse at length in Chapters Two and Three, both feature women of colour who are trapped by a multi-layered Otherness, oppressed on the basis of race as well as gender. In this thesis, I argue that the more Othered a person is, the more separated they become from the historical, monumental timeline. This ahistoricity then lays the foundation for a time travel narrative where a unique and powerful healing of identity can occur. In writing my novel, *Else*, for example, I have given my protagonist three separate layers of Otherness: Else experiences the predominantly white and patriarchal culture of contemporary Australia as female, as queer, and as biracial (her biological father is Egyptian; her mother is English). Navigating Else's character arc has entailed a constant consideration of how her different identities make her feel Othered and ahistorical within her present. Her experiences with time travel further complicate her relationship with her present home of Adelaide in 2019, and a deepening sense of displacement from time and place leads to the decision Else makes to travel to and ultimately remain in 2054. Through time travel—a literal removal of herself from the past—Else is able to directly break free of the Othering social structures of the present, and become the Subject of her own narrative.

The following chapters will consider Butler's protagonist Dana and Piercy's protagonist Connie with regard to their African-American and Latina identities, and to the creative potential within both alternate histories and future utopias. In doing so, the chapters will uncover a powerful relationship between the oppression (both racial and gendered) within their socio-political contexts at the beginning of the narrative, and the transformation their sense of self and identity has undertaken by the novel's end. The thesis will look to the time travel experience as the vessel for this metamorphosis, and consider how the time travel narrative is able to liberate oppressed minority identities in ways that other narrative structures cannot, and in ways from which white men, the general rulers of historical time, are simply unable to benefit.

## Chapter Two

### Backwards—*Kindred* and Shadow Histories

In *Kindred* (1979), after the protagonist Dana's second encounter with time travel, she returns home prepared to defend the legitimacy of her experiences. Her husband Kevin hastens to reassure her: 'I wouldn't dare act as if I didn't believe [you]. After all, when you vanish from here, you must go someplace'<sup>101</sup>. As readers, we know that this someplace is a Maryland slave plantation centuries in the past, because as *Kindred's* narrator Dana can bring us along. For Kevin, however, Dana has gone somewhere he can neither see nor reach—not without her help. By communicating her experiences of Maryland and, later, by physically dragging Kevin with her through time, Dana becomes Kevin's only link to the narrative of the past, and his only link back to the narrative of the present. In abstract fashion, this minor exchange encompasses why Dana is so powerful as the time traveller of this text, due to her ability to recover and foreground Othered narratives. Chapter One brought together the Other, cursive time and personal time to create a parallel between Othered identities and time travellers. This chapter takes that parallel and applies it to an analysis of *Kindred*, considering how Dana's African-American and female identity affects her relationship with the past and its inhabitants. I argue that when a minority identity such as Dana time travels to the past, they introduce readers to a perspective of historical events which has often been excluded from the larger, white masculine narrative.

The narrative of *Kindred* opens on Dana's twenty-sixth birthday. Following a dizzy spell, Dana finds herself involuntarily transported through time and space, from her home and her white husband Kevin in 1976 Los Angeles to a plantation in antebellum Maryland. She stays just long enough to save the life of a drowning white boy, before being transported back to 1976, experiencing the same dizziness, and 'shaking...with residual terror'.<sup>102</sup> On her second trip to the past, she saves the same boy from a fire and learns that he is Rufus Weylin, heir to the plantation. Rufus is also Dana's distant ancestor, his name recognisable due to an extensive family tree kept by Dana's family. Dana realises that she has been tasked by unknown forces with keeping Rufus alive until fatherhood: 'No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist...If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live.'<sup>103</sup> Dana must continue to save her ancestor Rufus' life, or else she cannot logically exist.

---

<sup>101</sup> O. Butler, *Kindred*, New York, Doubleday, 1979, p. 44.

<sup>102</sup> Butler, p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> Butler, pp. 24-25.



This is commonly called the “grandfather paradox”, which outlines the contradictions of changing past events within a singular timeline. The paradox is well-laid out in John W. Carroll’s *A Time Travel Dialogue*, a text structured as dialogue between fictional characters:

TAD: ...I could go back in time and shoot my grandfather, but then if I had shot my grandfather, I wouldn’t exist because my grandfather would never have fathered me. But then you’d have my grandfather lying dead in the street back in 1930, shot dead by a killer who never existed. Impossible!<sup>104</sup>

The paradox prevents the time traveller from killing their own grandfather, as without him they would not exist in the first place. This inverse cause and effect relationship is at the centre of my novel, *Else*, in which certain random objects (Else Objects) have been identified in the past, and must be transported from the future, otherwise they will not have existed initially to be identified by that future. In both *Kindred* and *Else*, the characters decide not to challenge or test the contradictions of the paradox, opting instead to leave their proverbial grandfather alone. This has been a popular approach; Paul J. Nahin writes that ‘If a solution to the grandfather paradox puzzle escaped an early science fiction writer, then he would mysteriously mention it and then hasten on to other matters’.<sup>105</sup> Pulled back to the plantation each time Rufus is in mortal danger, Dana does not question the logic of her quest; she decides it is necessary. Until she is pulled forwards again to the 1970s, she must play the role of a slave owned by the Weylins; this is both for her own safety and the safety of the other slaves, among them her ancestor Alice, who will grow up to be the mother of Rufus’ children.

In this chapter, I argue that when travelling backwards in time, the Othered time traveller has the power to bring what I am terming “shadow histories” into the light. This term has a basis in Beauvoir’s Other and expands on my earlier distinction between “the past” and “history”. In the Introduction, I defined “the past” as a blanket term for all authentic, lived historical experience, in its messiness and its diversity, and “history” as the artificial, narrative representation of that past. To best define “shadow history” and its counterpart “spotlight history”, I am introducing the metaphor of the past as a stage in a theatre, facing an audience. The stage encompasses all lived experience, recorded and unrecorded, and the audience represents consumers of the historical narrative. As the show begins and the spotlight is turned

---

<sup>104</sup> J.W. Carroll, *A Time Travel Dialogue*, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2014, pp. 13-14.

<sup>105</sup> P.J. Nahin, *Time Machine Tales: The Science Fiction Adventures and Philosophical Puzzles of Time Travel*, Cham, Springer Nature, 2017, p. 204.

on, only a portion of the stage is illuminated to this audience. This is "spotlight history", the parts of the past that are highlighted in order to be consumed. "Shadow history" encompasses the rest of the stage; the audience is aware that these sections of the stage exists, but they are in darkness. The audience is manipulated into focussing on the portion of the stage—of the "past"—under the spotlight. These two types of history are not always completely distinct from each other; the light shining on the spotlight history can sometimes partially illuminate the shadow history, but only tangentially. Shadow history is secondary to spotlight history in the same way that the Other is considered only in relation to the Subject.

It also mirrors how the time traveller's personal time can only be measured against the external experienced by the rest of the world. This is exemplified in *Kindred*, as time in 1976 consistently passes more slowly in comparison to the time Dana spends on the plantation. During the months she spends in the past, only hours have passed in present day Los Angeles, and when she escapes back to the present she finds Kevin wearing the same clothes as when she left. Later in the text, Kevin is accidentally left behind and trapped in the past, whilst Dana returns to the present. Dana notes, 'I had been at home for eight days when the dizziness finally came again';<sup>106</sup> as she arrives back on the plantation and is eventually located by Kevin, he tells her, 'it's been five years for me'.<sup>107</sup> Later, she directly acknowledges her disjointed experience of time: 'I'm sure my last two visits here have aged me quite a bit, no matter what my calendar at home says'.<sup>108</sup>

This chapter discusses how Dana's Othered identity, as time traveller and as woman of colour, qualifies her to navigate and communicate the shadow history of American slaves. *Kindred* is considered both a neo-slave narrative and an Afrofuturist text, which makes use of science fiction elements to recover and celebrate African-American voices. This act of "recovery" challenges practises of hierarchical exclusion. Maylei Blackwell writes in *Chicana Power!*—with specific reference to Chicana narratives, but it is similarly resonant when discussing Afrofuturism—that 'it is precisely within the gaps, interstices, silences, and crevices of the uneven narratives of domination that possibilities lie for fracturing dominant narratives and creating spaces for new historical subjects to emerge'<sup>109</sup>. Blackwell suggests here that texts such as *Kindred*, that are narrated by characters often excluded from history, draw their

---

<sup>106</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p. 126.

<sup>107</sup> Butler, p. 205.

<sup>108</sup> Butler, p. 148.

<sup>109</sup> M. Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011, p. 2.

strength directly from this exclusion and allow their protagonists to perform a recovery of self. Time travel allows Dana to perform her own self-recovery not only by keeping her ancestral line intact, but also by forging intimate and empathetic connections with her ancestors, which navigate various intersectional hierarchies of gender and race. This self-recovery comes at a dire cost to both Dana and Butler, on which the end of the chapter will elaborate—but nevertheless it represents a shift from Subject to Other, and from shadow history to spotlight history. The relationship between Dana and the act of time travel is thus complex, but ultimately empowering, and in a way that is utterly unique to the Othered time traveller.

### *Defining Kindred*

Much like its protagonist, *Kindred* is not easily categorised. Octavia Butler herself has referred to it as a ‘grim fantasy’<sup>110</sup>; Frances Foster Smith expands on this interpretation, writing that the text is an amalgamation of ‘realistic science fiction, grim fantasy, neo-slave narrative, and initiation novel’.<sup>111</sup> Barbara Strickland, meanwhile, considers it ‘a novel of psychological horror’.<sup>112</sup> Most importantly for this thesis, *Kindred* has also been called a neo-slave narrative and an Afrofuturist text. Both these descriptors are important to define in more detail, as they set up a necessary discussion of history as a marketable text.

The neo-slave narrative, to begin with, was coined by Bernard Bell and defined simply as ‘modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom’.<sup>113</sup> Madhu Dubey elaborates that this is mainly used to discuss ‘fiction about slavery published since the 1970s’, which is ‘centrally concerned with the question of *voice* as a measure of authentic historical recovery’.<sup>114</sup> In the first book-length study, Ashram H. A. Rushdy writes of the aspirations driving the subgenre:

the authors of the Neo-slave narratives are able to comment on cultural politics in America, especially the politics of canonization and the issue of appropriation in

---

<sup>110</sup> J.C. Snider, ‘Interview: Octavia E. Butler’, in Consequa Francis (ed.), *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

<sup>111</sup> W.L. Andrews, F.S. Foster and T. Harris (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 246.

<sup>112</sup> B. Strickland, review of ‘Kindred’, in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.

<sup>113</sup> B.W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, p. 289.

<sup>114</sup> M. Dubey, ‘Neo-Slave Narratives’, In G. A. Jarrett (ed.), *A Companion to African American Literature*, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 332, 335.

American cultural history...Moreover, by using a form of writing that had been excluded from the academic study of slavery for so long, the authors of the Neo-slave narratives were able to make a critical comment about the historiographical tradition whose often romanticized representation of slavery was enabled by the exclusion of firsthand African American perspectives.<sup>115</sup>

The seminal example of a neo-slave narrative is Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*,<sup>116</sup> which 'initiated an outpouring of novels about slavery that continues unabated into the twenty-first century'.<sup>117</sup> Rushdy's definition, however, is restricted to narratives situated in the antebellum period and written in first person; in the words of Sherryl Vint, Rushdy 'neglects the importance of the fantastic'.<sup>118</sup> His definition on its own is therefore an inadequate introduction to Octavia Butler; particularly as *Kindred* prompts 'a rethinking of the relationship between African-American and fantastic literatures.'<sup>119</sup>

This provides an apt transition into Afrofuturism, which is an active and explicit exploration of this relationship. Afrofuturism is defined most succinctly by Sheree R. Thomas as 'speculative fiction from the African diaspora',<sup>120</sup> although the term is originally attributed to Mark Dery, who classifies it as:

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century technoculture—and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.<sup>121</sup>

During the late 1990s, the definition grew into a serious mode of critical inquiry, in discourse led by Alondra Nelson.<sup>122</sup> For Lisa Yaszek, one of the central Afrofuturist texts is Ellison's *Invisible Man*,<sup>123</sup> which 'uses science fictional motifs to aggressively critique American

---

<sup>115</sup> A.H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> M. Walker, *Jubilee*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1966.

<sup>117</sup> Dubey, 'Neo-Slave Narratives', p. 332.

<sup>118</sup> S. Vint, '“Only by Experience”: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives', *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, July, 2007, p. 241.

<sup>119</sup> Vint, 241.

<sup>120</sup> S.R. Thomas (ed.), *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, New York, Aspect, 2004.

<sup>121</sup> M. Dery, 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', in M. Dery (ed.), *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1994, p. 180.

<sup>122</sup> See A. Nelson, *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2002.

<sup>123</sup> R. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Random House, 1952.

institutions and practices that erase black people and their history from the future imaginary'.<sup>124</sup> Famous literary examples include writings from Samuel R. Delany<sup>125</sup> and Octavia Butler; a more contemporary example is Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*,<sup>126</sup> which follows a young woman in post-apocalyptic Africa who uses her magical powers to challenge her sorcerous father. I argue that Afrofuturist texts can be viewed as excavators and celebrators of shadow histories; as bell hooks articulates in 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination', '[t]o bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable...it is the telling of that history that makes possible political self-recovery'.<sup>127</sup> In *Kindred*'s case, Dana's search for a self-recovery occurs through the pain of memory, and the catharsis of identity that comes with defining the space between authentic history and commercial representations of that history.

Ultimately, these descriptions of *Kindred* are all plausible; perhaps it is then more useful to consider the text less for how it conforms to a genre and more for its rejections of strict definitions. It is, after all, this rejection—of linear time, of power dynamics, of the Subject/Other, and of the contemporary fictionalisation and commodification of the slave narrative—which has led *The Baltimore Sun* to label *Kindred* 'a celebrated mainstay of college courses in women's studies and black literature',<sup>128</sup> and, likewise, which earned from *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* the title of 'shattering work of art'.<sup>129</sup> It has become a precursor to other texts that combine the time slip device with themes of racism and slavery. In *A Wish After Midnight* (2010)<sup>130</sup> by Zetta Elliott, the black protagonist Gemma seeks to escape her drug-infested poverty and finds herself transported to Civil War-era Brooklyn. Another example is Delia Sherman's *The Freedom Maze* (2011)<sup>131</sup>, in which thirteen-year-old Sophie slips from her grandmother's house in 1960 Louisiana to the plantation it was, exactly one hundred years before. Sophie is immediately misidentified as a slave, and the text centres around her experience working on the plantation. As two young adult texts, *A Wish After Midnight* and *The Freedom Maze* are both less shocking depictions of slavery than *Kindred*, but they are notable for their similarities.

---

<sup>124</sup> L. Yaszek, 'Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,' *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, November 2006, p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> See S. R. Delany, *Babel-17*, New York, Ace Books, 1966.

<sup>126</sup> N. Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*, New York, Daw Books, 2010.

<sup>127</sup> b. hooks, 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination', in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. A. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 342, 345.

<sup>128</sup> L. Smith, review of 'Kindred', in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.

<sup>129</sup> S. Frank, review of 'Kindred', in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.

<sup>130</sup> Z. Elliott, *A Wish After Midnight*, Amazon, Skyscape, 2010.

<sup>131</sup> D. Sherman, *The Freedom Maze*, Easthampton, Big Mouth House, 2011.

For Nadine Fligel, *Kindred* remains ‘a rebuke to patriarchal American culture, which has created its own monstrous threat through practises of exclusion.’<sup>132</sup> By foregrounding Dana’s experience, and prioritising the worldview of the Othered identity within intersectional hierarchies, Butler challenges these practises of exclusion mentioned by Fligel. These hierarchies play out not only between Dana and the Weylins, but also eventually between Dana and the slaves, and within Dana’s marriage, both in her present and in the past. Through the transgressive structure of the time travel narrative, Butler demonstrates the constant impact of past upon present, and reminds twenty-first century readers that:

...slavery—both discursive and experiential—becomes a charged and immediate presence in modern-day life, whose shape changes daily and whose contours readers must renegotiate continually if they are to make any sense of it and its place in their present existence.<sup>133</sup>

### *Intersectionality*

Dana’s relationships with her ancestors transgress numerous hierarchies of race and gender. Time travel gives her an awareness of these hierarchies, and an ability to critique them from the distant, post-institutionalised slavery standpoint of the 1970s. In addition, she is able to use her Othered identities—of woman, as African-American, and as time traveller—to empower herself within these relationships, and to manipulate them for her own survival. When considering her task of keeping Rufus alive until fatherhood, Dana’s immediately concern is how her identity will limit her capabilities: ‘I was the worst possible guardian for [Rufus]—a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children’.<sup>134</sup> Dana’s awareness of her own pre-determined position in life reflects certain words in a speech delivered in 1893 by black activist Anna Julia Cooper. Speaking to the Congress of Women's Representatives during the 1893 World's Fair, Cooper states that '[t]he white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation; the black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent'.

---

<sup>132</sup> N. Fligel, ‘“It’s Almost Like Being There”: Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer, 2012, p. 226.

<sup>133</sup> Fligel, p. 239.

<sup>134</sup> Butler, p. 69.

In a 1997 interview, Butler addresses these disadvantages, and discusses in particular the narrative advantages of employing a female protagonist:

I began with a man as main character, but I couldn't go on using the male main character, because I couldn't realistically keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed...because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so.... That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favour.<sup>135</sup>

In other words, the facets of Dana's identity that disadvantage her may also be the reason she is still alive at the end of *Kindred*, as they lead other more powerful characters to misunderstand her, ignore her, and thus underestimate her. This is a treatment which Dana finds herself subject to constantly by the Weylins, by the plantation's slave community, and even by her husband. An early example can be found in Dana's explanation for the trousers she is wearing upon her arrival in the past. Seeking indifference from her contemporaries, she acknowledges that it is less suspicious to see a white man down on his luck, than a black woman up on hers: '[i]t was probably easier for the people here to understand a master too poor or too stingy to buy me proper clothing than it would be for them to imagine a place where it was normal for women to wear pants'.<sup>136</sup>

Dana also takes advantage of her perceived Otherness to incite fear, and create a wary distance between herself and others. Her sudden materialisation in the past is often witnessed by Rufus' parents, who individually struggle for, and ultimately fail to find, a rational explanation. Dana imagines that Mrs Weylin has developed a spiritual explanation for her appearances: 'I was probably [Mrs Weylin's] ghost. She had had to find some explanation for my vanishing.'<sup>137</sup> By expecting the irrational reasoning from Rufus' mother as opposed to his father, Dana demonstrates an internalised acceptance of the "irrational woman" myth discussed in Chapter One. Confirming this prejudice, she then muses: 'I wondered how her more realistic husband had explained it'.<sup>138</sup> Mr Weylin, however, fares no better in considering Dana's origins, asking her early on in the text—'Who are you?...What are you?'<sup>139</sup>—and much later,

---

<sup>135</sup> C.H. Rowell, 'An Interview with Octavia E. Butler', *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 1, Winter, 1997, p. 51.

<sup>136</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p 73.

<sup>137</sup> Butler, p. 18.

<sup>138</sup> Butler, p. 18.

<sup>139</sup> Butler, p. 141.

having reached his own conclusions, he angrily informs her: ‘You’re something different. I don’t know what—witch, devil, I don’t care...You come out of nowhere and go back into nowhere...You’re not natural!’<sup>140</sup> Dana ultimately decides not to contest these rationalisations, instead wielding her own Otherness as a barrier which protects her from the Weylins.

Dana being a time traveller allows her to make contrasts between the two cultures of past and present, and also to analyse how people change when removed from one of these cultures and exposed to the other. This highlights the shadow history of slave narratives, suggesting that it is not so much a history as something which still strongly affects the present. One of *Kindred*’s key explorations is the effect of socio-political and cultural context in the building of character. This is often explored negatively, with regard to good people being conditioned into evil behaviours and beliefs, and Dana’s primary concern is for Kevin, who physically is interchangeable with the text’s historical villains: ‘an unusual-looking white man, his face young, almost unlined, his eyes so pale as to be almost [colourless]’.<sup>141</sup> Lynette D. Myles argues that even in the comparatively progressive culture of 1976, ‘Kevin’s dual role as white male and spouse can be read as oppressive.’<sup>142</sup> When she is transported back to save Rufus a third time, Kevin puts his arms around her, and the physical contact pulls him along with her. On the plantation, they decide to pretend that Dana is Kevin’s slave, for Dana’s protection, and in order to keep each other close. For Kevin, writes Myles, ‘it is different and in some ways comfortable to act out the role of master over Dana, as it is familiar and expected in the white household’.<sup>143</sup> The text revolves around the naivety and ultimately doomed nature of their role-playing, documenting Dana’s slow but steady acclimatisation to slave culture, and what Roslyn Nicole Smith calls her metamorphosis from ‘a historically fragmented Black woman, who defines herself solely on her contemporary experiences’ to ‘a historically integrated identity’.<sup>144</sup> Lisa Yaszek, similarly, refers to this metamorphosis as a ‘newfound understanding of historical representation itself as a kind of mutable structure informed by multiple sources’.<sup>145</sup> The evolution of this newfound understanding involves an exploration of

---

<sup>140</sup> Butler, p. 228.

<sup>141</sup> Butler, p. 53.

<sup>142</sup> L.D. Myles, *Female Subjectivity in African American Women’s Narratives of Enslavement*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 157.

<sup>143</sup> Myles, p. 157.

<sup>144</sup> R.N. Smith, ‘Medias Res, Temporal Double-Consciousness and Resistance in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, PhD Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007.

<sup>145</sup> L. Yaszek, ‘“A Grim Fantasy”: Remaking American History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 4, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, Summer, 2003, p. 1064.



the inseparable and often toxic relationship between history and text, which will be explored further on in this chapter.

Dana's oppressed position within racial and gendered hierarchies means that, even though the hierarchies of the past are significantly more regressive, she can consider those structures and the people it affects from a place of intimacy and empathy that Kevin cannot reach. In contrast, Kevin's own identity affords him a sense of comfort and wonder at his surroundings that Dana is not permitted. His skin colour also empowers him to move freely around the plantation. When Dana unexpectedly travels home, Kevin is not physically touching her, and is consequently trapped in the past for five years. Butler uses his prolonged exposure to the South to explore the inseparability of cultural context and identity, and the dangers of compromising one's core values, or even just pretending to. Kevin's character arc offers the reader a case study in both white and male privilege, and a juxtaposition against Dana's struggles. At various points throughout the text, the advantages inherent in Kevin's identity are brought into stark, violent juxtaposition with Dana's disadvantages. It becomes swiftly apparent that the time travel structure treats the two characters very differently; whilst Dana navigates a primal fear towards and hatred of the past, Kevin experiences a growing awe towards his situation:

'This could be a great time to live in [Kevin says]...go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true.'

'West,' I said bitterly. 'That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!'

He looked at me strangely. He had been doing that a lot lately.<sup>146</sup>

Dana becomes quickly and darkly aware that '[i]f he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him'<sup>147</sup>—and later, after her fears are realised and Kevin is trapped for years in the deep South, alone in a regressive white culture, she is wary of meeting him again, wondering: '[w]hat might he be willing to do now that he would not have done before?'<sup>148</sup> Eventually, she does also worry for herself within this culture, after seeing how the slaves force themselves to be submissive to survive. Despite the horrors of her experience at the Weylin plantation, when she arrives there once again she feels a sense of warmth: 'I was

---

<sup>146</sup> Butler, p. 103.

<sup>147</sup> Butler, p. 80.

<sup>148</sup> Butler, p. 203.

startled to catch myself saying wearily, ‘Home at last.’<sup>149</sup> Similarly, after being whipped as punishment by Mr Weylin and Rufus weeks later, she finds herself resolved to be more obedient, and notes with alarming finality - ‘[s]ee how easily slaves are made?’<sup>150</sup>

Having spent a large portion of the text being consciously disobedient to the Weylins, out of loyalty to her more progressive values, Dana realises that her experiences have, against her own will, reshaped her for the worse. This self-awareness allows Dana to interpret all inhabitants of the past as products of their time. For this reason, inhabitants of the eighteenth century are never explicitly portrayed as evil. Despite Mr Weylin’s numerous acts of violence towards Dana, and his conclusions about her not being human, Dana ultimately decides that he ‘wasn’t a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper’.<sup>151</sup>

Additionally, the discrepancy between Dana’s personal and external times allow her to watch Rufus grow into manhood in snapshot-like experiences. For Rufus, this happens in natural, linear time over the course of almost two decades. Through time travel, however, Dana is able to chart Rufus’ character development from an innocent boy, whom she feels compelled to save from drowning, to an entitled man who takes what he wants—who, when his advances are rejected by Dana’s ancestor Alice, responds with intense violence, and defends himself by claiming: ‘I wouldn’t have hurt [Alice] if she hadn’t just kept saying no’.<sup>152</sup> The term “rape culture” ‘originated in the 1970s during the second-wave feminist movement, and is often used to describe contemporary American culture as a whole’;<sup>153</sup> it thus was a part of cultural discourse whilst Octavia Butler wrote *Kindred*. Rufus’s self-defence is, however, still hauntingly relevant, forty years after the publication of *Kindred*, in modern discussions of rape culture.<sup>154</sup>

Rufus’s attitude is also evidence of the complete dehumanisation of slaves during the antebellum period; the act of Rufus raping Alice represents not only the domination of a woman, but the owning of an object. According to bell hooks, the dehumanisation of female slaves in particular stemmed from a ‘deep hatred of woman that had been embedded in the

---

<sup>149</sup> Butler, p. 137.

<sup>150</sup> Butler, p. 196.

<sup>151</sup> Butler, p. 146.

<sup>152</sup> Butler, p. 133.

<sup>153</sup> R.E. Field, ‘Rape Culture’, in M.D. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Rape*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2004, p. 174.

<sup>154</sup> The discussion of rape culture is brief here, as it is only a small facet of this chapter’s argument, and only discussed with regard to the exchange between Rufus and Alice. For a fuller account of modern American rape culture, see K. Harding, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do about It*, Philadelphia, Da Capo Press, 2015, and R. Gay (ed.), *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, New York, Perennial, 2018.

white colonizer's psyche by patriarchal ideology and anti-woman religious teachings [which] both motivated and sanctioned white male brutality against black women'.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, in her aforementioned legal paper Kimberle Crenshaw considers how, due to the intersection of racial and gendered hierarchies of oppression, the rape of a black woman is more disempowering than the rape of a white woman.

The singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror. When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically. Their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection.<sup>156</sup>

Rufus' violent sexual actions thus do not only dominate Alice as a woman, but as a *black* woman. Moreover, his self-defence – that he wouldn't have hurt her if she'd just said yes – conveys his extreme ignorance towards the powerlessness of Alice's situation, and in turn emphasises his privilege as a white man. Whilst he suggests that Alice had her chance to avoid pain, in neither situation does she avoid sexual intercourse; any power she yields is thus an illusion, and secondary to Rufus's sexual desires. This aligns with modern definitions of victim blaming, in which 'Excuses are often found to explain why men commit rape, or why violence against the victim is justified'.<sup>157</sup> Even Kevin displays an internalised acceptance of rape culture, saying of Dana's relationship with Rufus, "Look, if anything did happen, I could understand it. I know how it was back then." To which Dana fiercely responds, "You mean you could forgive me for having been raped?"<sup>158</sup>

The treatment of women, and what women should be, is as bleak in *Kindred* as the treatment of people of colour. Whilst Dana finds herself shrinking, through external *and* internal forces, into the psychology of a slave, one need only look to Rufus' mother, Margaret Weylin, for a similar oppression. A startling contrast can be found between the treatments of Dana and Mrs Weylin, who is painted early on as 'a poor, uneducated, nervous, startlingly pretty young woman who was determined to be the kind of person she thought of as a lady'.<sup>159</sup> Race and gender play an intersectional role in the characterisation of Mrs Weylin; her gender,

---

<sup>155</sup> b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?*, p. 32.

<sup>156</sup> Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing*, p. 159.

<sup>157</sup> Field, p. 174.

<sup>158</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p. 274.

<sup>159</sup> Butler, p. 99.

for instance, places her at a disadvantage to her husband and son, which is illuminated in their treatment of her. The whiteness of her skin, however, grants her more socio-political freedoms than Dana, despite the fact that Dana is more educated, and infinitely more capable. These intersecting hierarchies reach an ugly crescendo in the following exchange of dialogue between Dana and Rufus, who is at this point too young to properly grasp these hierarchies, and is particularly fond of Dana. Having been harshly ordered out of the room by her son, Mrs Weylin flees, and Dana notes with shock:

‘She was crying.’

‘She always cries. Read, Dana.’

‘Do you talk to her that way often?’

‘I have to, or she won’t leave me alone. Daddy does it too.’<sup>160</sup>

Visible in these four simple lines of dialogue are several complex and somewhat contradictory strands of privilege. Dana is the more intellectual, being able to teach Rufus to read, but her dark skin would have stolen her right to literacy from her had she grown up in this time period, and so this makes her talent suspicious. Mrs Weylin, meanwhile, is an uneducated woman, and less capable than Dana, but the whiteness of her skin grants her several more privileges, among them the right to be outraged by Dana’s mysterious literacy. Ultimately, however, nullifying the various authorities of both women are Rufus and Mr Weylin, who as white males are the peaks of privilege in each of these hierarchies, despite one of them being a child and the other not even present during the above exchange. The enactment of this privilege, furthermore, is a learned behaviour passed down from white father to white son, practised and honed in domestic, social, and work spheres. Rufus’s final response—‘I have to,’ as opposed to ‘I want to’ or ‘I like to’—illuminates a deep set belief that the verbal abuse and oppression of his mother is necessary to the roles they play within the mother/son relationship.

This gendered privilege, or more specifically the shared lack of it, is a catalyst for the eventual friendship that blooms between Dana and Mrs Weylin. Across the course of the narrative, the two women grow less antagonistic towards each other, brought together by the softer, more stereotypically feminine facets of their personalities, until, in their final scene together, Dana observes: ‘I found myself laughing and actually holding conversations with her as though we were just a couple of lonely people talking without the extra burden of stupid

---

<sup>160</sup> Butler, p. 111.

barriers'.<sup>161</sup> Here, Dana sheds direct light on the multiplicity of hierarchies which have separated them for so long. Amidst the severity of the narrative's conclusion, perhaps the evolution of this relationship between two women is cause for hope, and proof of how time travel has enabled both Dana and Mrs Weylin to subvert expectations of their race and gender in search of connection.

### *History as Text*

In his book *Modernity and self-identity. Self and society in the late modern age*, holistic sociologist Anthony Giddens writes that '[a] person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going'.<sup>162</sup> The interplay of identity and the sustaining of narrative is constant within the text; it can also be thought of as the relationship between writing and power. At the novel's beginning, Dana's knowledge of slavery comes solely from textbooks and media; as if to foreshadow her eventual struggle with these texts, our first image of her after the prologue describes her sorting books onto shelves, 'try[ing] to keep them in some kind of order'.<sup>163</sup> This is perhaps symbolic of the constant library of material she struggles with across complicated ways, and accessing and reclaiming many of these narratives is a process of direct the narrative, both personal and expositional. These layers of texts saturate the novel in intertextuality. Her knowledge of the Weylins, for instance derives solely from a family Bible in which her family tree is charted; without this text, she would not have understood the necessity of saving Rufus' life, as 'most information...had died before it filtered down to me...[t]here was only the Bible left'.<sup>164</sup>

Analysing Dana's interaction with and use of written texts also allows us to chart her relationship with power, and how she both sustains and loses it. At first, surviving in the past does not necessitate a change of identity so much as a temporary *disguising* of identity; rather than fully becoming a slave, Dana is able to temporarily "play the role" of slave, until she is able to shed the role and return to 1976. Her awareness of the future allows her to view history as a text, and thus imagine herself as a character in this text. This mindset initially empowers

---

<sup>161</sup> Butler, p. 283.

<sup>162</sup> A. Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 54.

<sup>163</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p. 5.

<sup>164</sup> Butler, p. 24.

her; even when Kevin is drawn back through time alongside her, she thinks: '[w]e were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors'.<sup>165</sup> By subconsciously defining her ancestors as semi-fictional, Dana is making them Other, categorising them as secondary to her identity.

The distance between actor and character, however, is constantly murky and eventually almost non-existent. Dana's narrations of her more violent experiences are consistently contrasted with her recollections of contemporary media: '[h]orror stories', she ruminates, 'except that they were true'.<sup>166</sup> A more horrific example of this is the first time she meets her ancestor, Alice, and watches Alice's father attacked by white patrollers. This horrific witnessing shocks Dana into seeing the gaping holes in her understanding of history:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat...I was probably less prepared for the reality than [the child Alice] crying not far from me.<sup>167</sup>

By slowly replacing what she has learned with what she experiences, Dana 'comes into memory while we, readers, are left only with history', caught 'between reading's virtual satisfactions and the limits of such satisfaction.'<sup>168</sup>

This awareness of her own inadequate knowledge of history increases across the narrative, until Dana becomes a character of history rather than an actor: erasing the separation between herself and her ancestors which initially gave her power. At points she seems to have fused with her great-great-grandmother, Alice, compared to her more and more until, finally, Alice herself remarks: '[Rufus] likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike...we're two halves of the same woman'.<sup>169</sup> Intertwined with her own lineage, Dana loses the safety of distinction between herself as present and her surroundings as past, and cannot reverse this process. 'Once,' she reflects, towards the end of the narrative, 'God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting?'<sup>170</sup> In struggling to separate

---

<sup>165</sup> Butler, p. 104.

<sup>166</sup> Butler, p. 77.

<sup>167</sup> Butler, p. 33.

<sup>168</sup> Parham, 'Saying "Yes"', p. 1323.

<sup>169</sup> Butler, p. 254.

<sup>170</sup> Butler, p. 245-6.

herself from inhabitants of the past, she is also struggling to retain her contemporary identity, and the sense of independence and distinction which accompanies it. Consequently, her identity is trapped in a halfway state, shaped equally by the contexts of past and present. When she returns to 1976 after months in the past, she confirms: '[t]oday and yesterday didn't mesh. I felt almost as strange as I had after my first trip back to Rufus—caught between his home and mine'.<sup>171</sup>

This in-betweenness can be diagnosed as an irreversible juxtaposition between personal time and external time. At novel's end, after Dana has broken free of the time loop and returned home for good, the calendar in her house shows that in 1976 not even a month has passed since the day she was first transported to save the young Rufus from drowning. Her physical body, however, has spent so long in the past that she realises: 'though I'll never be able to prove it, I turned twenty-seven'.<sup>172</sup> Marisa Parham considers this temporal disparity a central paradox of *Kindred*. In creating a structural contrast 'between the time of living [antebellum Maryland] and the time of reading [1976, in which history books help Dana and Kevin prepare for time travel]...Butler insists that there is no possibility for an experience of the past outside of first-person experience'.<sup>173</sup>

Ultimately, both Dana and Kevin's lapsed faith in texts is conveyed by their inability to translate their experiences onto page, despite both being published writers. Within the context of the Weylin plantation, Dana does write a shorthand diary which temporarily empowers her, but which does not last: 'Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn't say them, couldn't sort out my feelings about them, couldn't keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward'.<sup>174</sup> The destruction of the writing perhaps foreshadows her later failures, particularly when, in hopes of catharsis, 'I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it'.<sup>175</sup> Her husband Kevin has arguably even less luck, due to spending longer in the past. When he returns to the 1970s after years away, she observes his complete disintegration of contemporary self: 'he fumbled with [the typewriter] for a moment,

---

<sup>171</sup> Butler, p. 124.

<sup>172</sup> Butler, p. 273.

<sup>173</sup> M. Parham, 'Saying "Yes": Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's "Kindred"', *Callaloo*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, vol. 32, no. 4, p. 1322.

<sup>174</sup> Butler, p. 282.

<sup>175</sup> Butler, p. 125.

remembered how to turn it on, then looked at the stack of blank paper beside it and turned it off again. Abruptly, he brought his fist down hard on it'.<sup>176</sup>

If writing is a form of power for both Dana and Kevin, then their inability to write about their time travel experiences represent a complete loss of power. In parts of her book *Woman, Native, Other*, filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha considers whether it is even possible to identify the truth of a past, let alone write about it. For Trinh, it is difficult to believe certain perspectives or retellings of history because they are too shrouded in the art of “storytelling”.

When history separated itself from story, it started indulging in accumulation and facts. Or thought it could. It thought it could build up to History because the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related...Managing to identify with History, history (with a small letter h) thus manages to oppose the factual to the fictional...the story-writer – the historian – to the story-teller...fiction, not infrequently, means lies, and fact, truth.<sup>177</sup>

Trinh’s usage of “story”, “history” and “History” are very similar to my own. Here, Trinh defines “story” as a constructed narrative, “history” as the story woven specifically by historians, for the purposes of consumption and education, and “History”, with a capital H, as authentic past facts and events, separate from subjectivity and from attempts to condense it into story form. Trinh wrote these words in an altogether different context, but I have included this excerpt because it exposes the distance between real History and the narratives which are written to represent and communicate that History.

In turn, it helps to diagnosis Dana and Kevin’s mental states. By the end of the novel, these characters are both starving for narrative catharsis: as Rushdy writes, ‘[f]or them to understand their recent experience of loss and their present condition as historicized beings, both Kevin and Dana require a return to the past in the form of a narrative’.<sup>178</sup> They long not for the truth of History, but for the emotional closure of the “story” of that History; their roles as historical characters, and their violent expulsion from this narrative, leaves them yearning for a return to text. The novel’s last scene sees them travelling to Baltimore, searching for

---

<sup>176</sup> Butler, p. 214.

<sup>177</sup> T. M. Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, pp. 119-120.

<sup>178</sup> A.H.A. Rushdy, ‘Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, *College English*, vol. 55, no. 2, February, 1993, p. 137.



information on the Weylin plantation and its inhabitants. This pilgrimage is an unhappy one; their meagre findings include a newspaper notice regarding a fire at the plantation, and a Slave Sale announcement listing several familiar names. In the face of this failure, Rushdy suggests that 'Dana must [instead] learn to appreciate and employ a form of communication which is more dialogic, more capable of communing with her partner at the same time as it communicates with the past. That medium is *memory*'.<sup>179</sup> The narrative conclusion, then, is representative of a rejection of contemporary, commodified slave narratives, and a return to lived memory. In light of the chapter's hypothesis, this can be read as a triumph of Subject over Other, and a shifting of shadow history to spotlight history.

Dana's rejection of the written word is most explicitly represented by the loss of her arm, and thus one of her typing hands. When we meet Dana in the prologue, she is in the hospital recovering from unknown events, which we learn later to be her final journey through time—she has saved her family tree and killed Rufus, but his grip on her arm at her moment of departure means that she arrives in 1976 'still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it, or growing with it'.<sup>180</sup> The symbolic value of Dana's amputated arm has been a subject of consideration amongst numerous scholars. Karla Holloway claims that it 'figuratively expresses her loss of the symbol-making intuitive side of the feminine'.<sup>181</sup> Rushdy considers the amputation symbolic of the part of Dana that is lost to history, and to the irreversible trauma of her experiences. 'Dana loses part of her body to history,' he explains, 'part of her fundamental integrity to the past...[her] losses and scars figure the way that the past exacts a cost which is not just psychic...[they are] symptom[s] of how recovering the past involves losing a grip on the present', and that 'to flesh out the past means to leave part of one's being there'.<sup>182</sup> Myles considers that the amputation of Dana's arm 'evokes a symbolic recovery of black women's bodies when she pulls her arm free from the hold of nineteenth-century ideology'.<sup>183</sup>

The image of the arm is a powerful one throughout revolutionary history. In her groundbreaking 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech, Sojourner Truth draws direct attention to her arms, holding them up and imploring: 'Look at me, look at my arms. I have plowed, and planted, and gathered

---

<sup>179</sup> Rushdy, p. 141.

<sup>180</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p. 292.

<sup>181</sup> K. Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1992, p. 117.

<sup>182</sup> Rushdy, 'Families of Orphans', p. 139.

<sup>183</sup> Myles, 'Space and Time', p. 162.

in the barns, and no man can head me'.<sup>184</sup> Sara Ahmed refers to arms as both 'limbs of labor' and 'the limbs of the laborer';<sup>185</sup> this suggests that the arm can represent the work of the slave as well as the slave themselves, and their forced submission to an oppressive power despite their own physical capabilities. To remove or distort the arm, then, is to challenge this submission, and to take this power back: 'to go on strike is to clench your fist, to refuse to be handy...the arm is a revolutionary limb...The arms that built the house are the arms that will bring it down'.<sup>186</sup> Ahmed adds that '[a]rms not only have a history; they are shaped by history; arms make history flesh. It is the arms that can help us make the connection between histories that otherwise do not seem to meet'.<sup>187</sup> In this light, Dana's loss of arm can mean not only the physical severing of her from the past, as it is her final act of time travel, but it also removes her ability to write about the past. The histories of nineteenth and seventeenth centuries, having made a previously impossible connection through Dana, can meet no more.

When asked about the amputation, Butler explains: 'I couldn't really let [Dana] come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and [losing her arm], I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole'.<sup>188</sup> The first sentence of her answer resonates most poignantly with this thesis. Whilst it is mostly interpreted as having the physical meaning, of Dana coming back without an arm, it may also suggest that Dana's final act of time travel is unsuccessful—that rather than returning to 1976, she instead inhabits a physical halfway-point between times, her arm in the past and the rest of her body in the present. This in-betweenness is referred to consistently throughout the text, particularly with regard to how Dana's 1970s sensibilities trap her midway between stereotypes, and render her mistrusted for her inability to conform to either. 'White people', she muses midway through, 'thought I was industrious. Most blacks thought I was either stupid or too intent on pleasing the whites'.<sup>189</sup>

Furthermore, the scholarly discourse surrounding Dana's arm parallels discussions on whether, despite its bleak subject matter and downbeat ending, *Kindred* conveys some positive messages about nature versus nurture. Michelle Erica Green argues that, despite its exploration of extreme racism and the realities of slavery, *Kindred* is Butler's most optimistic novel, and one of its takeaway messages is that personality and behaviour are constructed within a social

---

<sup>184</sup> E. C. Stanton, S. B. Anthony & M. J. Gage (eds.), *History of Woman Suffrage*, New York, Rochester, 1887-1902, p. 116.

<sup>185</sup> S. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 85.

<sup>186</sup> Ahmed, pp. 85, 88.

<sup>187</sup> Ahmed, p. 234.

<sup>188</sup> R. Kenan, 'An Interview with Octavia E. Butler', *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring, 1991, p. 498.

<sup>189</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, p. 178.

frame.<sup>190</sup> Beverly Friend, however, holds the more depressing view that Dana is a failed time traveller, writing that novels like *Kindred* convey that:

contemporary woman is not educated to survive, that she is helpless, perhaps even more helpless, than her predecessors...Men understand how the world is run; women do not. Victims then, victims now...and Butler know[s] it.<sup>191</sup>

The word “victim” here is crucial in considering whether time travel is a positive or a negative presence in Dana’s life, as there is much evidence pointing to the latter. Firstly, in a larger sense, it is important to acknowledge Dana’s lack of free will in accepting her initial time travelling quest. Even before she fully understands the specifics of her situation, and despite the terror of assimilating into slave life, Dana knows she has no choice but to try and save Rufus: ‘I didn’t dare test the paradox’.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, the act of time travel is enacted not by any conscious act or desire of Dana’s, but by fear: ‘Rufus’s fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home’.<sup>193</sup> The linear timeline within *Kindred* victimises Dana for the purpose of self-preservation. Later in the text, she learns that to intentionally time travel forwards and return home she must engineer a situation where her life is in genuine peril. She may be the protagonist of her own narrative, but to survive she must ultimately play by the violent rules of the timeline, and of the unseen forces dragging her from present to past and back again.

I argue that this pain is a necessary part of illuminating shadow histories: that navigating and recovering stories of oppression such as slave narratives *should* be painful and *should* be difficult, for writer and reader as well as protagonist. The painful relationship between Dana and time travel then represents the agony of coming to terms with a tragic past through memory. It is important now to turn back to Lisa Yaszek's discussion of Afrofuturism which was touched on earlier in the chapter. Yaszek writes that *Kindred* is an Afrofuturist text which approaches history through a 'memory machine...[that] interrogates the relationship between historical memory and commercial culture by appropriating and adapting the commercial form of science

---

<sup>190</sup> M.E. Green, “‘There Goes the Neighbourhood’: Octavia Butler’s Demands for Diversity in Utopia”, in J.L. Donawerth and C.A. Kolmerton (eds.), *Utopian and Science Fiction By Women: Worlds of Difference*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994, pp. 166-189.

<sup>191</sup> B. Friend, ‘Time Travel as a Feminist Didactic in Works by Phyllis Eisenstein, Marlys Millhiser, and Octavia Butler’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 23, no. 1, April, 1982, p. 55.

<sup>192</sup> Butler, *Kindred*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>193</sup> Butler, p. 49.

fiction itself.<sup>194</sup> I propose that one could go one step further, viewing the physical text of *Kindred* not as a text which employs a memory machine, but as a memory machine itself. In this way, the identity of “text” can be shifted to Butler herself. When asked about her motives in a 1991 interview, Butler explains her need for this interrogation of the distance between the past and history.

My mother did domestic work and I was around sometimes when people talked about her as if she were not there...I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she did, and I think one of the reasons I wrote *Kindred* was to resolve my feelings...*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some for the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery...[t]ime travel is just a device for getting [Dana] back to confront where she came from.<sup>195</sup>

Butler does, however, also acknowledge *Kindred* as another layer of commodity, realising early in her research that ‘I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it’.<sup>196</sup> Reading *Kindred* necessitates considering it not as a singular narrative, but as a compilation of several manufactured ones which, no matter how confronting, have ultimately been distorted for accessibility, and for sales. One could argue that Butler illuminates the commodification of slavery by knowingly adding to it, and that the time travel narrative, by bringing a modern black woman in direct contact with slavery, can be seen thus as representative of Butler’s own experience as author. In the prelude to Nichole Gause’s memoir *Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone*, Itabari Njeri laments that for the African-American, ‘[s]o institutionalized is the ignorance of our history, our culture, our everyday existence that, often, we do not even know ourselves’.<sup>197</sup> The memory machine of *Kindred* can therefore be considered Butler’s intertextual method of learning to know herself and her history, and that ‘what began as a pedagogical project has for its author become a therapeutic one’.<sup>198</sup> Dana’s

---

<sup>194</sup> Yaszek, ‘A Grim Fantasy’, pp. 1053-4.

<sup>195</sup> R. Kenan, ‘An Interview with Octavia E. Butler’, p. 496.

<sup>196</sup> Kenan, p. 497.

<sup>197</sup> I. Njeri, ‘Prelude’ to N. Gause, *Every Good-Bye Ain’t Gone*, New York, Vintage, 1991.

<sup>198</sup> Parham, ‘Saying “Yes”’, p. 1321.

failure to return fully to the present conveys the weight of history on minority identities; this is a weight that the text's white and particularly male characters do not feel, and could never express. Though this weight may be too much for Dana, who has literally left pieces of herself in the past, her role as narrator ensures that the reader directly engages with this weight, and—through learning the lessons of her narrative, and potentially carrying those lessons into new texts—helps her to shoulder it.

### *Looking Forward*

Through Dana's suffering, *Kindred* delivers the message that history, even when written from a lesser heard perspective, cannot be contained within the parameters and expectations of a physical text. It is thus possible to argue that Dana's painful experience as time traveller is the basis of her success. But is there a more optimistic version of this—must the female time traveller always feel pain, in order to produce a more poignant narrative than her male counterpart? Or can poignancy stem instead from the comparative lack of pain? The following chapter shifts focus from past to future in an analysis of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Looking at the text's protagonist Connie, it considers women as inhabitants of a cultural space which, having suffocated them in the past, now liberates them. The thesis' accompanying novel, *Else*, which interacts with the future in a manner inspired by *Woman on the Edge of Time*, will become a larger part of the analysis, and contribute to a possible answer for the question: what role can time travel play in the liberation of women?

## Chapter Three

### Forwards—*Woman on the Edge of Time* and Spotlight Futures

‘We are not competing any more than the first two [A]borigines who walked into Australia were competing. We create each other. We make the space that other women will occupy. We save each other’s sanity.’—*Marge Piercy*<sup>199</sup>

My analysis of *Kindred* in Chapter Two demonstrates that for time travelling women of colour, the past is a dangerous place. Dana's narration shifts the shadow history of the American slave into the spotlight, and as a time traveller she views the past from an outsider’s perspective, which allows her to more clearly navigate and critique the oppressive structures and relationships within this past; ultimately, however, this comes at great physical and emotional cost. On the final page of *Kindred*, Dana is not only missing an arm, but she now knows the pain of recovering a traumatic cultural memory, and the impossibility of authentically communicating this memory by use of the written word. This paints a grim picture, and prompts the question: must all time travel narratives with female protagonists be painful in order to be powerful? Are all Othered time travellers doomed, like Dana, to pay for the “privilege” of narrating their experiences in a historical timeline that has previously excluded them?

In searching for an answer to this question, in this chapter I shift my focus forwards in order to look at how women interact with the future in time travel narratives, using Marge Piercy’s utopian novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) as a case study. Piercy’s novel follows Consuela “Connie” Ramos, a Latina woman living in a bleak 1970s New York, who, after defending her niece from a violent pimp, is unjustly incarcerated in a mental hospital for the second time. Connie is an overtly Othered identity, marginalised by misogyny and racism, by the economic hierarchy which leaves her unable to change her circumstances, and by the welfare system which has legally stolen her daughter Angelina. Within the confines of the hospital, Connie is visited by Luciente: a beautiful, androgynous young woman who claims to be a botanist time travelling from the year 2137, and from an agrarian, post-gender community called Mattapoissett. Connie’s high level of empathy has allowed Luciente to make contact, and to bring Connie with her in sporadic excursions to the future. Through a series of trips to Mattapoissett and back again, the narrative explores what happens to a woman of colour when

---

<sup>199</sup> M. Piercy, *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt (Poets on Poetry)*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1982, p. 3.

she encounters a time that shines a spotlight on her, rather than a past that leaves her in shadow.<sup>200</sup>

Slowly, Connie learns that Mattapoisett is not the only possible future, and that at least one other possibility exists: a dystopian world which Connie accidentally falls into on her way to Mattapoisett. There, she encounters a woman whose physical form has regressed to match violently misogynistic societal views. Connie observes that ‘her body seemed a cartoon of femininity...[s]he looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled’.<sup>201</sup> Connie discovers that her timeline is currently wavering between the two futures, and that for Mattapoisett to exist she must take drastic action in her present. Condemning herself to lifelong incarceration and possible death, Connie fatally poisons the hospital’s scientists. In doing so, she halts the development of mind control technology which would likely have led her timeline into dystopia, and created the society in which she met the cartoonish woman. ‘I killed them,’ she proclaims, ‘because it is war...[a]t least once I fought and won.’<sup>202</sup> The war in question is most directly against the mental health system, but it can also be viewed as being against dystopia, and the gendered stereotypes which govern that world. Time travel has allowed Connie to see the entirety of this war, and to bravely choose her side.

In this chapter I further develop my framework of “shadow” and “spotlight” narratives. In the Introduction, I defined the past as a theatre stage, spotlight narratives as the parts of the past made visible to consumers of history, and shadow narratives as the sections of the past excluded from the historical narrative. In Chapter One, I explored how Othered time travellers can recover shadow narratives of the past and shift them into the spotlight. This chapter, however, requires defining the stage of the future, which is a much shakier structure. In this version of my metaphor, the theatre audience is no longer being educated about a past that has already happened; instead, they’re being shown what the future may be like. Whilst the past is comprised of events and narratives which have definitively happened, the future is unwritten and full of possibility—particularly a utopian future such as Mattapoisett, which is unlikely to realistically eventuate.

---

<sup>200</sup> Time travel as a means of escaping a hospital, and by extension one’s medical situation, can also be found in Everett Marroon’s novel *The Unintentional Time Traveler* (2014). This novel follows an epileptic teenager, Jack, who participates in a new clinical trial and is accidentally sent back in time to inhabit the body of a teenage girl, Jacqueline. It explores gender fluidity and the liberation of a soul from its physical limitations. See E. Marroon, *The Unintentional Time Traveler*, United Kingdom, Lightning Source, 2014.

<sup>201</sup> M. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1976, p. 314.

<sup>202</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 410-411.

On the stage of the future, therefore, I have adapted my terms slightly to reflect this ambiguity. Here, I define the spotlight narrative as the version of the future which, at the point of audience consumption, is *most likely* to eventuate. The shadow narratives are thus all the versions of the future that are less likely to occur, but are still possible. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, for example, Mattapoissett is the version of the future that Connie's spotlight illuminates. By contrast, the dystopian future she accidentally falls into—'She had missed Mattapoissett and hit some other place in the future'<sup>203</sup>—remains in the shadows. By travelling forwards, the Othered time traveller can discover a narrative which benefits her, and can take actions in her present to direct the spotlight onto this version of the future. Her time travelling grants her the power of deciding her own future.

This chapter begins by focussing on the utopian nature of Mattapoissett within *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and specifically its basis in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Connie's interaction with utopia through time travel marks a key difference between this text and *Kindred*. Antebellum Maryland is set within a real historical narrative, which is horrific in its treatment of Dana; Mattapoissett, in contrast, is an imagined society, and a political and psychological sanctuary for Connie. Whilst Dana's aim in *Kindred* is always to cease time travelling and return home, Connie spends much of her narrative longing to *continue* time travelling, and indeed to stay in the future forever. In this chapter I consider whether travelling through time to the future, which takes Connie to utopia, really is a positive force in her life, or whether it ultimately creates as much pain as going back to the past.

There is a long tradition of aligning utopian thinking with feminist thinking, which doesn't necessarily begin with the development of science fiction. It is important here to briefly discuss the history of this alignment, to then situate *Woman on the Edge of Time* within its second-wave feminist context, and as the literary result of centuries of women using fiction to express their need for more political space. It has been argued that the tradition of utopias and women's science fiction can be traced back to the seventeenth century, in texts such as Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666),<sup>204</sup> which lead to such texts as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-1853).<sup>205</sup> These texts, and others discussed in Susan Gubar's *Worlds of Difference* (1994), can operate under the title "literature of estrangement", which Gubar goes

---

<sup>203</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 314.

<sup>204</sup> M. Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, Newcastle, self-published, 1666.

<sup>205</sup> E. Gaskell, *Cranford*, London, *Household Words: A Weekly Journal conducted by Charles Dickens*, 1851-1853 [serial].



on to define as those ‘that counter female alienation from male-dominated structures and strictures by dwelling in and on the possibilities of a better place before, beyond, or behind masculinist history’.<sup>206</sup>

The notion of feminist utopia as a tradition developed over centuries has, however, been rebuked by many scholars; Justine Larbalestier, for instance, argues that ‘the problem with locating women science fiction writers in such an expansive definition of utopian literature is that it tends to ignore the importance of the field of science fiction’.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, in 2016 Margaret Atwood reproached the very idea that any aspect of science fiction could exist in past literatures: ‘[i]n science fiction it’s always about now. What else could it be about?’<sup>208</sup> In this chapter I am viewing literature of estrangement as a distinct precursor to utopian science fiction, so that I can focus more clearly on these latter narratives. It is fascinating, though, to consider how feminist utopian thinking might occur in texts published before the origin of the science fiction genre. That some scholars have attempted to connect literature of estrangement with utopian science fiction suggests that utopian feminist writing can transcend time and connect strongly with future readers. This power is something I will be discussing later on in the chapter.

It’s important here to highlight the short story ‘Sultana’s Dream’<sup>209</sup>, written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in 1904, and published in the newly-circulating *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905. Whilst not a time travel narrative, the story is a clear early depiction of feminist utopia; it depicts a technologically advanced future place called Ladyland, where women are in charge and men are locked away. ‘Sultana’s Dream’ is significant not only because it is written so early in science fiction’s history, but also because it is written in English by a Bengali Muslim woman, at a time when Indian women could not yet vote. It stands as a valuable connector between seventeenth century “literature of estrangement” and the feminist science fiction which would occur in the West in the 1970s.

The definition of the critical utopia, as applicable to science fiction, appears in Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible* (1986), where he writes:

---

<sup>206</sup> S. Gubar, ‘Introduction,’ J. L. Donawerth & C. A. Kolmerton (eds.), *Utopian and Science Fiction By Women: Worlds of Difference*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994, p. xi.

<sup>207</sup> J. Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>208</sup> L. Allardice, ‘Interview, Margaret Atwood: ‘I am not a prophet. Science fiction is really about now’, 20 January 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/20/margaret-atwood-i-am-not-a-prophet-science-fiction-is-about-now>, (accessed 3 June 2019).

<sup>209</sup> R.S. Hossain, ‘Sultana’s Dream’, *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, 1905.

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives.<sup>210</sup>

Here, Moylan states the importance of accessibility to the power of utopian texts, and suggests that the power of a utopian narrative lies not in what makes it perfect, but in what makes it imperfect, and in turn possible. Presenting this utopia through the structure of a time travel narrative can only strengthen the notion of attainability, by bringing this imperfectly perfect world into direct juxtaposition with a fictional society contemporary to the reader.

Alongside Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), *Woman on the Edge of Time* was part of a literary trend of exploring second-wave feminist ambitions through utopian fiction. As mentioned earlier, the nature of feminist thinking aligns almost perfectly with the nature of utopian thinking. Indeed, Sarah Lefanu writes that the only real difference between the two is that '[f]eminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms'.<sup>211</sup> Similarly, Sara Ahmed attests that '[t]o live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable',<sup>212</sup> which recognises that being a feminist, as with being a utopian thinker, is about deciding whether one's surroundings can be improved. Using this definition, one can see feminist utopian fiction as the powerful marriage of political action and artistic creation. Similarly Gubar attests to the natural union of these two literatures:

'[f]eminist criticism is itself inevitably a utopian project, born of the effort to counter women's more than probable estrangement from a male-dominated history of letters with the possibilities of an artistic matrilineage commensurate to our desires.'<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>210</sup> T. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1986, pp. 10-11.

<sup>211</sup> S. Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 100.

<sup>212</sup> S. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 2.

<sup>213</sup> S. Gubar, 'Introduction,' p. xii.

Gubar's words highlight the intention of feminist writers to create a counter-narrative to a masculinist history, and particularly to the presentation of that masculinist history in written texts. In writing *Kindred*, for example, Butler challenges the dominant white-centric narrative of slavery by presenting it through Dana's Othered perspective, which shifts the shadow narrative of the African-American slave into the spotlight. The addition of utopian writing, and particularly the act of time travelling forwards to a utopian society, provides a more hopeful version of this counter-narrative and a more explicit expression of female desires, as I discuss further below. Writers like Piercy, Russ and Dorothy Bryant<sup>214</sup> took advantage of the experimental nature of science fiction to explore ambitions of second-wave feminism voiced by Beauvoir and Friedan, as explained in Chapter One. Russ articulates the common themes among literary utopias as:

the communal, quasi-tribal nature of the societies; the lack of central or indeed of any formal government; the concern for ecology and the natural world; the rural or at least non-urban and non-industrial setting; the peripheral nature of war and violence (reflecting women's relation to war in the real world); and sexual permissiveness.<sup>215</sup>

Many of these fictional societies explored post-gender structures as a method of dismantling the Subject/Other, and 'as counterstories to the dominant phallogocentric narrative'.<sup>216</sup> As Carol Pearson writes, '[t]he belief in duality and the essential conflict between opposites characteristically is seen as the failure of patriarchy, which necessitates its destruction'.<sup>217</sup> Feminist utopias have offered ways of both challenging patriarchal structures and tackling the question: if not this kind of society, then *which one?* How would it function, and does it?

Before embarking on this analysis, it is important (and fascinating) to note that Piercy herself does not consider *Woman on the Edge of Time* a utopia 'because it's accessible. There's almost nothing there except the brooder not accessible now. So it's hardly a utopia; it is very intentionally not a utopia because it is not strikingly new. The ideas are the ideas basically of the women's movement'.<sup>218</sup> No matter what Piercy's intentions were, this glimpse of the

---

<sup>214</sup> See D. Bryant, *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You*, first published as *The Comforter: A Mystical Fantasy*, Evan Press, 1971.

<sup>215</sup> Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, p. 54.

<sup>216</sup> T. Teslenko, *Feminist Utopian Novels of the 1970s: Joanna Russ & Dorothy Bryant*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 56.

<sup>217</sup> C. Pearson, 'Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1977, p. 55.

<sup>218</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 100.

familiar in a perfect future can be seen to make her novel not only a utopian narrative, but a particularly resonant one. In her keynote lecture at Restorying Canada in 2017, Margaret Atwood outlined her view of utopias and dystopias:

I would describe [them] as a kind of yin/yang arrangement. In which every dystopia includes in it a little utopia, and every utopia contains a little dystopia. And that dystopia usually takes the form of “those people”. You know, those people that you have to do something about before everything will be wonderful.<sup>219</sup>

For Atwood, there are always small negative elements in utopias, which the reader will recognise as being negative, and which prevent the utopia from becoming perfectly perfect. Although Piercy does not view *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a utopian narrative, in this chapter I analyse it as an example of a critical utopia, because it is in line with Moylan’s definition of the ‘continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself’<sup>220</sup>. There are indeed darker facets to Piercy’s utopia which allow for this sort of reading. In Mattapoissett, the death penalty is in place, and there is discussion of a far-off war—although these are both only considered necessary in extreme situations. Mattapoissett can be considered a utopia in the same way as the planet Gethen in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in that both Le Guin and Piercy’s novels present futuristic worlds that challenge binary notions of gender and the physical and emotional spaces that are allocated to these genders. These worlds are able to liberate their occupants, empowering them to build their own identities.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, the New York narrative in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is comparable with the oppressive structures present in the state of Gilead, in Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Atwood describes her narrative as ‘a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime’.<sup>222</sup> As I will be discussing, Piercy’s New York narrative is a similar study of how power—or lack of it, in Connie’s case—informs character. Connie’s limited views of womanhood, and of the space she is allowed to inhabit, are shaped directly by the dystopian patriarchal society she has

---

<sup>219</sup> M. Atwood, ‘Keynote Address,’ *Restorying Canada*, [lecture], CBC Radio, 2017, (accessed March 25 2018).

<sup>220</sup> Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 11.

<sup>221</sup> Le Guin, reflecting later on her intentions for the novel, writes that she ‘eliminated gender, to find out what was left...[to] define the area that is shared by men and women alike’. U. K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York, Grove Press, 1989, p. 22.

<sup>222</sup> M. Rothstein, ‘No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood’, *New York Times*, 17 February 1986, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-gilead.html>, (accessed 29 March 2018).

grown up in. Unlike Atwood's heroine Offred, Connie has access to time travel, and can escape, albeit temporarily, the societal structure which has limited her for so long.

As a female time traveller encounters utopian worlds and learns to think of herself in a more liberating way than she is used to, the widening of her self-image enables the reader to also see her more clearly. She becomes a kind of interface between worlds, at once a part of and separate to both worlds, much in the same way that Dana in *Kindred* becomes 'caught between [Rufus'] home [the past] and mine [the present]'.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, Connie is described as being caught in between times: 'Connie was an object. She went where placed and stayed there...She felt distanced from her own life...She could not resume her life, therefore Connie was no more. Yet she lived on.'<sup>224</sup> This description refers specifically to how Connie feels trapped as a patient in a mental institution; it does, however, also come to represent the psychological state she inhabits by the novel's end. Through the act of time travel, Connie becomes distanced from the 1970s, but is unable to fully join Luciente and the others in 2137. However, unlike the sense of failure Dana feels in *Kindred*, Connie's in-betweenness is a mark of liberation from both worlds, redefining her as inhabitant of neither, accountable only to herself.

As I discuss in the second half of this chapter, however, the "stage" upon which the future plays out in this novel is complicated further by the fact that Connie is a paranoid schizophrenic, and therefore an unreliable narrator. Not only is this stage unstable, but the spotlight itself is shaking because the audience isn't sure whether they can trust Connie to wield it. The resulting image is a blurred and utterly disorienting platform, which leaves Connie as well as audience members clinging fiercely to their seats, firmly grounding themselves in their own present. For Connie, time travel is as painful as it was for Dana, but this time the pain stems from having to realise the shortcomings in her present, which has been integral to the construction of her identity. For the reader, suffering also comes from not being able to trust in Connie's account of the future. We finish *Woman on the Edge of Time* not knowing if Connie's final act—poisoning a room of scientists, to ensure that the timeline will lead to a future like Mattapoissett—has been worth it. This suggests that it is ultimately impossible to know or programme the future, and that taking actions in the present to shift the spotlight towards a particular future is based more on faith than on knowledge.

---

<sup>223</sup> O. Butler, *Kindred*, New York, Doubleday, 1979, p. 124.

<sup>224</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 329.

*Utopia: Connie and Mattapoisett*

On the 40 year anniversary of her novel's publication, in an article for *The Guardian*, Marge Piercy reflects on her motivations for writing *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and its continuing resonance. Her decision to write a time travel narrative, she explains, stems from a weariness with 'affluent white males hogging the genre', and a desire to see herself represented in fiction: '[w]hen I was a child, I first noticed that neither history as I was taught it nor the stories I was told seemed to lead to me. I began to fix them. I have been at it ever since. We need a past that leads to us.'<sup>225</sup> Piercy's act of writing her identity into texts is similar to the act of creating alternate history perspectives; like Dana, and indeed like Butler, Piercy actively shifts her Othered identity (her gender, in this case) to the forefront through the writing of a text. Unlike *Kindred*, however, Piercy's text is a work of speculative fiction which directly explores notions of utopia and dystopia, and which tends towards an imagined future rather than a recorded past. In doing so, it is able to create a critical balance between the exclusion of female voices from the past and their potential for inclusion in the future.

Mattapoisett can be seen as a creative exploration of the radical society advocated for in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Published twenty-one years after *The Second Sex*, Firestone's text is a more extreme product of and contributor to the cultural aftermath of Beauvoir's writings; indeed, its dedication reads, 'for Simone de Beauvoir who endured.'<sup>226</sup> *The Dialectic of Sex* argues for a post-revolutionary society devoid of constructs such as motherhood and romantic love. To Firestone, the reproductive role of women has been the root cause of their oppression, and liberating women from this role, she writes, involves a methodology borrowing heavily from Marxist vernacular:

So that just as to assure elimination of economic classes requires...[the proletariat's] seizure of the means of *production*, so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires...the seizure of control of *reproduction*...just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the

---

<sup>225</sup> M. Piercy, 'Woman on the Edge of Time, 40 years on: 'Hope is the engine for imagining utopia'', *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/29/woman-on-the-edge-of-time-40-years-on-hope-imagining-utopia-marge-piercy>, (accessed 29 November 2017).

<sup>226</sup> S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970.

economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be...not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself.<sup>227</sup>

Despite the absence of the terms “Subject” and “Other”, the passage borrows heavily from Beauvoir in calling not for the end of men, but for the end of the dichotomy of men and women, and the biological determinants of power and opportunity that separate them. With this achievement, Firestone concludes, ‘[t]he tyranny of the biological family would be broken...[a]nd with it the psychology of power.’<sup>228</sup>

Piercy’s agrarian, post-gender Mattapoisett is a fictional simulation of these ideas, and a setting that contrasts with Connie’s home in 1970s New York. As Lyn Pykett describes, *Woman on the Edge of Time* ‘finely counterpoints the utopianism of Mattapoisett (sic) with the dystopian realism with which Connie’s actual world is represented’.<sup>229</sup> Within this utopian community, there is no patriarchy, racism, homophobia, or visible prejudices of any kind; the hierarchies of oppression which have victimized Connie back in New York are, she is shocked to discover, no longer in place. Inhabitants of the community use non-gendered pronouns for each other, and work at every turn to continue dismantling power structures. Whilst giving Connie a tour of the community, for instance, Luciente explains that all residents grow up in their own space, rather than co-habiting with family members. In justification, she exclaims: ‘How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?’<sup>230</sup> This social development, writes Jane Goldman, ‘not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private and public, but the intrusion of women into spaces previously considered the spheres of men’.<sup>231</sup> Furthermore, in a direct exploration of the above passage from Firestone, foetuses in Mattapoisett are developed in an artificial womb and grow up with no one mother, encouraged to choose their own name and develop their own ideas. Luciente explains to Connie that the origin of this radical change was a necessary requirement for deconstructing biological gender roles:

---

<sup>227</sup> Firestone, pp. 10-11.

<sup>228</sup> Firestone, p. 11.

<sup>229</sup> L. Pykett, ‘Marge Piercy: Overview’, S. Windisch Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Novelists* (6<sup>th</sup> edition), St. James Press, 1996, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420006388/GLS?u=ric\\_main&sid=GLS&xid=6508e88c](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420006388/GLS?u=ric_main&sid=GLS&xid=6508e88c), (accessed 6 May 2017).

<sup>230</sup> M. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 73.

<sup>231</sup> J. Goldman, ‘The Feminist Criticism of Virginia Woolf’, G. Plain & S. Sellers (eds.), *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 71.

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding.<sup>232</sup>

Of all Mattapoissett's elements, this subversion of motherhood and parenthood is what incites the most horror from Connie. She is forced to consider the fact that if she were a resident of Mattapoissett, her status as mother—the most crucial facet of her personality—would instantly no longer be a part of her. Through the trauma of being separated from her daughter, Connie has been conditioned into identifying so strongly with the role of mother that the complete absence of that role within a society is terrifying. Having been the subject of an involuntary hysterectomy whilst seeking an abortion, she is conditioned through trauma to see an external womb only as the result of tragedy, and to see men as the instigators of this tragedy. She recalls the racist, sexist, atmosphere of a hospital she once spent time in:

with the doctor going rounds and cracking jokes for the amusement of his residents over the bodies of the women patients, mostly black and Puerto Rican...[i]n the bed next to [Connie] was a nineteen-year-old black woman on welfare who had been admitted for an abortion in the fourteenth week and been given a hysterectomy instead...[t]he women with syphilis were treated to obscene jokes.<sup>233</sup>

Recoiling from the artificial wombs, Connie expresses her disgust that the self-imposed end of biological motherhood could possibly be considered progress: '[t]hese women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women...They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk'.<sup>234</sup> Connie's reaction makes sense to the reader; when compared with Luciente's worldview, Connie's view of biological motherhood and the nuclear family is likely to be aligned more closely with the reader's own views. Furthermore, by marginalising the reader's perspective as well as Connie's, Mattapoissett empowers the reader to reconsider their own

---

<sup>232</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 105.

<sup>233</sup> Piercy, p. 171.

<sup>234</sup> Piercy, p. 134.



views, and to redefine themselves. This, Annis Pratt claims, is the great power of feminist speculative fiction writers, who have made the woman's time travel novel 'a pathway to the authentic self', a once-tangential, female self which naturally experiences time and space in a different way.<sup>235</sup>

Women's fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-to-day life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology and because those excluded from the *agora* are likely to perceive normal settings from phobic perspectives.<sup>236</sup>

This phobic perspective applies to Connie not only in terms of her womanhood, but also in terms of her Latina identity and on account of her questionable mental health, which I discuss in depth later when I define Connie as an unreliable narrator. When faced with the racial diversity present within Mattapoissett, the reader is cast back to earlier in the text, when Connie ponders and her employer's white privilege: 'How did [white women] stay so young?' Connie asks herself. 'Did they take pills? Something kept them intact years longer... [She felt] [e]nvy, sure, but the sense too of being cheated soured her, and the shame, the shame of being second-class goods. Wore out fast. Shoddy merchandise.'<sup>237</sup> This divide between Connie and her boss is reminiscent of the relationship between Dana and Mrs Weylin in *Kindred*—they share a similar Othering based on their womanhood, but only Connie is made Other for her race as well. The difference between these two relationships lies in the fact that Dana, coming from future to past, recognises these structures as regressive, whilst Connie, travelling from past to future, does not know a world without them.

Connie's initial disgust at Mattapoissett's non-traditional attitude to parenthood transforms into yearning after several more visits, once she observes how happy and healthy Mattapoissett's young residents are. Here, the time travel structure has allowed Connie to see the real benefits of a feminist utopia. If she had never left the 1970s, any sort of utopian society would have been unlikely to survive in Connie's imagination, given that her worldview is initially so bleak. Physically existing in and exploring Mattapoissett, however, empowers Connie to shift her worldview by increments through personal experience. In this way, Piercy argues for nurture over nature—the idea that that one's personal values are not inherent, that

---

<sup>235</sup> A. Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, p. 178.

<sup>236</sup> Pratt, p. 178.

<sup>237</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, pp. 32-33.

one's identity is constructed not by DNA but by the society which surrounds them, and the voices and discourses to which they pay attention. The transformation of Connie's worldview becomes complete in the passage below, which comes after Connie sees a young girl who reminds her of her daughter Angelina, who was taken away from her by social services:

Suddenly she assented with all her soul...to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future...Take her, keep her!...I give her to Luciente to mother, with gladness I give her. She will never be as broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden...[p]eople of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you!<sup>238</sup>

In 'giving' Angelina to Mattapoissett, Connie metaphorically releases the part of her identity that is so thickly intertwined with traditional motherhood. In doing so, she creates space within herself for a more expansive ideology which welcomes multiple co-existent definitions of motherhood. Direct encounters with these liberated characters work to reduce Connie's initial shock, and gradually change her mind about both reproductive and parenting roles. Connie's seeing this young girl represents less a sudden reversal of philosophies on motherhood and more the last of several small amendments. Through time travel, therefore, one espies the slow but steady liberation of a woman.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that '[s]tructural forms of injustice that permeate the entire society yield only grudgingly to change...empowerment cannot accrue to individuals and groups without transforming U.S. social institutions that foster this exclusion...segregation of this magnitude cannot be changed overnight'.<sup>239</sup> Whilst written specifically for and about the African-American woman, these words also suggest that the only real way for Connie to overcome her oppressive state is to reject her own time completely. By escaping to the future, Connie is set free from the legal structures of her own time, and from her own cynical, self-limiting worldview which up until this point she has needed to survive. In Mattapoissett, she needs no defence equipment—only an open mind towards her own value

---

<sup>238</sup> Piercy, p. 150.

<sup>239</sup> P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge, p. 277.

and towards the role she can inhabit within such a society. Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life* that '[t]o be is to pressed...maybe then, if you start going in the right direction you experience a relief of pressure...You might go faster as your passage is eased'.<sup>240</sup> Here Ahmed is not writing about women travelling to utopian futures, but her description of pressure is still resonant. Connie, having spent her whole life thus far being 'pressed' by the world around her, learns that forwards is the right direction, and that Mattapoissett will facilitate the easing of the pressure.

In addition, by potentially encountering both her ancestors and descendants, the time traveller is able to consider the identities that have contributed to hers, and, in turn, the identities which she will create. To take a brief metaphorical approach, this can be visualised as a string of lights one might find around a Christmas tree. As the power is switched on and each individual bulb flickers to life, the path of wire between them can be traced without necessarily being seen. By interacting with and providing a narrative voice for women's experiences across time, female time travellers like Connie can thus act as both a singular bulb of experience and as a part of the complete string of lights—both distinct from, and integral to, the structure of womanhood. Tatiana Teslenko writes about *Woman on the Edge of Time*'s capacity for crossing temporal space:

The feminist present might be best imagined as persistently interrupted by the demands of the future—haunted by the promise of something different and something more. Connie's experiences and the language of mourning provide models for thinking about the inevitable ways we are always out of time, giving us language to experience the multiplicities of the present, the residues of the past and the loss of a future we have yet to know.<sup>241</sup>

Joanna Russ adds to this discussion, noting that 'Connie's longing for and assent to utopia states eloquently the suffering that lies under the utopian impulse and the sufferer's simultaneous facing of and defiance of pain'.<sup>242</sup> The tumultuous treatment that women have experienced validates both her deep connection to the past and her clear and understandable preference for the possibilities of the future.

---

<sup>240</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 50.

<sup>241</sup> Teslenko, *Feminist Utopian Novels*, p. 53.

<sup>242</sup> J. Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 147.

The transgressive nature of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is represented by how relevant its interrogation of misogyny still is, particularly in discussions of rape culture and the discussion of woman's ownership over her own body. It is the same enduring anger which has fostered the #MeToo movement<sup>243</sup> and the hype surrounding the Hulu adaptation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the first season of which has been paralleled with both contemporary America under the Trump administration,<sup>244</sup> and life under Islamic extremism.<sup>245</sup> Connie's early reflections on life in Mattapoisett involve awe at the absence of rape culture and the safety of minority identities, particularly women, in public spaces:

She imagined herself taking a walk at night under the stars. She imagined herself ambling down a country road and feeling only mild curiosity when she saw three men coming toward her. She imagined hitching a ride with anyone willing to give her a ride. She imagined answering the door without fear...<sup>246</sup>

These scenarios, simple in theory, are still beyond our reach in 2020 as reports of sexual assault and violence against women proliferate in supposedly progressive Western societies.<sup>247</sup> This, perhaps, is the underlying power of time travel narratives: by transgressing time periods, they are able to more intimately connect with readerships beyond that of the author's contemporary demographic. Time travel narratives ultimately remind readers that past, present and future are constantly influencing each other—the present is shaped by memories of the past, and ideas of the future are shaped by present hopes and fears. A utopian future like Mattapoisett is possibly the most powerful example of this connectedness of time, being the result of both an aspirational present which will shape that utopia, and a traumatic past which has created those aspirations.

---

<sup>243</sup> See B. Fileborn & R. Loney-Howes (eds.), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019.

<sup>244</sup> See C. Nally, 'How The Handmaid's Tale is being transformed from fantasy into fact', *The Independent*, 31 May 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/handmaid-s-tale-elizabeth-moss-channel-4-margaret-atwood-donald-trump-feminism-abortion-a7763646.html> (accessed 3 January 2020).

<sup>245</sup> See T. Stanley, 'What The Handmaid's Tale can tell us about Islamic extremism', *The Telegraph*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/30/handmaids-tale-can-tell-us-islamic-extremism/> (accessed 5 January 2020).

<sup>246</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 226.

<sup>247</sup> In 2019, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare published that 1 in 6 Australian women (versus 1 in 16 men) have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15. Similarly, 1 in 5 Australian women (versus 1 in 20 men) have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story', AIHW, June 5 2019.

My novel, *Else*, is set in modern Australia and presents examples of cultural xenophobia and homophobia which speak to how these prejudices feel like permanent fixtures in many societies. In the opening scene, for example, Else and Lace are stopped by a white male construction worker on their way to the airport. Upon learning that Lace is Korean, the man only just resists making a culturally insensitive quip: ‘I don’t have to look to see the smirk. He’s found his footing again. You can feel the joke rising through him, that dangerously common confidence of having watched just enough news.’ Prejudice towards Else’s queer identity is most unashamedly displayed by Else’s brother-in-law Jared, who corners her in the middle of the night and, smirking, tells her: ‘I know you’re the wrong person to ask about natural anyway...I know your deal, Elsie’. When Else’s sister Rachel accuses her of propositioning Jared, Else is quick to remind her that she’s not interested in men, to which Rachel aggravatedly responds: ‘Oh, grow up.’

Additionally, I made the decision to include the problematic treatment of women in my future setting. After reading *Woman on the Edge of Time*, I briefly considered situating Section Twelve within a utopian framework, but ultimately decided that not enough time had passed between present and future worlds for the oppressive attitudes of Else’s context to be erased. Being only three decades away, my future narrative still plausibly needed elements of Othering within it. I chose to represent this in the future’s treatment of Dr Ross, who has chosen the importance of her scientific work over her duties as a mother. Her female colleague, Dr Juniper, corners her early on in the novel and condemns her actions:

you—you’re a psychopath. And you’re not going to get away with it. The government might see your side, but the public are going to destroy you. I hope you never work again. I hope you’re haunted by guilt for the rest of your life.

In writing Dr Juniper’s character, my intention was to demonstrate that even a society that has developed time travel technology still harbours an innate suspicion of women in the workplace, and that working mothers still face judgement from other women. I decided early on not to make the future setting of *Else* a utopian one; this was because I didn’t believe that the time difference between 2019 and 2054 was enough time for a utopian society to develop. I considered increasing the time difference, but needed characters to be certain ages in certain years to serve specific narrative functions. I have, however, experimented with notions of Else being liberated from her misogynistic present through time travel, and being given the power to do whatever she wants in the future. As Dr Ross tells her in the final scene, when she asks

what she is supposed to do now: ‘I don’t know. But I also don’t know what *I’m* supposed to do...isn’t that the whole point?’

### *The Unreliable Narrator*

The problematic framing of women is often perpetuated by the language used to describe them in fiction. The distance created between a female character’s true self and the reader comes from depriving her of narrative voice, and from presenting her to the reader through a biased and sometimes unreliable narrator. This is certainly true for Connie and Luciente in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. In Chapter Two, I argued that the disrupted relationship between Dana and writing, combined with the amputation of her writing arm, conveys the impossibility of condensing the past into narrative form without great sacrifice, and that this was Butler’s ultimate self-referential message. In a similar way, I argue that Piercy purposefully dismantles the relationship between Connie and the reader through unreliable narration, to show how female authorities have been undermined in fiction, and how the Othered identity can be oppressed through language. The myth of the irrational female psyche is at the root of Beauvoir’s writings in *The Second Sex*, and it is perpetuated throughout the history of Western literature. Notable examples include Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Daphne Du Maurier’s eponymous Rebecca, and Bertha, the wife of Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. In a study of the link between gender stereotypes and modern panic disorder with agoraphobia, Ruth Bankey articulates that:

the hysterical body is more than a metaphor for femininity within a patriarchal society, it has become a living shadow or simulacra of womanhood. The hysterical body has become emblematic of all the traditionally negative characteristics considered to be feminine: duplicity, theatricality, suggestibility, instability, weakness, passivity and excessive emotionality. The hysterical image is a symbol of the feminine as spectacle and irrational which leads to being visually scrutinised, judged as abnormal/deviant and punished.<sup>248</sup>

---

<sup>248</sup> R. Bankey, ‘La Donna é Mobile: Constructing the irrational woman’, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 8, no. 1, July 2010, p. 40.

Similarly, Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that ‘if [women] do not behave like angels they must be monsters’.<sup>249</sup> Gilbert and Gubar’s statement, when considered with Bankey’s writing, exposes the way that troubled women are condemned without empathy or understanding: if a woman isn’t perfect, she can only be hideous, and there is no middle ground between the two. Connie’s incarceration within the mental hospital, for example, occurs when she attacks a pimp to protect her niece, but—rather than her actions being understood as necessary self-defence—she is victimised by the prejudices laced within the legal system, and labelled dangerous. ‘All those experts lined up against her,’ she observes at her trial, knowing she has already lost, ‘all those cool knowing faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon hung all with tiny barbed hooks that stuck in her flesh and leaked a slow weakening poison’.<sup>250</sup> Also telling is the language used to describe Connie’s moment of institutionalization, arriving at the hospital:

Then the gates swallowed the ambulance-bus and swallowed her as she left the world and entered the underland where all who were not desired, who caught like rough teeth in the cogwheels, who had no place or fit crosswise the one they were hammered into, were carted to repent of their contrariness or to pursue their mad vision to the pit of terror.<sup>251</sup>

The reader’s first impression of the hospital filters through negative connotations such as “mad vision”, which suggests a parallel between the mental patients and the stereotype of hysterical women. Additionally, an image of hell is created not only by the use of “underland”, but also by the visual image of the gates—comparable to the Biblical gates of Hell—swallowing them upon their entrance, and trapping them in order that they may “repent” of their sins in the “pit of terror”. The hospital’s new inhabitants transform from mental patients into creatures of the underworld, which foreshadows how the mental health system within the text has dehumanised its sufferers. Later in the text, Connie describes the tests performed on patients by male doctors: ‘cold, calculating, ambitious, believe themselves rational and superior, chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel’.<sup>252</sup> The dismantling of Connie’s identity has reached the point where Connie herself believes she is more animal than human.

---

<sup>249</sup> S. Gilbert & S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p 53.

<sup>250</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 60.

<sup>251</sup> Piercy, p. 31.

<sup>252</sup> Piercy, p. 282.

The degradation of identity through language is a theme considered by Beauvoir, as well as other French feminists who wrote of the ‘need to examine the words, the syntax...the archaic and elitist attitudes toward language and representation that have limited [their] self-knowledge and expression during the long centuries of patriarchy’.<sup>253</sup> In labelling herself animal, Connie fully submits to the Othering imposed on her through the myth of the irrational, hysterical woman.

This is not, however, the end of Connie’s character arc—by engaging with this language, Piercy sets Connie up for her later subversion of this stereotype, and ultimate metamorphosis. At this point, however, the reader is unaware of the direction this narrative will take. And so Connie is made powerless not just by the structure of the world she inhabits, but also by the language communicating her to the reader. From the moment we meet Connie, we recognise her struggle, we want her to prevail against the system which has destroyed her life—but we don’t quite trust her. Almost immediately, Connie is established as an unreliable narrator; this technique is employed not only to make readers doubt the protagonist, but also to cast question marks over several supporting characters.

The term “unreliable narrator” was coined by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), and defined as a narrator who violates the external values of the text: ‘I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work...*unreliable* when he does not’.<sup>254</sup> Writing sixteen years later, Peter J. Rabinowitz calls for a more expanded definition which acknowledges the inherent complexities of truth-telling in fiction, and the role of the reader in navigating their own deception:

An unreliable narrator...is one who tells lies, conceals information, misjudges...one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience...In other words, all fictional narrators are false in that they are imitations. But some are imitations who tell the truth, some of people who lie.<sup>255</sup>

Connie’s unreliability as narrator stems most directly from her identity as mental patient, which creates an immediate distrust in her version of the truth. The immediacy of this distrust can be

---

<sup>253</sup> A. R. Jones, ‘Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of “L’Ecriture Feminine”’, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 1981, p. 261.

<sup>254</sup> W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1961, pp. 158-159.

<sup>255</sup> P. J. Rabinowitz, ‘Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn 1977, pp. 133-134.



read as a comment on society's tendency to discount women and people of colour. It is also worth pointing out that the spiritual underside of the novel—Connie and Luciente's telekinetic method of time travel, for instance—only enhances the sense that Connie's unreliability is connected to her mental health. In the words of Yigit Sumbul, 'the novel has also been read as an example of magic realism...as [Connie] is barely educated and due to the narrowness of her vision as a black woman in a patriarchal white society'.<sup>256</sup> Connie's visits to Mattapoissett, made possible through psychic connection within the mind of a possible schizophrenic, takes on a fantastic, dream-like quality: and this dream festers with ambiguity.

In writing *Else*, I experimented with ambiguity in order to create discord between Else and her ordinary, present-day life. Most explicitly, Else's visits to the future take place via Chrono-Previews, which transport her consciousness forwards to witness, but not interact with, the events of 2054. Chrono-Previews operate in a similar way to Luciente's method of time travel, which does not physically remove the time traveller from her own present, but instead borrows her mind. As the novel progresses, Else learns that she doesn't belong in the present, but had actually travelled backwards from 2054 when she was three years old. Else becomes caught between two worlds, just as Dana and Connie do, and her life in Adelaide takes on a surreal quality as a result. At one point, in an effort to reassure herself of her own sanity, she conducts research into historical accounts of people claiming to have time travelled, and conjures one of these people into being:

Behind me there is the rustle of a paper bag unfolding, the cold clink of teaspoon against china. I turn around to find my tea being made for me, carefully, methodically.

'How many sugars do you take?' asks Charlotte Anne Moberley.

'One, please,' I answer. 'Thank you very much.'

'My pleasure.'

...

I say: 'You don't seem that surprised to be here, Charlotte Anne Moberley. You know this is the twenty-first century.'

She says: 'I gathered as much, but you know, there's really no cause for alarm. This stuff happens to me all the time.'

---

<sup>256</sup> Y. Sumbul, 'Marge Piercy's Conception of a Feminist Utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time*', *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, vol. 10, 2014, p. 175.

At this point in the narrative, my depiction of Else verges towards insane. I have refrained, however, from making Else a wholly unreliable narrator, as I intend the discord to be between Else and her external world, rather than between Else and the reader. I have therefore made Else's final journey to the future one which involves her physical self. By the end of the novel, the reader should have no doubt that Else is truly time travelling; it has simply made her a bit stranger as a result.

Though the ambiguity in *Woman on the Edge of Time* casts shadows over the entire future world, it is most damaging for Piercy's characterization of Luciente. It is telling that, when first meeting Luciente, Connie observes her confident, androgynous appearance and assumes she is a man. When faced with a woman whose society celebrates progressive and comparatively unfamiliar definitions of gender, Connie's first and only rational response is that she is too liberated to be female. At a party, long after realising her mistake, Connie observes that 'Luciente's face and voice and body now seemed female if not at all feminine; too confident, too unself-conscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman: yet a woman'.<sup>257</sup> Connie's internalised misogyny has limited her definition of who a woman should be, and so she is challenged by Luciente's own, more progressive definition.

As Connie's psychic connection to Mattapoissett, and the primary source of information about its inner workings, Luciente is objectively the text's authority on time travel. Her impact on the reader, however, is undermined by Connie's status as a diagnosed schizophrenic, which makes her an unreliable source of scientific fact. The reader is never certain whether Connie has tangible interactions with Luciente and Mattapoissett, or whether her fears and dreams about her own social status have manifested in hallucinations. Connie touches on this notion herself, considering Luciente as '[a] voice in her ears, good-natured, chiding: Luciente as a fraction of her mind, as a voice of an alternate self, talking to her in the night. Perhaps she was mad'.<sup>258</sup> After a dialytrode is implanted at the hospital to regulate Connie's mind, she notes that 'she had not been able to reach over [to Luciente] on her own', and Luciente agrees with her that '[c]ommuning's been harder. Something is interfering'.<sup>259</sup> It remains ambiguous whether or not the implant is simply curing Connie of hallucinations; indeed, it is only in the text's final pages that readers are allowed access to Connie's Clinical Summary, which includes her history of 'child abuse, alcohol problems, confusion, and bizarre behaviour', and diagnosis: 'Paranoid

---

<sup>257</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 104.

<sup>258</sup> Piercy, p. 275.

<sup>259</sup> Piercy, pp. 355-356.

Schizophrenia, type 295.3'.<sup>260</sup> Luciente, the potential vision of a madwoman, is stripped of her scientific authority within the text.

A similar example of the “deauthorisation” of female authorities on time travel can be found in Isaac Asimov’s *The End of Eternity* (1955). In this text Andrew Harlan, a technician for a time travel organisation, falls in love with a woman named Noÿs. After they have sex, he reflects that ‘[s]he was entirely different in his eyes now. She was not a woman, not an individual at all. She was suddenly an aspect of himself. She was, in a strange and unexpected way, a part of himself’.<sup>261</sup> As the reader’s only access point to Noÿs, Harlan’s narration paints her as an overly sexualised damsel in distress, who should only be considered in relation to Harlan’s own needs. When Noÿs is unveiled as an undercover agent, sent from the distant future to thwart Harlan’s mission, his first response is that she must not be a woman, which only undermines her further. In a similar vein, even knowing that Noÿs is from a century much superior to his, Harlan decides that her actions are influenced primarily by her physical attraction to him: that ‘she [was] confidently relying on the attraction she knew she had for him even now, certain that it would immobilize him, freeze him in weakness and shame’.<sup>262</sup> Noÿs, like Luciente, is made Other through narrative voice. By viewing her as a love interest, Harlan prioritises descriptions of her body over her scientific knowledge, and projects the illusion that *he* is in fact the expert, and the one in charge.

My depiction of Dr Ross in *Else* is entirely influenced by my analyses of both Luciente and Noÿs, and is my own attempt at a female authority who is initially undermined and irrationalised through language, before being finally redeemed. Earlier drafts of *Else* included sections of the narrative told from Dr Ross’ point of view; I chose to omit these sections to purposefully create distance between her and the reader, so that she would only be presented through the biases and preconceptions of other characters. Similarly, I purposefully did not give her a first name. Apart from the initial ‘A’, which appears briefly on a legal document, Dr Ross is only known through her title, which evokes the importance of her work identity over her personal identity. Across the novel, the reader encounters various iterations of Dr Ross, in stories told by Apoch, in the Chrono-Previews, and in the physical presence of Dr Ross’ younger self. All these iterations are manipulated to villainise Dr Ross, and to position both Else and the reader against her. Else eventually learns this, but it’s not until towards the end of the novel. As a result, Else’s first unfiltered interaction with her mother is in the novel’s final

---

<sup>260</sup> Piercy, p. 415.

<sup>261</sup> I. Asimov, *The End of Eternity*, New York, Doubleday, 1955, p. 73.

<sup>262</sup> Asimov, p. 242.

scene. At this point, Else knows that Dr Ross didn't choose to send her back through time; she was instructed to do it as part of her own mission, given to her in the far future. And so, Else forgives her:

My finger drops from the screen, and I turn to look at her. It's all far, far too quick, and I want more. I want to take this moment and stretch it out ahead of us, take all the unwanted time, all the wasted time, and recycle it here and now—and God, she invented time travel, why the fuck can't she just *do this?*—but time is its own self-paving, self-constructing city, and all she really did was notice, and she is only a person like everyone else.

The final scene reveals the first true characterisation of Dr Ross, not as a failed mother, nor a monster: only a woman who has been forced to do an impossible job. The fact that Else only truly sees her mother once they are standing together in 2054 was a very deliberate decision, which I made to reflect my argument about the shakiness of the future stage, and the importance of focussing on the present. All of Else's impressions of her mother, until the final scene, have been made upon her whilst Else is in 2019. Even when experiencing the Chrono-Previews of Dr Ross's trial, Else's mind is the only thing which is transported forwards; her physical body, like Connie's, remains in her present. And for as long as she is in the present, her ideas of the future are incomplete and hazy. When Else's time travel involves her whole self, however, the once-future society becomes her present, as the notion of the "present" is relative to the person inhabiting it. Once 2054 is her present-day, she is finally able to fully interpret and interact with its events and people.

This is in keeping with my framework of the stage of the future being unstable, as it only becomes stable once it is no longer the future. This also reflects my final conclusions about Connie's sacrifice in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Piercy uses unreliable narration not only to show that women have been Othered through language, but also to show that—despite our best bets to direct the spotlight—the stage of the future cannot be accurately predicted or planned, nor should it be clearly communicated to the audience of the present. Time travellers who present the future through unreliable narration, such as Connie and Else, encourage readers to focus on carving positive spaces for themselves now, and having faith that these spaces will lead to positive spaces in the future.

## Conclusion

I came to this thesis certain that there was a powerful relationship between Otherness and time, and that time travel narratives were a place where this relationship could be explored in its most subversive and boundary-pushing forms. Visualising the past as a theatre stage, I termed the narratives largely excluded from the historical narrative as “shadow histories”, left almost forgotten, out of range of the spotlight. I proposed that featuring an Othered identity as the central time traveller in a text—a woman of colour in particular, and in the case of my novel, a queer woman of colour—was a way of shifting the narrative spotlight towards those underrepresented shadow histories.

To frame my argument about Otherness, I began in Chapter One by drawing attention to the different types of Otherness present within the time travel narrative. I traced the origins of time travel as a fictional device, from its supernatural presence in *A Christmas Carol* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, to its foundational presence as a scientific endeavour in *The Time Machine*. I then looked at how, whilst Einstein and Gödel's works on the theoretical possibility of time travel created a place for time travellers in science fiction, time travel narratives remain in a fringe space between science fiction and fantasy. This in-betweenness reflects the role of the time traveller within those narratives, who, according to David Lewis's notions of external and personal time, interacts with time from an outsider's perspective. Here I drew connections between the time traveller and Beauvoir's writings on the female Other, combining Kristeva's conception of women's time in order to explore the notion that women inhabit temporal spaces in a similar way to time travellers. I argued that both feel excluded from the dominant historical narrative, or what I termed the spotlight narrative. At the end of the chapter, I proposed that science fiction novels featuring female time travellers may be a way of shifting the spotlight onto shadow histories, and a way for Othered identities to rewrite the historical narrative with their perspective at the forefront.

In Chapter Two, I applied this hypothesis to a reading of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, looking at how an Othered identity interacts with the past through time travel. I began by briefly defining both Afrofuturism and neo-slave narratives, to frame *Kindred* within a history of African-American narratives that aim to recover stolen histories through the power of writing. In *Kindred*, Dana's Othered identity as a woman of colour combined with her outsider's identity of time traveller empowers her relationships with people of the past. Her narration of antebellum Maryland helps shift the spotlight away from the dominant white historical narrative, and onto the shadow history of the African slave. However, I also explored

how this comes at great personal cost to Dana. I concluded that Butler puts Dana through so much suffering to convey that recovering a traumatic past should not be easy, and that properly condensing history into narrative form is impossible, even for a text like *Kindred*.

In the wake of these rather pessimistic findings, Chapter Three became a search for a more positive relationship between the Othered woman and time travel. I hypothesised that travelling to the future, as Connie does in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, would involve a more positive character transformation. To this end, I adapted my metaphor of the spotlight and shadow histories, and wrote that on the stage of the future, shifting the spotlight does not mean promoting an underrepresented perspective. Instead, it is about directing the present towards a particular version of the future. My analysis found that Connie does have a transformative experience; her visits to the utopian society of Mattapoissett help reshape her worldview by distancing her from the oppressive society which has institutionalised her. However, as with Dana, being the narrator of a time travel narrative has a severe cost, which for Connie comes from her diagnosed schizophrenia. Ultimately, Piercy dissuades readers from trusting Connie's narration of the future, and so we don't know whether Connie's ultimate sacrifice—committing mass murder, to veer the timeline in the direction of the future Mattapoissett—has been worth it. I argued that this ambiguity is intended to encourage readers to focus on carving positive spaces in their present, rather than worry about ensuring a certain type of future.

My novel *Else* is a creative exploration of these ideas. I experimented with writing *Else* as an unreliable narrator, distancing her from reality through hallucinations, and distorting her narrative of the future through Chrono-Previews. I did, however, choose to avoid ambiguity, by having *Else* learn the whole truth at the end of the novel. Through the character of Dr Ross, I also explored how the Othering of scientific women can be achieved through language, in the distorted truths about her actions which are fed to *Else* through other characters. Ultimately, I decided to redeem Dr Ross at the end of the novel, as I sought a more hopeful ending than I had found in both *Kindred* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*. *Else's* other themes—predeterminism, cause and effect, and paradoxes, all of which inform my construction of the *Else* Objects—are all elements I love as a fan of quantum physics, and as an avid reader of novels which manipulate time. In the end, *Else*—and the thesis—is as much a tribute to the insane, flawed, fearless realm of the time travel narrative as it is a study of the relationship between Otherness and history.

There were several areas I initially wanted to explore further, but unfortunately could not contain within the word count and the scope of the exegesis. If the thesis had encompassed

only a theoretical exegesis, and not the novel as well, I would have used those extra tens of thousands of words to consider alternate history narratives alongside time travel narratives, as related endeavours. I am convinced that there is a strong connection between the term "alternate history", what it stands for—a different version of the history we know—and my definition of shadow history, being an underrepresented version of the history we know. It would be fascinating to study the relationship between time travel narratives and alternate history narratives, and to delve deeper into paradoxes of cause and effect which stem from experimenting with time.

The popularity of the time travel narrative, in science fiction as well as fantasy, reflects a rising need to make these narratives positive spaces for the Other, and there are good signs that this is occurring. In the realm of film, Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020)<sup>263</sup> and Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz's *Antebellum* (2020)<sup>264</sup> have both prioritised a person of colour's perspective within a time narrative. *Antebellum* in particular shares a lot with *Kindred*, in that it features a modern black woman who has a series of horrific encounters with a slave plantation in the nineteenth century. As I mentioned in the Introduction, there is a plethora of new novels about female time travellers, many of them queer. In addition, there is some promising scholarship which indicates the development of exciting research into the representation of female authorities in science fiction. For instance, in response to Jodie Whittaker's appointment in *Doctor Who*, Jolie C. Matthews has published 'Dominant Narratives and Historical Perspective in Time Travel Stories: A Case Study of *Doctor Who*' (2020)<sup>265</sup>, which indicates that the study of women time travellers and the dominant historical narrative will develop far beyond what this thesis begins to achieve. Also, the film *Arrival* (2016)<sup>266</sup>, whilst not a time travel narrative, explores the relationship between a scientific woman, looped time, and motherhood, which overlaps with the concerns of my thesis. It prompted Heather Latimer to publish her forthcoming paper, 'A queer pregnancy: affective kinship, time travel and reproductive choice in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*' (2021)<sup>267</sup>.

I approached this thesis intending to promote the time travel narrative as a positive space for the Othered time traveller which has been vastly underutilised. As I discovered,

---

<sup>263</sup> *Tenet*, dir. C. Nolan, Warner Bros., USA & UK, 2020, [film].

<sup>264</sup> *Antebellum*, dir. G. Bush & C. Renz, QC Entertainment, USA, 2020 [film].

<sup>265</sup> J. C. Matthews, 'Dominant Narratives and Historical Perspective in Time Travel Stories: A Case Study of *Doctor Who*', *The Social Studies* (open access), Taylor Francis Online, 9 October 2020.

<sup>266</sup> *Arrival*, dir. D. Villeneuve, Paramount, USA, 2016 [film].

<sup>267</sup> H. Latimer, 'A queer pregnancy: affective kinship, time travel and reproductive choice in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2021.

however, the past is a difficult place for a minority identity to encounter from a future, more liberated time, and even the future can be irreparably harmful. Shadow histories are impossible to fully recover through text, and the stage of the future, especially an optimistic one, is impossible to fully communicate to a receptive present. Narrating the worlds of both past and future is a painful process for those who have been excluded from the larger historical narrative. Perhaps, in the end, narration of and by the Other is *necessarily* painful. In this case, it is up to all of us—writers, readers, and scholars—to help share the load, and to continue shifting that narrative spotlight inch by inch towards the shadows.



## Bibliography

- Ahmed, S. *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.
- “ahistorical”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2012, Retrieved from <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/view/Entry/4284?redirectedFrom=ahistorical#eid>
- Allardice, L. ‘Interview, Margaret Atwood: ‘I am not a prophet. Science fiction is really about now’, 20 January 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/20/margaret-atwood-i-am-not-a-prophet-science-fiction-is-about-now>, (accessed 3 June 2019).
- Amis, K., *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*, London, Penguin, 2012.
- Anderson, P., ‘My Object All Sublime’, Groff Conklin (ed.), *12 Great Classics of Science Fiction*, New York, Fawcett Gold Medal, 1973, pp. 48-57.
- Andrews, W.L., F.S. Foster and T. Harris (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Antebellum, dir. Bush, G. & C. Renz, QC Entertainment, USA, 2020 [film].
- Arrival, dir. Villeneuve, D., Paramount, USA, 2016 [film].
- Asimov, I. *The End of Eternity*, New York, Doubleday, 1955, p. 73.
- Atwood, M. ‘Keynote Address,’ *Restorying Canada*, [lecture], CBC Radio, 2017, (accessed March 25 2018).
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story’, AIHW, June 5 2019.
- Back to the Future, dir. Zemeckis, R, USA, Universal Pictures, 1985, [film].
- Bankey, R. ‘La Donna é Mobile: Constructing the irrational woman’, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 8, no. 1, July 2010.
- Barr, M. S. *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 1987.
- Barr, M., *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Bauer, N., ‘Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism’, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex*, trans. C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Vintage Books, 1949.
- Bell, B.W., *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.

- Blackwell, M. *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2015.
- Blish, J., *More Issues at Hand: Critical Studies in Contemporary Science Fiction*, Chicago, Advent Publishers, 1970.
- Booth, W. C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Bradbury, R., 'The Fox and The Forest', *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, pp. 131-143.
- Bryant, D. *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You*, first published as *The Comforter: A Mystical Fantasy*, Evan Press, 1971.
- Butler, O. *Kindred*, New York, Doubleday, 1979.
- Carroll, J.W., *A Time Travel Dialogue*, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2014.
- Cavendish, M. *The Blazing World*, Newcastle, self-published, 1666.
- Clegg, B., *How to Build a Time Machine: The Real Science of Time Travel*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2011.
- Crawley, G., 'Doctor Who fans react to Jodie Whittaker's appointment as 13<sup>th</sup> doctor', *Express: Home of the Daily and Sunday Express*, 16 July 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/829419/Doctor-Who-13th-doctor-Jodie-Whittaker-female-appointment-time-lord>, (accessed 30 November 2018).
- Crenshaw, K., 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Issue 1, 1989, pp. 139-167.
- D'Mello, G., 'Woman Who Took 1<sup>st</sup> Photo of Black Hole Is Wrongly Accused of Stealing Credit By Male Trolls', *India Times*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.indiatimes.com/technology/science-and-future/sexist-trolls-accuse-katie-bouman-of-stealing-credit-from-male-colleague-get-schooled-online-365360.html>, (accessed 2 June 2019).
- Davis, F., *Moving The Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Delaney, S.R., *Babel-17*, New York, Ace Books, 1966.
- Dery, M., 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', in M. Dery (ed.), *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1994.
- DeWitt, B., 'Quantum mechanics and reality', *Physics Today*, vol. 23, no. 9, 1970, pp. 30-35.
- Dick, P.K., *The Man in the High Castle*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962.
- Dickens, C., *A Christmas Carol*, New York, Global Classics, 1859.

- Dijkstra, S., 'Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, Summer, 1980, pp. 290-303.
- Donawerth, J. L. & C. A. Kolmerton (eds.), *Utopian and Science Fiction By Women: Worlds of Difference*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994.
- Drake, N., 'First-ever picture of a black hole unveiled', *National Geographic*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/04/first-picture-black-hole-revealed-m87-event-horizon-telescope-astrophysics/>, (accessed 4 May, 2019).
- Dubey, M., 'Neo-Slave Narratives', in G. A. Jarrett (ed.), *A Companion to African American Literature*, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 332-346.
- Earman, J., 'Recent Work in Time Travel', in S.F. Savitt (ed.), *Time's Arrows Today: Recent Philosophical Work on the Direction of Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 268-324.
- Einstein, A., 'Remarks to the Essays Appearing in this Collective Volume', in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein, Philosopher-Scientist: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume VII*, La Salle, Open Court, 1949, pp. 663-688.
- Einstein, A., *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein, Volume 6: The Berlin Years: Writings, 1914-1917*, trans. A. Engel, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Elliott, Z., *A Wish After Midnight*, Amazon, Skyscape, 2010.
- Ellison, R., *Invisible Man*, New York, Random House, 1952.
- El-Mohtar, A., 'Why are there so many new books about time-travelling lesbians?', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/aug/09/why-are-there-so-many-new-books-about-time-travelling-lesbians>, (accessed 21 October 2019).
- El-Mohtar, A. & M. Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2019.
- Feynman, R.P., 'The Development of the Space-Time View of Quantum Electrodynamics', *Nobel Lecture*, December 11, 1965 [lecture].
- Field, R.E., 'Rape Culture', in M. D. Smith (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Rape*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Fileborn, B. & R. Loney-Howes (eds.), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019.
- Filipovic, J., 'The misogynist trolls attacking Katie Bouman are the tip of the trashpile', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/17/katie-bouman-black-hole-image-online-trolls>, (accessed 2 June 2019).

- Firestone, S. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970.
- Fiyah Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction*, <https://www.fiyahlitmag.com/>, (accessed 18 May 2021).
- Flagel, N., ‘“It’s Almost Like Being There”: Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer, 2012, pp. 216-245.
- Frank, S. review of ‘*Kindred*’, in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.
- Friedan, B., ‘No Gods, No Goddesses,’ *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1975.
- Friedan, B., *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.
- Friend, B., ‘Time Travel as a Feminist Didactic in Works by Phyllis Eisenstein, Marlys Millhisser, and Octavia Butler’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 23, no. 1, April, 1982. pp. 50-55.
- Galland, N., *Master of the Revels*, New York, William Morrow, 2021.
- Galland, N. & N. Stephenson, *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.*, New York, William Morrow, 2017.
- Gaskell, E. *Cranford*, London, *Household Words: A Weekly Journal conducted by Charles Dickens*, 1851-1853 [serial].
- Gay, R. (ed.), *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, New York, Perennial, 2018.
- Giddens, A., *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Gilbert, S. & S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979.
- Gödel, K., ‘A Remark About the Relationship Between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy,’ in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *Albert Einstein, Philosopher-Scientist: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume VII*, La Salle, Open Court, 1949, pp. 557-562.
- Gödel, K., ‘An Example of a New Type of Cosmological Solutions of Einstein’s Field Equations of Gravitation’, *Reviews of Modern Physics*, vol. 21, no. 3, July, 1949, pp. 1410-1417.
- Goldman, J. ‘The Feminist Criticism of Virginia Woolf’, G. Plain & S. Sellers (eds.), *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

- Green, M.E., ‘“There Goes the Neighbourhood’: Octavia Butler’s Demands for Diversity in Utopia’, in J. L. Donawerth and C. A. Kolmerton (eds.), *Utopian and Science Fiction By Women: Worlds of Difference*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994, pp. 166-189.
- Grimes, K. T., ‘Simone de Beauvoir and the Race/Gender Analogy in *The Second Sex* Revisited’, Hengehold, L. and N. Bauer (eds.), *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, New Jersey, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, pp. 47-58.
- Harding, K. *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do about It*, Philadelphia, Da Capo Press, 2015
- Heartfield, K., *Alice Payne Arrives*, New York, Tor Books, 2018.
- Heartfield, K., *Alice Payne Rides*, New York, Tor Books, 2019.
- Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, A.V., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Heinlein, R.A., ‘All You Zombies’, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, New Jersey, Mercury Press, Inc., 1959, pp. 5-15.
- Hill Collins, P., *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge.
- Holloway, K., *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- hooks, b., *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, South End Press, 1981.
- hooks, b., ‘Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination’, in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. A. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge, 1992.
- Hossain, R. S., ‘Sultana’s Dream’, *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, 1905.
- Interstellar, dir. Nolan, C., USA, Paramount Pictures, 2014, [film].
- ‘Interview with Robert Brandom on “Making It Explicit” Part 1’, [online video], 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdIPuERVjk0>, (accessed 17 August 2019).
- Jones, A. R. ‘Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of “L’Ecriture Feminine”’, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 1981.
- Kenan, R., ‘An Interview with Octavia E. Butler’, in *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring, 1991.
- Kojève, A., *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Nichols, J.H. Jr., London, Cornell University Press, 1969.
- Kristeva, J., ‘Women’s Time’, trans. Jardine, A. and H. Blake, *Signs*, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn, 1981, pp. 13-35.
- Kristeva, J., *Revolt, She Said*, trans. O’Keeffe, B., Los Angeles, Semiotext[e], 2002.
- Lai, L., *Salt Fish Girl*, Ontario, Thomas Allen Publishers, 2002.

- Larbalestier, J. *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2002.
- Latimer, H., 'A queer pregnancy: affective kinship, time travel and reproductive choice in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2021.
- Le Guin, U. K. *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York, Grove Press, 1989.
- Lefanu, S. *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*, London, The Women's Press, 1988.
- Lenthang, M., 'Male scientist who helped capture the first photograph of a black hole defends Katie Bouman after she was attacked by sexist trolls who say she took the credit for her team', *Daily Mail*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6917089/Male-scientist-helped-capture-black-hole-photo-defends-Katie-Bouman-sexist-trolls.html>, (accessed 2 June 2019).
- Lewis, D., 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, April, 1976, pp. 145-152.
- Lord, K., *Unraveling*, New York, DAW Books, 2020.
- Marroon, E., *The Unintentional Time Traveler*, United Kingdom, Lightning Source, 2014.
- Mascarenhas, K., *The Psychology of Time Travel*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018.
- Matthews, J. C., 'Dominant Narratives and Historical Perspective in Time Travel Stories: A Case Study of *Doctor Who*', *The Social Studies* (open access), Taylor Francis Online, 9 October 2020.
- McAfee, N., *Julia Kristeva*, London, Routledge, 2004.
- McBean, S. 'Feminism and Futurity: Revisiting Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*', *Feminist Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, July 2014.
- Meyerowitz, J., 'Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 79, no. 4, March 1993, pp. 1455-1465.
- Milojević, I., 'Timing feminism, feminising time', *Futures: the journal of policy, planning and futures studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, May, 2008, pp. 329-345.
- Moylan, T. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1986.
- Myles, L.D., *Female Subjectivity in African American Women's Narratives of Enslavement*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.



- Nahin, P.J., *Time Machine Tales: The Science Fiction Adventures and Philosophical Puzzles of Time Travel*, Cham, Springer Nature, 2017.
- Nally, C. 'How The Handmaid's Tale is being transformed from fantasy into fact', *The Independent*, 31 May 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/handmaid-s-tale-elizabeth-moss-channel-4-margaret-atwood-donald-trump-feminism-abortion-a7763646.html> (accessed 3 January 2020).
- Nelson, A., *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2002.
- Newitz, A., *The Future of Another Timeline*, New York, Tor Books, 2019.
- Newton, I., *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, trans. A. Motte, New York, Daniel Adee, 1729.
- Nguyen, H. 'Doctor Who': Jodie Whittaker Casting Complaints Prompt BBC Response: 'The Doctor Is An Alien', *IndieWire*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/07/doctor-who-jodie-whittaker-casting-complaints-bbc-1201857106/>, accessed (30 November 2018).
- Njeri, I., 'Prelude' to N. Gause, *Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone*, New York, Vintage, 1991.
- Oates, J. C., *Hazards of Time Travel*, New York, Ecco Press, 2018.
- Okorafor, N., *Who Fears Death*, New York, Daw Books, 2010.
- Paglia, C. *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*, New York, Penguin, 1993.
- Parham, M., 'Saying "Yes": Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's "Kindred"', *Callaloo*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 1315-1331.
- Parrinder, P., (ed.), *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Books, 1972.
- Pearson, C. 'Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1977.
- Pezzotta, E., 'Personal Time in Alternative and Time travel Narratives: The Cases of *Groundhog Day*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 2, Winter, 2011.
- Piercy, M. 'Woman on the Edge of Time, 40 years on: 'Hope is the engine for imagining utopia'', *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/29/woman-on-the-edge-of-time-40-years-on-hope-imagining-utopia-marge-piercy>, (accessed 29 November 2017).
- Piercy, M. *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt (Poets on Poetry)*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1982.
- Piercy, M. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1976.

- Pratt, A. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981.
- Pykett, L. 'Marge Piercy: Overview', S. Windisch Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Novelists* (6<sup>th</sup> edition), St. James Press, 1996,  
[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420006388/GLS?u=ric\\_main&sid=GLS&xid=6508e88c](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420006388/GLS?u=ric_main&sid=GLS&xid=6508e88c), (accessed 6 May 2017).
- Rabinowitz, P. J. 'Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn 1977.
- Robson, K., *Gods, Monsters and the Lucky Peach*, New York, Tor Books, 2018.
- Rothstein, M. 'No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood', *New York Times*, 17 February 1986,  
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-gilead.html>, (accessed 29 March 2018).
- Rowell, C.H., 'An Interview with Octavia E. Butler', *Callaloo*, vol. 20, no. 1, Winter, 1997, pp. 47-66.
- Rushdy, A.H.A., 'Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*', *College English*, vol. 55, no. 2, February, 1993, pp. 135-157.
- Rushdy, A.H.A., *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Russ, J. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Sanders, M., 'Was Friedan Right? The Feminine Mystique in Newspapers, 1958-1959', *Fides et Historia*, vol. 39, no. 2, Summer/Fall, 2007, pp. 39-58.
- Schiff, S.E., 'Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*', *The Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 1, Spring, 2009, pp. 107-136.
- Schippers, B., *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Schuessler, J., 'Criticisms of a Classic Abound', *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/books/50-years-of-reassessing-the-feminine-mystique.html>, (accessed 19 September 2018).
- Sherman, D., *The Freedom Maze*, Easthampton, Big Mouth House, 2011.
- Simons, M.A., J. Benjamin and S. Beauvoir, 'Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 330-345.
- Smith, L., review of 'Kindred', in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.



- Smith, R.N., 'Medias Res, Temporal Double-Consciousness and Resistance in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*', PhD Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007.
- Snider, J.C., 'Interview: Octavia E. Butler', in Conseula Francis (ed.), *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2010.
- Sorensen, R.A., 'Time Travel, Parahistory and Hume', *Philosophy*, vol. 62, no. 240, April 1987, pp. 227-236.
- Stanley, T. 'What The Handmaid's Tale can tell us about Islamic extremism', *The Telegraph*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/30/handmaids-tale-can-tell-us-islamic-extremism/> (accessed 5 January 2020).
- Stanton, E. C., S. B. Anthony & M. J. Gage (eds.), *History of Woman Suffrage*, New York, Rochester, 1887-1902.
- Steinmetz, K. 'She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today', *TIME*, February 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>, (accessed 21 March 2021).
- Strickland, B., review of 'Kindred', in *Beacon Press Online Catalog*, Beacon Press, 2014.
- Sümbül, Y. 'Marge Piercy's Conception of a Feminist Utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time*', *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, vol. 10, 2014.
- Tenet, dir. Nolan, C., Warner Bros., USA & UK, 2020, [film].
- Teslenko, T. *Feminist Utopian Novels of the 1970s: Joanna Russ & Dorothy Bryant*, New York, Routledge, 2003.
- The Guardian (ed.), 'Donna Strickland: the female Nobel winner deemed not important enough for Wikipedia entry', *South China Morning Post*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/2166890/donna-strickland-female-nobel-winner-deemed-not>, (accessed 12 July 2019).
- Thomas, S.R. (ed.), *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, New York, Aspect, 2004.
- Thurman, J. 'Introduction' to S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Borde, C. and S. Malovany-Chevallier (trans.), New York, Random House, 2010.
- Trinh, T. M., *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Twain, M., *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, New York, Charles L. Webster and Company, 1889.
- VanderMeer, A. & J. VanderMeer, *The Time Traveler's Almanac*, New York, Tom Doherty, 2014.

- Vint, S., ‘ “Only by Experience”’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives’, *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, July, 2007.
- Walker, M., *Jubilee*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
- Wells, H. G., ‘The Betterave Papers’, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, Summer, 1945, <https://www.vqronline.org/essay/betterave-papers>, (accessed 23 February 2017).
- Wells, H.G., Preface to *Seven Famous Novels*, New Jersey, Between the Covers—Rare Books, Inc., 1934.
- Wells, H.G., *The Time Machine*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1895.
- Willis, C., *Doomsday Book*, New York, Bantam Spectra, 1992.
- Willis, M., ‘Edison as Time Traveller: H.G. Wells’ Inspiration for His First Scientific Character’, *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, July, 1999, pp. 284-294.
- Wolf, N., ‘A Fond Farewell: Berry Friedan’, *TIME Magazine*, 25 December, 2006, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2019341\\_2017103\\_2016955,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2019341_2017103_2016955,00.html), accessed 7 March, 2016.
- Woolf, V., *Orlando: A Biography*, Surrey, Hogarth Press, 1928.
- Yaszek, L., ‘“A Grim Fantasy”: Remaking American History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*’, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 4, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, Summer, 2003, pp. 1053-1066.
- Yaszek, L., ‘Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,’ *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, November 2006, pp. 41-60.