



The Art of Falling and Searching for Loretta

By

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Thesis

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Dedication

To Mum, the first woman in her family to go to university and who completed her PhD while pregnant with me.

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Thesis Summary

The creative work, *The Art of Falling*, is a speculative biography of the life of Loretta La Pearl – America’s first woman clown – merged with essays exploring my search for Loretta’s story fifty years after her death. I place these two narratives side by side, my life and Loretta’s, forging connection between two women living in different times and vastly different places.

While being interviewed by Earl Chapin May in 1927, Loretta talks of learning to fall. It is the first thing a clown must do, and so the book centres on Loretta’s resilience when confronted with not only the physical, literal act of falling but falling as a metaphor for falling into a difficult professional world where she must not only perform but also conceal her identity.

In Loretta’s biographical story (spanning 1915 to the 1960s), she endures much throughout her long performing life: learning the man she loves is already married; spending years performing with him – waiting for him – while he obtains a divorce; and eventually witnessing his death to cancer. Throughout Loretta’s life, she both endures and thrives – always gentle, contemplative, and in love with the circus.

In my own narrative, I find Loretta in a drawer at the Oregon Historical Society in 2016. As well as writing my physical journey to search for Loretta in America, in a series of essays, I think through what it is to *be* her. I explore embodiment and the performing body, how women who push beyond society’s boundaries are deemed ‘monstrous’ and what happens to those who are deemed the ‘first’.

The exegesis explores three key elements that arose when writing the speculative biography. In the first chapter, I look at hybrid approaches to contemporary Australian biography and encounter *The Convict’s Daughter* by Kiera Lindsey, *The Book of Dirt* by Bram Presser and *Tracker* by Alexis Wright. The second chapter questions the ethical implications of writing biographical history. Particularly, how they change when, due to archival gaps, the biographer speculates. In the third chapter, I discuss my practice-led approach to writing speculative biography, and how the integration of essays alongside speculative biography can indirectly signal to the reader where and to what extent a biographer is speculating. Through this hybrid approach, the contract of non-fiction can be upheld with the reader while the creative work maintains a narrative voice. In the final chapter, I reflect on writing speculative biography during the pandemic, exploring the impact of global events on archives.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. 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: Katerina Bryant

Date: 28/08/2022

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Publications

Sections from ‘Historical Figures, Archives and Australian Disability Life Writing: Reading Jessica White’s *Hearing Maud* and Writing *Hysteria*’ and ‘Speculative Biography and Countering Archival Absences of Women Clowns in the Circus’ have been included in the exegesis.

Review: Speculative Biography

H-Biography, 2022

Historical Figures, Archives and Australian Disability Life Writing: Reading Jessica White’s *Hearing Maud* and Writing *Hysteria*

Australian Literary Studies Journal, Disability Issue, 2022

Speculative Biography and Countering Archival Absences of Women Clowns in the Circus

Life Writing Review, 2021

Reprinted in *Essays in Life Writing* (Routledge, 2022)

Review: In Search of the Woman Who Sailed the World

Life Writing Review, 2020

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Creative Artefact: ‘The Art of Falling’

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Why Loretta/Why Me/Why Now

I'm asked what this book is about and I say it's about a woman who has been forgotten; 'She died with nothing and nobody knows who she was.'

'But what is beneath that?'

'Well, it's the pull of her. I'm looking at Loretta – the way she exists in her body – through my lens as a disabled woman. Performance was her livelihood and I see strength in that. It's not something I can do.'

Later, I will wonder if my words are true. I feel them to be – but I first fell into Loretta's story in 2016 when my nonfiction writing class went to the Oregon Historical Society for an afternoon; I was sick with anxiety but not ill in the way I am now. My movements – while limited then with crowds edging me into panic attacks – were not restricted like they are now. When I found Loretta, I was living for a semester in a college town an hour and a half outside of Portland. The kind of town where the dive bar, the bank and *Pizza Schmizza* were all on the same street. I would walk to campus each day, passing thick trunks of the sequoia trees with green mossy pavement underfoot. I'd scream 'fuck, shit' as garden snakes flicked underneath my feet; the woman I lived with would tell me again and again they're harmless but I couldn't undo my Australian way of thinking: *Snakes are death*. One day in class, a small spider falls onto a student's outstretched paper. She shrieks and I lift the paper, guiding the spider sitting atop to the door. Now I am brave, useful. *This is nothing*, I want to say. But instead I'm quiet. Writing these words now, I remember this time as a happy one.

A memory: Mathew and I travel to Portland. We catch the train home at night. The train takes us to the end of the line, then a bus stop where we huddle behind a brick wall away from the bitter wind. My eyes water in the cold, fingers pulling my beanie down past my eyebrows. The thrill at the headlights; the bus is finally approaching. I never thought I'd look upon this with fondness but now, I can't go out at night too often. In winter, my days are short. Headlights burn to look at; the flash of them as traffic passes can encourage a seizure. If I were to go back to Oregon now, it would have to be different. No train rides at night; no saying yes to Bullwinkle's, an arcade where I raced on go-karts and pointed laser guns in between enjoying cold beer in red plastic cups. The Oregon of my past is no longer accessible; time has marched forward, and an illness has unfolded.

When I think of the 2016 me, I realise that this is no longer who I am. This shouldn't be hard to come to terms with – especially now that my life is happier. More stable. Then, my hair was long and fell naturally into thick knots while I slept. I'd spend twenty minutes a day combing the

matted blonde. Now, that hair is gone and I spend my mornings stacking the dishwasher, brewing coffee and thinking about the day's work. A different type of care.

Then, I was freshly on antidepressants. The anxiety was still a live wire in me. But I was adventurous, strong in my flannel shirts from Goodwill living off quesadillas. I did not have to plan each time I left the house; I would put my shoes on and stride out, leaving the door unlocked behind me (this was seen as the normal thing in said small college town).

It is here I stop writing. Walk away from the computer. Why is this so hard to put into words? I wrote a book about my illness, breaking down each little sick part of my brain on the page. It wasn't this hard, then. It didn't feel like a comparison between a different self and now.

All of this is to say: I fell into Loretta before I became ill. But now I'm *in it* with her. Is the pull thickened by the new limits imposed on by body? She is movement, life, humour embodied. Those things had left me for a while.

*

I've said I will go back to Oregon but I can't bring myself to book that flight. I've been close over the years – LA is a common port from Australia. But it feels to visit would be to pollute the Oregon that exists in my mind. To change that piece of myself that is a place in time. If I were to go back to the waterfall – where I felt so dizzy from the height less than half way up that I had to walk back down, blocking my peripheral vision on the way down – what would I remember in the years to come? Would it still be the taste of a pumpkin sandwich, wrapped tight in brown paper? The voice of another student pointing out a SNL cast member striding down the track, everyone's heads snapping to see. I know there's room for more memories of this place to exist within me; there is not a limit to how much we can recall but I fear dampening what I already possess. Or changing what I thought I knew.

When I come home after weeks spent travelling, my home mismatches my perception of it. It is either a little bigger or smaller, perhaps depending on where I've been. Something is off. So, I know my memory is an amorphous, inaccurate thing. I do not want to change this one part of my mind – one that holds good.

I found Loretta while feeling uncomfortable about my body (it's funny this comes to me after writing how Oregon exists as a happy part of me). At the historical society, my class is sectioned into the elevator in groups of two. I hang back, unsure where to be and nervous of being up against other bodies in a tight space. I examined a framed poster with more interest than it warranted. What was in the frame, I cannot say.

On the first floor, looking over the archives, I feel uncomfortable once again. This is my first time in the archives; I don't know what I'm looking for while others have come with subjects or family to search for. I'm in Oregon and no one I've met let alone are related to has been here. In my class I have people I can speak to, not friends. It takes years for me to build the intimacy of friendship and I'm only here for four months. I hesitantly join my classmates in wandering the stacks, flicking through black and white images in small, labelled drawers. I'm still flicking while everyone settles at heavy wooden tables with their materials. I don't know what I'm looking for but I don't want to sit yet (where do I sit? On the table that is full with people who have known one another for years, whispering in comfort? Or by myself and risk offending my classmates?). I move from the 'animal' drawer to 'circus'. My fingers push through each image until I see Loretta. I do not know this is her name yet (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 31). She is the only woman in the file dressed in baggy clown silks rather than the more alluring acrobatic costumes with their revealing cuts and adornment in sequins. Beneath the image, there is a caption, "Mrs Harry La Pearl" (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 31). It will take another few days of researching her husband, Harry, before I learn that she is *Loretta* (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 31). By the time I learn who she is – sitting in the library and looking out at the squirrels dashing up the sequoia trees in between Google searches – I'm all in.

*

How can a person know another? Especially when they have never met. I think about the family I have not met in person – those who died before I came into being – but who I feel I know. I see the grandfather I never met in Dad's gentleness; how he tries so hard to diffuse a terse conversation. How he cannot bear to watch sad films with Mum; he walks out, unable to listen to the sound of her gentle sniffs. Can I know Fred through Dad? I wonder, too, if there are parts of Loretta lingering in people I have not yet met. Could an act of kindness from her – or cruelty, I remind myself for I do not truly know who she was – shape how someone moves? I imagine her teaching a young boy to fall; him star-fished onto a hard dirt floor. I wonder if a memory can be carried in the body, even if it lived in the imagination.

*

I want to write about Loretta. I don't want to write about being ill anymore. I'm sick of being sick and softening horrible experiences with well-ordered words. It used to make me feel better, tunneling trauma into a paragraph that made sense. I wrote until I understood what was happening.

Now, I understand but can do nothing but feel through it. Keep on keeping on, my therapist says and I write this down. Why write about it anymore? *Because it's the reason you are searching.* Is it that simple, though? Can we attribute a trauma to every motivation? And even if it is true, should we?

What I'm trying to ask (*really*, this time) is: why is it that when I'm writing about a woman clown, I'm also writing about trauma in the body and mental illness? Writing this book, I wanted to move away from this – what could be more of a leap from illness to clowning, I joke with friends – but her life is not just clowning. She is a person before a clown and part of being a person is pain and trauma. I guess part of being a clown is acting if these things don't exist; or, at least, poking your tongue out at them.

Loretta is joy and light and pain and trauma. She is both sides of the coin, and all I wish in researching her is that I can live on one side for a little bit. To inhabit her brightness is to escape, one word at a time. Being asked 'why her, but *really?*' draws me out of the joy. In an interview about my first book *Hysteria*, the interviewer says that it contains little about my childhood.

'Is there a reason?' she asks.

My words come out and as I speak them, I realise this has been sitting on my chest for months. 'I didn't want anyone to be able to see a part of my early life and try to draw a straight line to my illness. I am not interested in those connections.'

I don't think illness – *my* illness, specifically I should say – can be directly drawn from an early experience. It's not like passions or dislikes, which can be made from one moment. Who we are accumulates over time, like layers of soil beneath us. We build ourselves. We stack both the good and bad on top of one another and it all blends into something that cannot be replicated.

I fell for Loretta's life on that day in 2016 at the Oregon Historical Society but perhaps it is all of my experiences – all of who I am – built upon years that made me search for her. This includes my experience of disability, yes, but that's just one layer. For some reason that I can't articulate, what makes me and what made her are connected. I begin to think it is my job to see this connection to the end.

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Chapter One

Ohio, 1915

Loretta stands, left hand gently resting on her chest. Her right skims her outer thighs. Legs slightly bent, one foot lifted slightly so her figure appears soft and curving. Neck tight, rigid. She looks ahead into the line of the horizon, her eyes blurring and long past watering. She cannot see Ginnie but she can sense her beside her as one senses a large toppled tree trunk when walking through the forest. Ginnie is unmoving, Loretta's anchor in stillness.

It's been maybe two hours; Loretta calculates by the burn in her thighs that has shifted from stinging to a hot ache. She tries to stop herself thinking of the time, instead preferring her mind to drift. Most often she'll think of the people she knows: Ginnie and her latest boyfriend or the loudest girls at Miss Nourse's School for Young Ladies whose voices break open the silence of the Conservatory courtyard. By the third hour, her arms heavy and feet puffing with pooled blood, she wills herself to think of the piano. The loops of scales up and down; the latest exercise her teacher says is 'integral' to her success as a player. Loretta wonders how many things can be integral before, by definition, they lose their importance from sheer volume of tasks. What is the number at which a collection of knowledge transforms from being important to everyday? The wearier she is, the more abstract her thought becomes.

As they approach the fourth hour – Loretta takes note of the thinning crowd – the Director comes over to let them know they can clean up and go home. Loretta learnt on her first night not to break the pose immediately; she had crumpled at the sudden movement. She starts by flexing her toes, then ankles, slowly creaking her joints until she is able to move off the platform. Ginnie strides over to her in short wooden movements, leaning against her when she arrives. Cool air hits Loretta's bare shoulders, painted and powdered to look like a classical statue. The first night it had taken them hours to paint each other, giggling as they noticed missing spots. Two weeks later and they felt they were professionals at seventeen years old. It took less than forty minutes for Loretta to water down the paint, Ginnie to sponge it over their limbs before Loretta powdered it with the dense smell of talcum. They'd also become more adept at tying the sheets over their shoulders and wrapping it tightly around their hips.

'How're your ankles tonight?' Ginnie whispers, her voice scratchy from dehydration.

'It's like they've grown two sizes,' Loretta replies with a raspy laugh. 'And your arms?'

'Maybe a little better.' Ginnie had been complaining about her arms and wrists for the past week. She'd said they felt heavy from their nightly performances; the aches had followed her into the day and her piano was suffering for it. Ginnie lived at the Finishing School while Loretta took

private tuition at the Conservatory. For Ginnie and her parents, there were expectations that came with their wealth. Loretta was considered a dabbler, despite her talent. Her father, William, was a paper carrier. With her four brothers, there would never be enough money for lessons to nurture her skill. She knew this from when her father had arranged private lessons at twelve; she had told herself to savour them. She could not complain like Ginnie; she enjoyed each minute she was at the instrument, even if the rules of the Conservatory stifled her.

‘Etta, are you going to walk back with me today?’ Ginnie was hesitant. She knew Loretta told her parents there were late rehearsals this month; she could stay out much later than Ginnie who was due back at the school soon after their performance for curfew.

Loretta knew Ginnie wanted her to walk back with her, but she couldn’t give up the next hour of freedom to walk around the John Robinson Circus. There was so much to see beyond the living statue stage, set up just behind the Lot’s entrance. Another living statue – a wife of an acrobat – had taken to accompanying Loretta to the final evening performance at the Big Top.

‘I think I’ll stay another hour. Do you mind, Gin?’

Ginnie smiles at her gently. Loretta senses her worry. She knows Ginnie sees her as reckless; she isn’t though. Ginnie is sheltered by her family’s wealth, mistaking Loretta’s family life as freedoms rather than the reality that with little income and five children, her parents were too busy to watch over her like the mistresses of the Finishing School did for Ginnie. It freed Loretta in these long summer evenings, but the limits of money meant she would have to give up piano to marry soon. She didn’t care to explain this to Ginnie, though. Being seen as an outlier; a girl who bucked the will of others in Ginnie’s eyes bolstered her. When the newspaper had advertised living statues work at the John Robinson, Loretta had come to Ginnie. She knew Ginnie awe at the idea would support her bluster. If she was seen as brave and reckless, she’d learnt, only then could she act so.

‘Thanks, Gin.’ Loretta places a hand on Ginnie’s bare shoulder, noticing that the warmth of her fingers smudges away paint in uneven stripes.

Ginnie joins another girl to walk together to the changerooms. Loretta can picture her bending over a bucket and hastily scrubbing away at her skin before fastening her long wool skirt and starched white shirt.

Loretta reaches behind the stage, snatching an old jacket she wraps around herself, not caring at the patches of paint lining her sleeves. She wanders over to the Big Top, a dirt path before her. Few families are out this late; it’s mostly young men congregating in groups or their older brothers trying to impress their dates. Chaperones lurk awkwardly a few steps behind. A breeze comes – that delicious shift from humid summer air to cool evening wind. Loretta closes her eyes to inhale when she hears someone.

‘Excuse me, miss. Are you alright?’

She turns to the man speaking. He looks to be in his early 30s. His face is large and long; forehead stretching back to thinning hair. His eyes are bright and a smile fills his face, showing his straight white teeth. Loretta glances down, noticing the neatness of his suit. His tie knot is tight and sits close to his neck. On appearance, she thinks, he is unremarkable. Except perhaps for when he smiles and the size of it counters the wide clearness of his eyes. She wouldn’t have noticed him if he had not spoken.

His smile is frozen as he waits for her to reply. She frowns and pauses, letting a tremor of uncertainty cloud his eyes.

‘Do I know you?’

The man stifles a laugh, turning it into a low, rumbling cough. Loretta keeps her blank expression locked. She doesn’t look at his face, instead seeing beyond him so what is close to her blurs.

‘No, not at all,’ he replies. ‘I’m Harry. Do you work at John Robinson?’

‘Ah... yes.’ Loretta does not wish to talk, wanting instead to wander the Lot in the hour she is afforded each night to be truly alone. She wants to shriek in glee in the Big Top with no one looking at her nor knowing she’s there. In her family’s small Ohio neighbourhood, there is little she can do without comment. One afternoon she had played with her little brother Sylvie in the garden, both of them cackling over some nothing. When her father had come home, he’d already heard about the ‘indecorous racket’ his daughter had made. But even though she does not wish to speak, Loretta cannot refuse this man. So built into her is this idea of what it means to be polite.

She senses his discomfort and continues to speak, growing angry at herself as she does: ‘Just these two weeks past. While the circus stays in town.’

Harry’s smile relaxes into one that’s more natural. ‘Well, enjoy. Robinson’s is a good place to work.’ He clasps his hands together and Loretta wonders if he’s nervous, although he looks at home in the Lot. His shoulders are pushed back straight, his eyes fixed on hers. Not distracted by the wash of noise surrounding them.

‘I’ll let you be on your way. G’night.’ Harry lowers his eyes before turning. Loretta watches him stride to the back of the Big Top, wondering at how quickly she was rid of this odd man. Never before had she felt her ability to look beyond a person – gazing into the distance so they blurred into a distracting shape – so disquieted someone before. She smiles briefly at this thought. A newfound power that makes men more than a decade older than her shrink away. As she walks on to the Big Top, alone, she wonders how she will recount this to Ginnie.

*

Loretta sits on the wall outside the Finishing School waiting for Ginnie. Her eyes are caught by the sway of the English ivy brushing back and forth in the wind. She strums her fingers; they are alive after her lesson. Full of movement and an eagerness to slide across the keys. Loretta wonders if Ginnie feels this way too. An unceasing energy. It usually lasts the afternoon, fading as she steps into her family home. Greeted by the shouts of her brothers; a rushed hug from Sylvie. Her mother always short with her for taking so long to walk home. ‘Where were you?’ Mary huffs as she prepares dinner for the seven of them.

Loretta hears the burst of girls walking through the oak double doors. They pour out before her and she sees the amber of Ginnie’s hair; she’s a head taller than the others. Long and thin, she folds in on herself as she walks, hunching to make herself match those around her.

‘Gin!’ Loretta shouts out to her, raising her twitching fingers in the air. She sees Ginnie startle before smiling and rushing over to the concrete wall.

‘Etta, what are you doing here?’

Loretta marvels at the neatness of Ginnie’s uniform. The pleats of her wool skirt are as straight as rulers.

‘I had a lesson with Miss Scratch.’ Loretta shrugs and smiles. ‘I’m in no rush to be home.’

‘We only have twenty minutes for a break.’ Ginnie looks shy that the limits of her life are on display to Loretta. ‘Want to sit?’ Ginnie gestures at the grass behind them, yellowing in the Cincinnati heat.

Loretta kicks her legs up, swinging them over the wall to find a spot where the two of them will be distanced from the crowd of girls. Their eyes are on her and she instinctively shifts her skirt, knowing that despite her fuss it will never hang like theirs. She does not have the energy to heat the iron on the stove top, pressing it to an old sheet on top of her clothing. Loretta paces quickly to the large oak tree that shades the school, flopping onto the ground and crossing her legs. Ginnie kneels beside her, smoothing her skirt with her palms.

‘How was class?’ Loretta asks. ‘Learn anything good?’

Ginnie pokes out her tongue. ‘Depends on whether you think poetry is any good.’

‘Maybe. Was it about anything interesting?’ Loretta raises her brow comically, vaguely aware she is being watched beyond the wall. The sense of it makes her want to be bolder. To push back at what that nameless group of girls think of her.

‘Etta,’ Ginnie begins, her fingers working the edge of her skirt. ‘I can’t come to John Robinson’s tonight.’ Her voice lowers to a whisper as she speaks the circus’ name.

‘Tonight?’

‘Well, any night.’ Ginnie is no longer looking at her fully. ‘I think the mistresses have caught on. I’m staying out later and later. And... my piano isn’t the same.’

Loretta’s face eases: she tries not to show her confusion.

She matches Ginnie’s whisper: ‘I thought you loved it?’

‘I do, Etta. I do. I like it but not like you do.’ Ginnie leans forward to place a hand on Loretta’s knee, looking into her face to smile. ‘That’s okay, isn’t it?’

Loretta leans forward, pulling Ginnie into a rough hug.

‘Course it’s okay, Gin. Who else would go to the circus with me after reading an advertisement in the paper?’

Ginnie moves out of the hug, her pulled back hair now askew. ‘The others are going to be whispering about me all week!’

‘Let ‘em.’ Loretta squiggles both of her eyebrows up and down which had Ginnie grinning.

‘Thanks.’ Ginnie’s tone turns serious. ‘You’re so brave. Being able to do this by yourself.’

Loretta smirks, discomforted by the shift. Her face is unable to settle into seriousness.

‘So, you’ll come see me perform? There’s only two weeks left of the season,’ she says brightly, hoping Ginnie’s venture into seriousness will end.

‘Course! Although I might not stay for all four hours...’

The two of them hear the rush of girls migrating back to the classroom. Ginnie rushes to stand up, brushing dry strands of grass off her skirt and grey socks.

Loretta stays sitting, yelling out ‘Bye, Gin!’ as she watches her friend rush away. She only now remembers that she intended to weave a story of her scaring off the man at the circus. She smiles at the unexpected turn of their conversation, realising she’s not brave like Ginnie thinks. If she hadn’t had her friend to join her, she wouldn’t have gone in to meet with the circus owner about living statue work. Even now, she’s unsure she’d continue if she hadn’t begun friendships with the other statues. Or if Ginnie said she wouldn’t visit the Lot. The thought discomforts her and as she stands, she tries to shake it off along with the dry leaves that have clung to her calves.

That night, elbow on a wooden column painted white and hand beneath her chin, Loretta’s eye catches on a flicker of movement in the crowd. She cannot shift her glance from the distance – always look beyond the people, another performer had told her on her first night – so her senses sharpen to this rush of movement. In her periphery, Loretta sees a white block with strokes of red. Her hearing usually tunes out the murmur of the audience, dimming her surrounds to focus on thought. Now it heightens. She imagines her senses crystallising; she hears a woman shriek. A man laughs low and thick. Looking ahead, there is a figure is moving into her line of sight. She sees the balloon of his costume before she realises his face is painted. A *clown*. His eyebrows are painted on

black. A line for his nose. His smile is red and hooks up to meet his nostrils. His pants are three times his width and as he splits his legs, he emphasises the preposterous shape of his clothing.

Loretta blurs her eyes intentionally, so the man becomes a blot; she doesn't wish to tempt herself to smile and break her pose. Despite being at John Robinson the past two weeks, she's noticed little of the clowns. At the Big Top, she often dashed home when the clowns came on. She'd crave the animal shows and the acrobats. The twist of human bodies in the air and the bellows of polar bears; these were sights she'd never imagined. She hadn't particularly cared for the frivolity of the clown troupe when these attractions were on display. Before John Robinson moved on to the next city, she'd hoped she'd would be able to speak to an animal trainer. To come close to touching a lion pup or have a monkey hang off her neck, like she'd seen trainers do as they hung by the ticket booth to encourage hesitant buyers.

A burst of laughter emerges from the audience. Loretta feels the spread of it; more folks must be turning to watch the clown dart at the back of the crowd. If it had been the first hour of the statues, she would have been annoyed. At the beginning of the night, her skin is always alive with the audience watching her so intently. Hoping for her to stumble, to move. But after hours pass, her aches surpass the crackle of attention. Now the clown is neither an annoyance nor a pleasure. He is just a distraction from the pain thrumming through her bent elbow. She clenches her teeth, resisting the urge to straighten her arm and feel the ecstasy of the stretch. With a sense of pain growing, Loretta sharpens her sight to distract herself with the patrons walking the lot in the distance. Her eyes settle on a small boy holding his mother's hand as she strides forward. His legs drag and kick up dust as she turns to him to say something. Loretta imagines they are rushing to meet someone; she paints in the details with her mind. Scabs on the boy's knees, the mother's scuffed black court shoes.

Deep in imagining – looking as far across the Lot as the small platform she stands on will allow – it takes a moment for her to register the creak of the stage floorboards. She suppresses the instinct to flinch. The stage only creaks when the statues position themselves at the beginning of the night, hidden by a thick red velvet curtain that had delighted Loretta the first time she saw it. Her breath stills so that she can listen to those around her. It's in this hyperaware state that she becomes aware of a presence to her left. She can almost sense the heat of the body. They must be slightly behind her, she figures, as in her periphery she can only see the painted figures of her peers. Loretta no longer remembers the sting throughout her muscles; now, she is alert. She is stiff but she can move quickly if she needs to. *It's probably nothing*, she tells herself. *Perhaps a drunk audience member crawling onto the stage.* She thinks this, but still holds her breath.

As Loretta forces in air to her nostrils, she sees an arm appear to her side. Seeing the blur of white, she thinks another statue must have moved. She'd heard of workers who fainted on the stage

on particularly warm evenings, dehydrated and exhausted. The arm bends, elbow sharing her pedestal. They are mimicking her. Their face settles in their palm and she sees the painted stripes. It's not another statue, but the clown. Loretta is relieved. No one is ill. *It's just a clown with too much time on his hands.* Beside her, he is frozen. She imagines the view from the audience. He mimics her position. Face in hand, the other on hip. Dramatic, but his painted-on smile against her soft expression turns them into farce. Funhouse mirrors, no longer beauties to be studied in detail. The audience roars. A man at the back even bends over in laughter, as though the force of it affects his relationship with gravity.

Blood rises to the top of Loretta's skin, heating in the pleasure of the audience's reaction. As the crowd's laughs dip and fade, the clown beside her moves again. He marches behind her and she feels the push of air from his flapping arms. He ducks in front, leaning on one knee. The edge of his wide brimmed hat brushes against her stomach. She resists the urge to run her hand over where she has been touched; the touch stays long after the clown has moved away. Lowering her eyes slowly, she sees him at her feet once again posing like she does. Chin on palm. Faux serious expression underneath the clown paint. The crowd chuckles, quieter than before. Loretta moves. It has been over two weeks of performing and she has not coughed or blinked. So seriously had she taken her responsibility to not move, even when a girl younger than her had taken to shaking slightly on the cooler nights. Now, she twists on her hips to pivot towards the clown. She keeps everything else frozen, her elbow no longer on the pedestal but moving through the air. As she turns, her eyes wash over the crowd. One woman gasps, gripping the arm of her older friend. A young boy points with a small yell. Loretta cannot draw breath: part frozen through fear of her recklessness, part thrilled. Moving slow to draw out the moment, she stops when her elbow grazes the scratchy wool of the clown's hat. He starts almost imperceptibly beneath her. She is tempted to smile. *Does he think he is the only one who can be unpredictable?* Leaning on the clown like a pedestal, she slowly shifts her expressionless look into a wide-eyed grin. The crowd erupts into their loudest cheers yet. Loretta is electrified; her body vibrates with their energy.

As she is looking out on the crowd that is, in turn, watching her, she sees the rush of red separate them. The curtain has closed and she allows herself to turn her head to see the circus director. His face shows amusement, masking what Loretta assumes is annoyance. The clown at her feet bends onto all fours before pushing himself up. She steps back quickly; without the audience watching she feels the impropriety of being so close to a man she does not know.

'Should've known it was a mistake hiring you.' The director is firm and Loretta's exhaustion returns before she realises it is not her being addressed. He continues, 'You always make a splash, don't you Harry?'

The clown, now on his feet, raises his eyebrows in response. He lopes forward to slap the director on the shoulder. Loretta stands two metres away from the men, not quite in their conversations yet not included with the other statues moving as a group off the stage.

The clown turns to her and she sees a familiarity in the brightness of his eyes. Loretta almost winces as her mind connects where she has seen him before.

‘Harry, is it?’ The nervousness has left her and frustration makes her bold.

The clown nods. ‘Let me guess. Do I know you?’ Harry pauses, holding back a grin. ‘Are you... Loretta?’

She smiles back at him, more resigned than amused, and steps forward. A painted white hand. Harry shakes it goodheartedly.

‘So, you’ve met I see?’ the director comments, a weary amusement plastered on his face.

‘Not quite,’ Loretta replies, suddenly hit with the impact of the hours on stage. Her left arm hangs heavy in its socket and she imagines it is now longer than her right. She goes to leave, face drawn. ‘I best catch up with the others.’

The two men nod at her, the director saying goodbye. As Loretta walks away, she can hear the director chastising Harry affectionately.

‘That’s the problem with hiring an old hat like you. Always pushing the boundaries. Anyway, forget that. How’s Frances?’

Loretta lingers by the front edge of the stage, hidden by the velvet curtain. She hears Harry mutter an anemic reply while she wonders how this man – who she barely knows – has managed to insert himself into another moment.

*

Early on a Thursday evening Loretta has off from performing, she is to meet Ginnie at the Lot by the Big Top. There’s one weekend left of the John Robinson’s stay in Cincinnati and Loretta is determined to take in what she can before her life returns to what it was. Her bickering brothers roaming through the neighbourhood while her mother determines to teach her how to prepare another meal. She tries not to think of what her future holds, instead luxuriating in her surroundings. The Lot is calmer than usual; it’s the end of their run and Loretta watches the circus workers prepare for travel. She is early. Ginnie will still be making her way from the Finishing School, so Loretta walks to the Back Yard. Past the costume tents and rest areas, she follows the guttural noises and earthy scents to the animal cages. She passes the doctor’s tent and sees the two elephants. One has chains around her neck and chest, looping around her ears. The other is standing on two metal podiums used in the ring. Loretta had only seen the two elephants from the audience

stage; never had her strolls in the Back Yard taken her so close. Her eyes trace the egg-shaped skull and flopped ears. A trainer is on his knees by the front podium. He is holding an iron file the size of his forearm, running it up and down in the gaps between the elephant's toes. Loretta watches as he files in brisk expert movements. She hadn't imagined that the elephants would allow such a treatment but this one barely shifts as the trainer works.

'Did you know they have five nails on their front feet and four on the back?' The deep voice is close to Loretta's left cheek and she turns quickly at the sound. She sees the familiar bright eyes of Harry the clown and her posture tighten in response.

He continues, 'Joe let me get close to Barb to count one day.'

Loretta nods curtly at him, imagining what it would be like to run her fingers over Barb's wrinkled skin. 'Now how do you always seem to find me?' she asks, eyebrows raised.

'Loretta, you know I live *and* work here?' Harry's brows match hers. 'The clown dressing room is just there.' He points to a canvas tent that looks much like the others surrounding it.

Loretta smiles, turning back to watch the trainer move to the second podium with his oversized file.

Harry follows her gaze and the two of them stand listening to the whoosh of serrated steel on kertain. The second elephant shifts in her chains, stepping closer to where they stand. The gentleness of her footsteps is astonishing for an animal twice Loretta's height. The elephant takes another step towards them and Loretta shrinks back, eyes fixed on the animal.

'She's plenty safe,' Harry says. 'Ain't that right, Joe?'

The trainer waves jovially at him as he shifts from Barb's left foot to right.

'How can she be?' Loretta says, unsure the heavy chains are enough for an animal so broad. Another statue once told her they use the elephants to pull up the pole frames for the Big Top. 'She's wild.'

'Nina's been with the John Robinson for more years than she was in Asia. I promise you, she's more like a family pet now. A big grey dog.' Harry smiles at Loretta's sceptical look. He moves forward, hand stretching out to Nina's chest.

Loretta grabs the back of his shirt, unthinking. The white cotton is damp and she releases it as Harry turns back to her, startled.

'I mean...' Loretta releases the fabric. 'I wouldn't want you to die on my behalf.' She forces a half smile.

'I've risked myself for less. And really, Nina is gentle as can be.' Harry steps back to Loretta, placing a hand on her shoulder to guide her. Nina doesn't try to greet them after all; her trunk is investigating an untouched patch of dried grass.

Loretta allows Harry to pull her forward until they can touch Nina's chest. Loretta looks at the elephant, taking in the smattering of fine hairs on her head. She watches as Nina swats away a fly with a flap of her left ear. Harry takes Loretta's hand and pulls it to Nina. Loretta touches the folds on Nina's chest, the muscle beneath cold skin. Her fingers brush up Nina's shoulder and behind her ear. Nina's ear flaps again, revealing the pink scar tissue that the weight of the chains have etched into her. Loretta is shocked at the sight.

She whispers to Harry, aware that Joe is still nearby. 'Can't they use rope?'

Harry looks at her quizzically, only following when she points to the scar tissue. 'Not strong enough.' He shrugs. 'I don't think it bothers her. Does it, Nina?' Harry raises his voice to address the elephant, gently slapping her leg. Nina pulls her trunk away from the patch of grass to wrap around his arm, curling playfully up to his shoulder.

Loretta touches Nina's trunk, laughing delightedly with Harry. To her surprise, the trunk is tougher than Nina's limbs. As though from exploring the world, it has hardened.

With Nina's trunk brushing over him, Harry looks at Loretta for a beat as if making a decision. She avoids his eye, focusing on Nina.

'Say, has anyone shown you the cook house?'

Loretta, softened by Nina's presence, replies with a broad grin. 'Not yet.'

*

Across the table from Harry, Loretta holds a steaming mug of black tea. She gently rolls the enamel against her palm to disguise her nervousness. Harry butters the roll Cook found for him; it's too early for meals to be served.

Loretta wonders how she can leave, using Ginnie as an excuse. Before she can speak, Harry interrupts her.

'Are you coming on the road with us?'

Loretta had heard the other statues talk about packing up their belongings to move to the next town. Cincinnati was their residency this year; from now, the John Robinson would be travelling across the country. Last night as she fell asleep, she imagined what her new friends would see while their wagons – carted by the elephants, zebras and horses – pulled them through parts of America Loretta could not even imagine.

'No.' She pauses, before adding: 'I belong in Cincinnati.'

Harry puts down one half of the roll he's torn. 'Ah, I envy you. I grew up travelling. I haven't found a home in a city or town. More in the people I surround myself with. My work, too.'

‘Never?’ Loretta cannot imagine seeing so much, so young. She thinks of Sylvie. How he squirms at the dinner table. Being stationary pains him. How could a child so young spend days in a wagon?

‘Not one that was rooted to the ground,’ Harry replies. He puts his open hand before him, beginning to bellow. ‘J. H. La Pearl’s Combination of Sure Hits. The Most Versatile and High Grade Artists on Earth.’

Loretta smiles at his imitation of a ticketer’s booming advertisements.

Harry continues. ‘My family was a circus family. My sister and I started contortionist acts at three. I don’t have any memories of life before.’ He sighs, caught in memories. ‘Roy, my brother and I, took to clowning in our teens. The family circus folded soon after.’ He clears his throat. ‘It had everything though. Bareback riding, acrobat, clowning.’ He smiles at the thought of the performers gathering in the costume tents, in varying states of makeup and dress.

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‘Your life is very different from mine,’ Loretta replies, unsure if her speaking is an intrusion into his reverie.

‘It doesn’t have to be.’ Harry looks at Loretta intently. His lashes are sparse. Amber nestles among the brown of his eyes.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You could come with us.’ Harry is leaning forward now, the torn half of his bread forgotten. ‘The John Robinson. There’s always a place for a performer like you. A natural.’

Loretta angles herself back, pulling the mug of tea towards her. She imagines what leaving would be like. Her mother would not allow her; she would have to pack a bag and leave when she was out. No goodbye. She thinks of her brothers – Sylvie, her favourite – growing without her. All four boys’ limbs bulking with muscle, leaving the house to work with their father one after the other. Without her. She’d be left behind, no profession of her own. She knows – has known for a long time – that her piano won’t morph into a life. She will be left in a half empty house with her mother or, worse, with a dull husband whose parents live only streets away.

Taking Loretta’s silence as consideration of his offer, Harry continues to speak: ‘I will not pretend to know what it means to leave something behind. But I can tell you that when you’re with the circus, you’re always travelling towards something.’

‘I don’t know.’ She sighs, a loud push of air that ripples her tea. Now cold and undrinkable.

‘Did you feel the thrill of the crowd the other night? How in that moment they were only watching you; they thought only of you. Didn’t that make you believe you’re important?’ Harry’s speech is intense now. An urgent rhythm that disarms her.

‘Even if that’s true,’ Loretta measures her words carefully, ‘why do you care to convince me?’

Harry looks down, his intensity broken. They sit together in silence, listening to Cook moving pots and rinsing potatoes, before he speaks again.

‘I want...’ he says. ‘I’d *like* to know you more.’

Loretta weighs his words. No one has spoken to her like this before. There’s an urgency about him, a pull much like the audience’s attention.

‘I have to go,’ she says. ‘I’m meeting a friend.’ She stands abruptly, her back straight before him. She leaves the cook house without looking back, imagining him picking at the bread. Amber brown eyes downcast.

That night, lying in bed with the cool weight of a sheet on her arms, Loretta cycles through her conversation with Harry. She hadn’t told Ginnie much; just that she’d stroked an elephant with the help of a circus man. She was nervous to hear her friend’s reaction. It would colour her own thoughts while she couldn’t place how she felt. Ticking through each of her and Harry’s interactions, she knew she liked being seen in this way. His intensity – his words were unlike any she’d heard spoken aloud before – made blood rush to her face. It was like how Ginnie saw her, but adult. Yet she knew both Harry and Ginnie were not seeing her for what she was, but what she

presented. Eyes still closed; she smiles, realising they saw her mask. The bluster of her, not the trepidation sitting beneath the surface.

Does it matter? A part of her doesn't want them to see underneath her illusion. Harry saw her, even if he was strange. His offer remained. *There's always a place for a performer like you.* The words repeat in her mind, taking on Harry's sound.

Loretta turns. Sleep is hours away. She scrunches her face, recalling the boredom of before she answered the John Robinson advertisement. She was frustrated. But she had a path that would unravel no matter her actions. Now, she had a decision to make. The brevity of her choice made the problems of weeks ago like nothing more than the annoyance of a mosquito hovering by her bed before sleep. She knows that a choice means an opportunity for mistake. Stay, and she'll be imagining the life that could have been. The sights she would have missed; roads beyond Ohio to great cities with their crowds of people watching her. But if she leaves, she'll be able to imagine exactly what she's leaving behind. Loretta sees a future vision of herself – her hair lightened with age, forehead lines emerging – sitting in a circus tent and feeling the pull of her absent family. The hunger of it distresses her and she pulls off her sheet. Her neck is sticky with sweat. Her mother would not speak to her, if she left – maybe forever.

Hunching over, watching her hands twitch, Loretta tries to decide which path is better. *The unknown or the known?* Before the John Robinson, her life was a farce. And she were unthinkingly moving through it, not fully aware of her movements. Almost unattached. She knows what Cincinatti can offer girls like her, having watched her neighbours grow up, marry and have their own children. She'd seen their faces, the new mothers she'd visited after they'd had their first child. [What did their faces look like? Describe specifics.] As her own mother spoke, Loretta would try to spot a twitch of muscle, a crinkle of an eye that would betray whether these women were as overjoyed as they said.

Sitting in her room, her house silent, Loretta is taken back to the age of twelve. She is visiting Cathy, a girl five years her senior who lived next door. Married less than a year when her first baby came. It was a shock to see her pregnant, face widened and her walk stiff. At Cathy's, the baby was placed in Loretta's arms. Its hands were swaddled close to its chest and Loretta marveled at their smallness. Fingernails that looked like cooked grains of rice. 'Not long 'til it's your turn, 'Etta,' her mother had said and she felt the shock of the truth behind these words. She hasn't thought of Cathy once since then; the memory has lived untouched within her for the past five years, tingeing her with dread.

Loretta pushes herself out of bed, over to the handbag where she keeps her small allowance and sheet music. She sidesteps the floorboards that creak without thinking, arms touching the walls in the grey darkness of her room. She knows she will have to make a decision tonight if she is to

make preparations before Sunday. She'll have two days to pack and write a letter saying goodbye, if she is to leave. Loretta rummages in the scuffed leather of her bag, her fingers finding a cool thin metal disc. Her index finger traces the lumpiness of the Head of Liberty on one side. Clasp the dime in her left palm, Loretta pads back to her bed. This will make her decision; she cannot go back on it. If the night's silence wasn't so imposing, she'd poke fun at the ridiculousness of a dime deciding how she will spend her life. Her parents would be furious at her carelessness.

Crossing her legs atop her sheet, she attributes the Head of Liberty to a life of circus. The other, her family. Cincinatti. Piano, maybe. In the shadows of her room, she doesn't flip but gently rolls it onto the sheet so as not to make a sound. Loretta sees the roundness of it, picks it up and slaps it onto her thigh. She pauses before removing her hand. The weight of her decision imbued in the coin makes her a little breathless; for the next two days she will either be rushing to organise herself and keep it a secret from her family or her life will return to what it was. No more living statue performances. A return to a different kind of silence.

Loretta cannot see the dime in the dim light. Her hand hovers, not yet touching the coin. She can sense the metal on her leg, warming. Light but heavy with the weight of her decision. She quickly shakes herself loose. She flicks the coin onto the bed, releasing tension. She pulls the sheet out from underneath her and wraps it around her shoulders before lying down. *I will make this decision for myself.*

*

Seated in a wagon, small bag of clothes and music on her lap, Loretta waits for the John Robinson to leave Cincinatti. It's early and she imagines her mother walking home, arms full of bags of potatoes, rice and chicken. Maybe Will or Charles will have joined her. Loretta had left before the rest of the household woke. The night before she had told them she was meeting Ginnie for early practice. They won't find the letter she left behind until that afternoon; Loretta's mother, Mary, will grow tight lipped upon reading it. Refusing to speak to Sylvie about her daughter for years to come. Loretta unclenches her fists, noticing the little white half-moons imprinted on her palm.

Next to her, another statue is squirming. They'd performed together each night for two weeks but never spoken. *A girl.* Her hair is fair and curls around her temples. When her face is posed, she has a beauty. But now, in the tight space of the wagon, her energy widens her mouth and gives away her excitable youth. Loretta sees Ginnie in her; looks out the window instead. Unsure how to start her new life, she busies herself with watching the last of the canvas tents being folded and packed.

'Is this your first time?'

Loretta turns back to the girl.

‘I’m Sonja.’

‘Loretta,’ she replies, smiling and glancing down. There’s an orange ribbon in Sonja’s hands and she wraps it again and again around her ring finger. ‘And yes, first time travelling.’

Sonja lights up at her reply. ‘How exciting! I’m used to it by now. Ma and Papa had me and my little sister while travelling. As Sonja speaks, her words speed up. Excitement thrusts her forward.

‘Is she a statue, too?’ Loretta tries to remember if she ever saw Sonja with another performer, but her memories of their nights on stage blur. She can only recall the heaviness in her limbs, the way her ankles would swell each evening.

‘No, no. Lisa’s an acrobat like our parents. I’m not so good at getting my arms and legs to swing like they are. Papa says I’ve always been that way. *Clumsy as can be.*’ Sonja puts on her father’s voice, and it sends her into laughter. Loretta joins her, more from pity than amusement. ‘But I like being a statue for now. It’s not too hard and when I’m a bit older I might try working with the animals. Even if Ma isn’t so sure.’

Loretta nods, her legs shifting under the weight of her bag. She wonders if she overpacked. She’d brought her two best dresses and a small bag of toiletries. The hardest part was deciding on which two booklets of music she’d allow herself out of dozens.

Sonja shifts, unsticking her damp thighs from the wagon seat. Loretta can smell their sweat, even though the day is early. This summer has been unseasonably warm.

Loretta tells Sonja of meeting Nina days earlier at the Back Yard.

Sonja grins. ‘She’s a gentle old thing, Nina. Ma and Lisa don’t like her much – they think Nina’s wild after all and to be careful. But I try to visit her when I can. Have you seen her wrap her trunk around anyone yet?’

Loretta smiles at the memory of her fear while watching Nina wrap her trunk around Harry. Like her trunk was a snake readying itself to squeeze the life out of him – not the gentle hello of a friend that Harry took it for.

‘Yes, it was quite something.’

Sonja joins Loretta in her grin, happy to make a friend here.

Loretta looks out of the window of the wagon once again. The final tools are packed and she can hear the wagons ahead beginning to creak into action. When she had rushed to the Lot that morning as she had arranged with the Director, she was startled to see the zebras strapped up next to the horses. Nina was pulling a caged wagon housing a polar bear with yellowing fur. Loretta hadn’t expected the attractions to literally pull their weight; only then had learnt how hard each part of the circus worked.

‘Oh look!’ Sonja points out of the window, her hand close to Loretta’s face. ‘The clowns are late again.’

Loretta smiles looking at the group of men, spotting Harry’s thin hair and broad frame a head above the others. They group of them stride past their window to the wagons behind them.

‘That tall one is a friend of Pa’s,’ Sonja says and Loretta twists towards her, subtly encouraging her to speak as she had not done before. ‘He comes over for tea often. How Papa and him cackle. One time in the off season, he came to our house and even brought his wife!’

Loretta tries not to start. Her fingers clench. She thinks of the way Harry spoke to her. How he leant forward and looked into her eyes at the cook house.

‘He’s married?’ Loretta keeps her tone flat.

‘Oh yes. He and his wife were married at Madison Square Garden in New York. He even wore his clown makeup for it! He told the story when he visited. His wife... Frances, I think? A strange name but she was nice enough.’

Loretta can’t yet reply and Sonja takes her silence for boredom, pointing instead to the horses who refuses to go despite the driver’s increasing anger.

Sonja is still cheerful and pointing when their own wagon starts with judder. Loretta forces air out in a steady stream, her mind ticking over what she is now running towards.

Chapter Two

Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, 1918

‘The ghost walks today,’ Al says as his feet move along the thin metal beam that joins the train carriages.

‘Out of cash already?’ Loretta replies. The dry summer grass prickles in notches against her back. Her feet rest on the dark steel step into the train above her.

‘Pay days are getting further apart. Either that or my spondoolicks are being carried away with the wind.’ Al is caught by a wistful look, and hand flutters as if it, too, was taken by the breeze. Al had always been dramatic.

‘Try being paid just over half your lot.’

Al jumps off the beam. Loretta digs a heel into the dirt. Smiles, thinking she could mouth the words before as Al says them: they’ve been down this track before.

‘That’s hard, I know. But you’ve got Harry’s wage, too. Plus, you’ll never—’

‘Have a woman to take care of, I know.’

Loretta doesn’t mention that she has to pay for herself. She regrets talking to Al like this. The afternoon had been slow and dull while they waited for the train to be repaired before they could move on. But at least before she had been enjoying the sun and the brushing sound of wind through the grass.

‘It’s a little warm, isn’t it?’ She half-heartedly flaps at her face. ‘I might go find Harry to see if anything’s changed with the engine.’

‘Don’t be upset, now.’ Al’s features arrange themselves into an exaggerated look of innocent sympathy.

Loretta laughs. ‘Oh, my love, why would I be upset? It’s a beautiful day.’

She hauls herself into the carriage, her legs carrying the weight of the conversation with her.

*

Harry is bent over a Clown Alley crate, turning up props in the dim of the railway carriage. A stuffed snake spills out onto the floor.

‘Be careful there. Don’t upset the snakes, now.’

Loretta’s voice is bright, and Harry’s arm stops scooping for a moment.

‘Don’t laugh too hard. We might be stuck here ’til dark.’

‘So, you thought you’d rearrange the crates?’

Harry turns to face her, slick dark hair starting to fan out in the heat.

‘I can’t find the batons. My gold ones.’

Harry always called them gold; Loretta had long stopped correcting him that they were, in fact, bronze plated. It hurt like anything if one spun out and hit you. There was the bruise that lasted all Spring when she borrowed them to practice while Harry was training with the other men. She hadn’t wanted him to see her drop the third baton as she incorporated it into her routine for the daily parade. It took her weeks of sneaking away to perfect the easy throw, the seamless way it joined the movement of the circus folk around her. With Harry watching, she’d pretended she knew how all along.

‘They’re in our suitcase. The green one with the silver latch.’

Harry looks at Loretta for a moment, chewing over her words to find the pith of truth in them.

‘How’d they get there? They always go in this crate.’ He knocks the beat-up wood with his toe to accentuate the point.

Loretta wants to grin but knows to hold it back. ‘I saw you fold them up with your band costume this morning.’ She keeps her eyes neutral, fighting off a smirk.

Harry smiles, acting like the memory had come back to him. She knew it hadn’t.

‘You always remember these things, my love.’ The words come out grateful, but the ‘my love’ is muffled; Harry has already turned back to the crate to stuff the snakes back onto one another.

Loretta plonks herself on a sealed chest, her boots swinging two inches off the floor. She watches him neatening himself after tidying the crate. Hair pushed back, shirt collar straightened. She spots dirt on his left knee but doesn’t tell him. It blends with the dark brown of his pants, anyway.

‘So not ’til dark, you think?’

‘They say there’s a problem with the engine,’ Harry says as though that answered her question.

Trains are tricky creatures. Halting and charging as if carried off by whims alone. To Loretta, they seem as reliable as the horses: always needing to be coaxed.

Before joining John Robinson, Loretta hadn’t thought the circus would be mostly waiting. Waiting to perform; waiting for the cook tent flag to be raised; waiting for broken trains to be mended; waiting for Maurice the elephant’s mood to improve so they could start the procession down the next town’s main street. Running away to the circus – that’s how she’d phrased it to her friends – she’d only imagined roaring engines and animals being led back into cages. Who would’ve thought she’d be sitting around as these things happened around her?

Harry saunters over to her. His outer thigh touches her as he sits. There's moisture under his clothes – he runs hotter than she does. Harry brings out the dark green of his box of Luckies and lights one, the balmy air of the carriage spreading the smoke quickly.

Loretta sighs, pushing and pulling the cracked skin of her bottom lip against her front teeth. She knows Harry can sense her restlessness but she can't hold it in. She's sweating. She itches, grass motes from the side of the tracks have settled on her skin. She can taste the conversation with Al in her throat. Beneath the frustration, she's bone-tired. But she cannot sit unmoving. Loretta wants to shake off the discomfort of the day. Move on to the next place. Leave the grass motes behind. At the next town, she'll be able to relax.

Harry uses his rubs the cooled ash that has fallen onto his thigh, creating circles. Loretta looks at slightly yellowed curve of his index finger. A child on the lot once asked him about it. 'What's that, mister?' He'd said he was full of sunshine.

'Etta?' Harry feels her mind drifting. Usually, she hides it better.

'After the next stop, let's drive to Hammond.'

'What? And give up all this?' Harry's cigarette hand extends out in a jerk as he beams.

'Would it cost much?' Loretta tries to tally how many more wages are left in the season, but the heat and smoke blur the numbers in her mind.

'Let me worry about that, won't you? If we drive, we can get lunch at a roadhouse too.'

A smirk spreads across Harry's face. He leans over to her. 'Just don't tell cook, I'm getting sick of bland gravy. Okay?'

Loretta chuckles, the sound punctuated by a low cheer at the front of the train.

'We're in business!' Harry says. He puts out his cigarette and springs off the crate. 'Let's get moving.'

*

In the traction car, Loretta feels each bump and lurch of the dirt roads but she doesn't mind. It's been weeks since she's been in an automobile. She relishes the movement; they can stop or start where they choose. Harry and her decide, for once. They don't have to wait for the train to be loaded up, animals and children alike dragging their feet.

Her mood even allows her to smile through their roadhouse meals. Harry loves them. Eats them up quick, mopping every speck of gravy with a greying roll. Loretta thinks it's all the meals he's had in them as a child; they take him back to a time when he was small and couldn't see the fractures forming in his family. Loretta doesn't share her theory, just enjoys his heightened spirits

while pushing her own food around the plate. It's never tasted the same since that time outside Chicago when she found a bunch of lice underneath her bread.

Half an hour from where they're meeting the circus, she rests her head against the window. Closes her eyes and enjoys that it is just both of them. No Al, no boys that somehow seem to grow younger by the end of the season. The silence between them is not quite silence – the engine fills her ears with its ocean roars – only voiceless. It's gentle and easy, and gives Loretta's thoughts the space they need to surprise her.

'Harry?'

'Yes, my dear?' His eyes flick over to her profile, then back to the road ahead.

'Are you ready to see the boys again?'

His smile glints with teeth.

'And you thought this'd be expensive. You can't even be away from the circus for a full day.'

She grins at herself. 'I suppose you're right.'

'I bet you even miss sparring with Al.' Harry's eyebrows are waggling now. One of many small ways his routine has leaked into his everyday face.

Her laugh comes as a honk. 'Not quite.'

'You know what I think.'

'Yes,' she tuts. 'I've heard it often enough. The best friends are the ones you can't stand.' She deepens her tone as she quotes him, gently mocking his good nature by plastering a too-big smile on her face and wrenching a thumb up into the air. 'In that case, Al and I will be thick as thieves before the season's out!'

'Don't say I didn't warn you.' The words fall from Harry's lips and hover in the air before them for just a moment before Loretta spots the 'Welcome to Hammond' sign. She no longer keeps track of the names like she did her first season, jotting them down in letters sent to Sylvie. Their sleek grey car motors through the main street and Harry points out landmarks - 'Look Etta, a library!' – despite it being the same mix of stores and pleasant milk bars that every town has. Loretta grumbles a response, watching a small group of women huddled daintily outside Marx's General Store, their purses squeezed in the crook of their elbow. Her mother had been one of them once, tutting and tightly nodding on the street corner, visiting friends' houses in her finest clothes and a sky-blue hat. Mary would rotate her three good dresses, certain of who saw her last in each to maintain the pretense of at least *some* money in their house. Loretta never understood why she bothered with the charade. Why did it matter how many good dresses were in her closet?

The car nears the end of the main road, driving through to a clearing by the train tracks. They're early. As they get out of the car – Loretta swirling her ankles and stretching her toes out in

her scuffed black boots – they can neither see the locomotive in the distance nor hear the hum of its engine.

‘How much longer do you think?’ Loretta is keen to return to the small sink in their carriage to wipe the grit of the road from her face. Rinse out the taste of the roadhouse gravy.

‘Not sure, love. Depends on how happy Maurice was to get in his carriage.’

Loretta rolls her eyes at him, thinking of his disdain for Maurice’s moods. Loretta’s quite likes that Maurice holds onto his animal-ness. Not like the horses who jump and trot without much fuss.

Harry must return the car; he agreed on the meeting spot and the rental service had arranged a man to meet them. He looks again at his watch before leaning against the boot. The light of the afternoon is turning golden and its soft shimmer reflects off the automobile, creating a glow around Harry. Loretta walks over to him, drapes her tired arms around his neck. There’s stubble on his cheek, and his neck is damp under his grey-white shirt. She smiles at his heat, his punctuality, *him*. All things that she loves.

He breaks the silence growing between them. ‘Look at you.’

She smiles, says nothing. Just enjoys the perfect end to their stolen day together.

‘How did you end up here in this clearing with me? A clown and his...’ Harry pauses. ‘His woman. Who’d of thought?’

‘You mean a woman and her clown?’

Harry wraps his arms around her waist, squeezes as he lifts her an inch off the ground.

‘That, I do.’

They stay holding each other as the sun drops, the light turning a deep orange. Loretta starts to stiffen; she rolls her shoulders back but the pops of her joints set her more on edge. Harry talks less than usual. His energy, wrapped up in her half an hour ago, has dulled as they wait.

‘I might take a walk.’ The words leave her mouth before she’s even sure this is what she wants. ‘I shouldn’t be long.’

Harry’s expression remains flat. Loretta needs to escape it, yet she’s not quite able to admit this to herself. Nor him.

‘Yes, yes. Go,’ he says. Eyes flickering from her to the railway line.

She edges away from him, not sure if she should leave but happy to stretch her legs. Her knees locked up through the six-hour long car journey and her joints feel the pleasure of movement. Loretta walks towards a copse of trees, thinking of this pull of pain and pleasure, how it’s shaped her body, shaped *her*. All year – her first at the circus – she’s woken to strain-lines running through her muscles, aftershocks of days playing statue, joining in with the band, even sewing up tears in

the clown costumes. Loretta pictures the pain as red veins humming within her; she's sore everywhere, but there's joy in it too. She's growing stronger each day.

Twigs crack beneath her feet, scattered on top of loose soil that will soon make its way into her boots. She can't let her mind drift any longer. Away from Harry, she no longer has to feign assurance. *Where's the train?* Maybe the engine has faltered; wouldn't be the first time. Maybe something was on the tracks. A while back, it took five laborers to pull a thick gnarled branch out of the train's path. She can't count the hours she has spent waiting for the train to move again, but she cannot expel the twitching anxiety in her fingers. Pressing on her chest. What if it isn't any of those things, but something much worse? One night in the cook tent, Billy told them of an old friend who'd died in a wreck while travelling on a Ringling train – one of two who'd been crushed. Apparently, bits of the wheel had come off but the train kept pulling along, high speed, until it hit a turn. Sixteen cars went off the tracks there. Five fell on their sides. Billy had recited the numbers matter-of-fact, like he was reading a newspaper article aloud. The details had stayed with Loretta ever since; she couldn't stop imagining the moment when the carriages derailed. The squeal of warping metal. The smell of burning.

Now her pace quickens, feet thudding in time with the imaginary, crumpling train. She sees how tall the trees have become. She inhales, hoping to fill her lungs with the scent of pine but instead tasting a hint of dust. To her left, a large tree's bark is splitting; its trunk is too heavy to contain. Loretta's instinct is to turn back. She's come far enough and doesn't want to be too long from Harry in case the train arrives and the others are left waiting. Her quicker than Loretta's ambling. It's always this way, she thinks, the return quicker than the journey. Perhaps it's because the way back – coming home, even – is always known. Mystery makes everything bigger.

Loretta sees the car before she sees Harry. It looks strange in the dirt, by the railway tracks. New and shining, except the splattering of bugs on the front bumper and windshield. It would almost make more sense if it was rusted out. Abandoned, like the Loretta saw near the Ohio river the summer before she left for the circus. It looked like the end of the world. The tyres taken off. Windscreen cracked. She could not believe someone would discard such a thing; her father used to talk about buying a car every evening at dinner. How it would revolutionize his paper distribution. It was a privilege he didn't live long enough to earn.

As the car comes into focus, she sees Harry's figure pacing back and forth. His shoulders hunch in a way she hasn't seen before. Blood flushes her face. Her feet skip over dirt and twigs in her way back to him. Harry looks up. Frowning.

'Did you see—'

Harry's head shakes slightly. 'I drove a mile up. Couldn't see or hear them.'

A pause. Harry's energy radiates like heat off train tracks.

‘I think we should go back to the main street. Spend the night in town.’ He adds, ‘they must have engine trouble again.’

Loretta nods, not ready to respond. She walks slowly, slipping into the car. As Harry starts the engine, she tries not to fall into her thoughts.

*

That night Loretta dreams of the Lot. It’s so hot and dry that dust sticks to her lips, front teeth. She’s on stage with the clowns. Can’t imagine why she’d be there. She looks down at her white and red costume and sees a rip down her side. The fabric hangs loose and she reaches down, feeling the bumps of her ribs. The tear is fraying and she knows it cannot be repaired without showing on stage. She thinks of the cost of a new yard of fabric.

The hand clutching her side is pulled forward and Loretta is thrown. She looks up to see the back of Earl’s head and his wads of black hair. She stumbles along after him, coughing as he pulls her towards the Big Top.

She’s centre stage with Harry, Earl and the others running around her in circles. Their faces aren’t their own: it’s like the audience’s have transplanted onto theirs somehow, but she can tell who’s who. She wonders if it’s part of the show, a new trick. They aren’t themselves – yet they are. Loretta rushed to join them but her mouth is full. *Dirt*, she thinks as she coughs and spits. Rocks line her mouth and as she leans over spluttering a pile of them onto the stage floor. White. Rough. Her hand rushes to her mouth and her fingers run over her cut up gums. Molars crumble beneath her touch. She spits the tooth fragments out, tears wetting her cheeks. Beneath the sound of her retches, she hears the distant hum of the crowd.

In the morning, Loretta wakes with the stickiness of the dream. It doesn’t slip away when she rubs the grit from the corner of her eyes. This one lingers and she is left with the distaste of it as she washes her face in the yellowing sink.

No news from the others.

*

As Loretta leans over to lace up her boots, Harry comes into their small room. He’d gone to talk to the men working the morning shift at the Havlin Hotel. He sits next to her on the bed and Loretta knows he’s heard something.

‘Well?’ she asks, sitting up straight.

‘They derailed. Just out of Gary.’ Harry speaks slowly and Loretta is unsure if he’s soothing her or himself. ‘We’ll leave now and drive to them. See what we can recover. I should warn you: they’re saying it’s one of the worst in circus history.’

‘Did... did they say how many carriages?’

Harry exhales gently. ‘They don’t know. Maybe three.’

Loretta tries to fathom the damage. One carriage and it’s easy to think the injuries are minor. But *three*. With that many, it’s impossible not to think of crushed bodies and hot, warped steel.

‘There... there was a fire, too.’ As Harry says ‘fire’, his posture crumples. Loretta imagines his soul departing from his body. Moving back to the wreck where they should have been.

Harry scoops up her hand in his. ‘We’ll be okay. Let’s go to them, Etta.’

She squeezes his fingers. ‘I’m ready.’

Removed due to copyright restriction

They drive three hours North to Gary, Illinois, only stopping to clear the windshield of bugs. They see the smoke before the train itself. A distant trail above the wreck, like a pin on a map. Harry presses down on the accelerator and the car judders on the pock-marked road. Loretta grips the door handle, gaze fixed on the dark speck of destruction in the distance. Shapes gradually come into focus as they near. A carriage on its side. Behind it, another. Bends of metal that used to be wheels. She spots a small crowd huddled a hundred yards away. Some standing and gripping onto each other, a few scattered on the ground, curled with family leaning over them. She tenses at the sight. *Is that everyone?* She’d considered a disaster but hadn’t expected it; some part of her remained hopeful until the smoke had swept it away.

Harry splutters – a cough held in his chest – but she can't look at him. Her eyes are trying to assess the damage, searching for confirmation of the worst. They pull the car up a bit from the crowd and as they rush over, a look of recognition on each of their faces. Loretta senses not relief but a grim acceptance of their presence. Billy rushes forward to meet Harry, gripping his shoulder. Loretta can't hold on to the words out of Billy's mouth, instead fixates on his sweat-soaked hair, pulled up sleeves, ash-streaked hands and forearms.

'Billy!' Harry's is louder than usual. Awkward. Ashamed. 'We didn't know.'

Loretta fills the silence. 'It's *so* good to see you.'

Billy looks at them with relief. 'And you.' His mouth flaps open and shut for a moment. He musters a whisper. 'A train went through us. I don't know what the engineer was thinking. It totally demolished three carriages, damaged a fourth. Fire... broke out immediately. Must've been the gas lighting system. So many died on impact, but the survivors... those who were burnt... The fire... The sound of it.'

'Do we know who?' Harry asks gently.

Billy just shakes his head. 'You know the towners came to help. First thing, they asked if there were wild animals loose. I wanted to shake them. What about the people?'

Harry pulls Billy away, nodding quickly at Loretta as he does. Harry's known him for years, long before the two of them met. He'll take his friend away, talk in soothing tones until Billy's voice stops cracking with pain.

Loretta finds herself alone at the edges of the crowd as Harry steers Billy around the wrecked carriages. Looking ahead, she sees others salvaging what they can. A flash of her nightmare: torn clowning silks and her bony hands clutching the rip together. She pushes it away, fixating on a woman by a laid-out blanket on the dirt. She's crying and she seems familiar but Loretta can't quite place this woman with her red and tear-shining face. The woman's blouse is scrunched, her skirt faded. She lets out choked breaths every so often, like a child who can't stop crying despite her clogged up nose. As Loretta bends down to her, she takes in the round of her eyes. Her svelte body, muscled thighs. She must be an acrobat – Betty, maybe? Loretta goes to touch the woman's shoulder but stops when she realises the blanket beside her is distinctly lumpy. When she goes to lift the brown wool, Betty shrieks and pulls her back.

'Don't,' she whispers, throat raw.

'Who is it?' Loretta asks.

'They don't know, they can't recognise–' She's so quiet now, it's a strain to hear her. 'But they think it's–'

Loretta can just make out 'Al' before Betty breaks down into sobs, rocking her muscled shoulders back and forth.

Harry finds Loretta kneeling in the dirt, Betty's head in her lap. Puffy lids closed; skin red from crying. Next to them is a body covered with a carriage blanket. Al, Harry guesses by the glazed look in Etta's eyes. Billy said they were still counting the dead; bodies pulled out of the wreck and news of the worst coming from the hospital. Al's death had been sudden, Billy said. 'If you had to go, couldn't ask for anything better.' Harry wanted to smart at this. *Who ever wants to go?* But he held back – he knew Billy was just comforting himself – and was surprised with his own restraint. When he was young, he'd got himself in all sorts of trouble [because of his sharp tongue/ something like that]. Then he'd have to move from troupe to troupe, pushing people away, but unable to stop himself. Older folks swore he'd mellow with age, but he never believed them. Now, with Al's corpse laid out on the ground, Harry appreciates ageing.

Loretta looks up at him and mouths, *Are you okay?*

Not wanting to disturb Betty, who has slipped into some sort of trance, Harry lifts his eyebrows and grimaces.

Too many, he mouths back.

Under the grime, Loretta's face whitens.

The alley?

Harry nods. He'd gone with Billy to the edge of the wreck, listening to his whispered recount of the impact. It was like looking into a kaleidoscope; his brain couldn't take in how something like a train could be on its side. Billy's eyes had glazed over as Harry gawked. Soon after, Billy had taken him to the crates. Their props were undamaged, save for a wooden crate that had split down its side. Stuffed snakes and rubber rings had spilled out and been covered in the dirt of the carriage but they'd been remarkably unaffected. Harry felt the guilt of it in his chest; Al had been crushed and Harry's work was safe. No hours hunched over himself, mending with thoughts drifting around him. As he spoke, Billy had seemed almost meditative, the words coming out measured. It reminded Harry of an old clown he'd met when he was just starting the business; he said that laughter was opening a window for pain to be let out. He'd believed making crowds react was a healing. Harry wondered then if Billy eking out his memory of the accident was a healing for him, too.

Now Billy, who'd gone to talk to the Circus Director, paces his way back to Harry. He clears his throat. 'He wants to see you both.'

Harry frowns. Eddie would be busy assessing damage and calculating when they might be back on the rails. He didn't have time for two five-cent performers like them.

Loretta breaks Harry's thoughts. 'She can't be alone,' she says, still cradling Betty.

'I'll stay with her.' Billy responds. 'Director's by the front carriage.'

Once upon a time Eddie Ballard galloped horses. Now, he spends most days wrangling other people's acts. Harry almost smiles, thinking of stout Eddie pacing the Lot with his whistle, searching for a stray performer. So tense that folks would change their route so as not to be caught up in his menace.

'You ready?' Loretta asks and Harry is taken aback by her words. He hadn't thought through what this meeting was to be. Running Clown Alley, Harry had grown used to being invaluable to management. The clowns were the cheapest of the acts to maintain, not having animals to care for. He couldn't count the number of times they'd been rushed out onto stage to cover the refusal of Maurice to enter the ring. Unlike the clowns, you can't tell an elephant what to do. Maurice either wasn't aware of – or didn't care for – ideas like schedules or a wage.

Loretta must know uncomfortable news is coming.

Maybe in the face of losses from the wreck, Eddie has to make cuts? Maybe he'll run through plans for the future. When to meet, what to prepare. Surely, they'll survive like they always have. Take a season off and start the next one afresh? But before Harry has time to theorise further, Loretta pulls him in front of the Director. Eddie's brows are dark and the hairs sprawl in all directions, giving him a look of chaos despite his life being guided by his pocket watch.

'Thank you for coming over,' he begins. 'Have you been here long?'

Loretta shakes her head. Harry is bracing himself for what'll come next.

Eddie outtalks the rising dread. 'I'll say it quick: the wreck was bad. The men are counting the bodies but I don't think we can go on.'

'Go on?' Harry fumbles for meaning.

'We're folding?' Loretta asks and as Harry hears the rasp of her, he thinks of days before where a Lot in Indiana had been filled with people bustling for the beginning of the season. *So much life*, he thinks.

'Billy said you saw... Al. But men have been working all night getting the bodies ready to be taken to Chicago. You didn't see what it looked like. All the folks gone.' Eddie swallows, reminding himself to keep the conversation short. 'We can't go on. Even if we could get operate with less performers next season, it's not right for the families.'

Harry's mind cycles through who has been lost. *How many children?* he wonders. *How many families broken?* This is not the first wreck he's seen. He knows it's better not to ask. To wonder who is alive and performing – moving onto the next stage, next town – is more comfort than the certainty of death.

Eddie gives a firm shake in response. Harry detects his gratitude. That this meeting is over quickly and he can notify the next performer. Harry looks to Loretta, bewildered. As they walk away, back to Al and the others, he grips her hand.

‘Is that it, then? The Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus is done?’

‘At least for now.’ Harry reminds himself that she is green. Her mother had prepared her for marriage one day, housekeeping, hour after hour of scales on the piano. Not a circus life.

‘What about the others? How do we know who...?’ The shock thrumming in her leaves the sentence unfinished.

‘It’s best we don’t know.’

Loretta’s stops but he pulls her forward. ‘I know it sounds callous... but trust me, Etta. You don’t want to hear something you can’t unhear.’ Harry can’t look at her. Can’t bear to see the shake of her shoulders.

He pushes air out between his front teeth. ‘I shouldn’t have brought you into this. There’s time. We don’t have to marry.’

Loretta’s head snaps up. ‘I chose this for myself, long before I met you.’ She begins to whisper, ‘and I thought we wouldn’t talk about the not-yet-official marriage in public.’ She digs her elbow into his side as she enunciates ‘public’.

Harry flushes with a smile. He is not yet ready to face the complications of telling Frances and procuring a divorce. Instead, he enjoys the idea of their future together. Remembering what brought them to this conversation, Harry expression turns somber.

‘Let’s find Billy then go back to the traction car. There’s no use staying much longer. We can’t do anything for the others and their grief.’

‘Okay,’ Loretta says, stifling the thought of Betty and what she’ll do in the coming weeks with no one to support her.

The next day in a hotel room not far from Chicago, neck strained from hours upright in the traction car, Loretta wakes to Harry’s footsteps. He’s dressed, creased black brogues and sleek grey pants. Newspaper tucked under his left arm. Her hair has escaped last night’s pins; plumes of black curls stand on end. Their first morning together, Harry said he’d never seen anything like it. Now, she’s so much stiffer than she had then. She cannot understand how that was only two years ago.

‘You look well, ‘Etta,’ he says, not quite smiling.

She blinks, uncoherent.

‘Well,’ he clears his throat and she detects bitterness in his tone. ‘I suppose I do too, for a dead man.’

Harry pulls out the newspaper, bulky from his awkward refolding, and places it in Loretta’s hands. On the first page, in thick bold type she sees ‘ENGINEER WAS ASLEEP AT THROTTLE.’ Then, ‘Wrecked dead number 85 says Circus Manager – Only 12 Bodies are Identified.’

‘Is this?’ Foolish question. Her mind softened by sleep, the horror of the day before hasn’t come into full view.

‘Yes. Keep going,’ Harry says as he sits on the bed beside Loretta’s feet, ashine of tears in his eyes.

Loretta hunches over the paper, scanning the small type for their names. She finds a paragraph listing ‘The Dead’ beside another story that features picture of a soldier, war plane in the background. *How could they be so thoughtless to write on anything else?* When she sees the ‘La’ of ‘La Pearl’, she concentrates.

Mr. Harry La Pearl, dean of producing clowns, and his wife were among those who perished in the wreck.

She reads the sentence thrice over before a giggle escapes her. She cannot believe this sound has come out of her. The bed creaks in response.

‘I didn’t think you’d respond so well to us dying, love,’ Harry says, smirking.

‘I didn’t think dying would be so painless,’ she replies. The absurdity of their lives hits her all at once. Loretta tosses the paper on the floor, then scoops the sheet off and stretches. ‘And it’s hard to be stung by an article that doesn’t even mention me by name.’

‘Well, we did say you *are* my wife,’ Harry responds.

Loretta touches her toes to the hotel room floor, pointing them and feeling the pulling sensation.

After a pause, she speaks again: ‘I suppose you’ve already written to the paper for a correction.’

‘Yes, I thought it best our families don’t think we’ve perished.’ Harry places quotes around ‘perished’, his fingers twitching in the air. He sighs. ‘And – not that I’d know – but I imagine it’d be tough getting a new position as a dead man.’

Loretta shuffles over to him. Her beige nightdress tightens around her thighs.

‘Are you... okay, love?’

Last night, Harry had been silent. Washing in the sink and going to bed hours earlier than usual, refusing dinner.

‘Yes, yes, my dear. I’m fine.’ He pulls a weak smile.

She frowns at him.

‘Really. I am.’ Harry’s tone turns sharp and Loretta nods, thinking through the beats of his words and posture over the past day.

‘Have you... have you written to Frances?’

Harry sighs, anger dissolving with his exhalation. ‘Not yet.’

Loretta places her hand on his. 'She needs to know you're safe before she reads...' She let the sentence hang.

'Yes,' he says. Harry clears his throat, summoning enthusiasm. 'So, Etta. What do you say? Can we enjoy the noncommittal nature of being dead? It's a pleasure few are afforded, after all.'

She smiles, the letter he'll be writing Frances rolling through her mind. She forces a wide smile while looking into his eyes.

Harry reaches for her hand, his thumb massaging her palm. 'So, how about it? A day of ignorance?'

Loretta lets herself enjoy the warmth of his touch. 'Of course. Who am I to deny a dead man?'

Looking, Home and Body

‘The clown who has nibbled many rinds of failure, many dregs of grief, will possess the richest treasure troves of slag to transmute into golden laughter. The clown must be melancholy, which is another way of saying he must be sensitive.’

- Thomas W. Duncan (76)

I bow my legs, heels touching. Toes pointed outward. My knees bend as far as they will allow. My body is stiff and not used to movement yet the clothes allow me to forget this. I spring up, bouncing on my toes before balancing on one foot and kicking the other leg out, firm and high. I cannot believe I stumbled into this: a replica of Joseph Grimaldi’s clowning outfit hanging in the performance section of London’s Victoria & Albert museum. I hadn’t come here for research, but as a tourist who left her laptop – and work – on another continent. It’s a week before Christmas and I couldn’t have hoped for a better gift. I don’t need presents wrapped in shiny paper with a fat bow; this sustains me.

I’ve learnt that Grimaldi came much before Loretta. He was famous in the Regency era, yet they are connected in a way; both her and Harry inherited their clowning tradition from Grimaldi. Clowns follow in the tradition of their forbearers, inhabiting their own personas built on the work of the clowns who came before. Grimaldi’s followers name themselves as the ‘joey’s after his first name: ‘Joseph’ (Beverly Kelly 73). Joeys paint their features black on a white base, as in the tradition of Grimaldi and the French pantomime character of Pierrot before him. Yet, as Francis Beverly Kelly writes, ‘notice that no two clowns have their faces painted alike. That is because, once a Joey decorates his face according to an original design, he is conceded to have a sort of moral copyright on the make-up and no colleague copies it’ (73). Since the 1940s in England, there has been a copyright process of sorts (Nalewicki n.p.). Clowns have their faces painted on eggs – in the early days, chicken and then ceramic eggs – to register their distinct artistry (Nalewicki n.p.).

Clowns stick to tradition but create their own. John S Clarke writes in *Circus Parade* that a clown ‘approaches the clever rascal of Pantomime’ (56). But the joey tradition is just one clown persona. Joeys sit alongside the ‘Auguste’ performers, popularised by Tom Belling (Clarke 57). ‘Auguste’ is the clown that may be the most recognisable in contemporary culture; he wears baggy trousers and a reddened nose. He falls and sprawls before the crowd (Clarke 57). Clarke calls the Auguste clown ‘true circus,’ but it is not who Loretta was. Like me in this moment of play, she was a joey.

Grimaldi ‘was a household word; it was the short for fun, whim, trick and atrocity—that is, clown-atrocity, crimes that delight us’ (“On Grimaldi [1779-1837]” 80). This is what or,

who, Loretta inhabited. *Fun and trick*. Chaplin himself would go on to inspire the next generation and iteration of clowns: 'Charlies'. Clarke sees this iteration of clowns as working 'to travesty human nature without begetting the smile of cruelty' (57). In their own way, they act and appear like Chaplin did with 'billowing trousers, huge boots, bowler hat, little cane, tooth-brush moustache' (Clarke 57).

But despite the history of clown and comedy before Grimaldi, in the V&A, I feel as though I'm wearing clothes from when it all began. This was Loretta's version of clown and I catch myself looking at shorts that make my thighs appear as round as apples. I can feel the weight of them pulling down the thick elastic waistband. I run my hands over the fabric as I continue to hop and bounce and spring. The outfit itself, shorts and cropped jacket, is white and covered in yellow, red and silver stars and dots. The shoulders of the jacket have padded strips and I feel the power of them as soon as I slip into the costume. I am broad, strong in these new clothes. I continue to stretch and move in long quick paces around the empty gallery room, cabinets of ornate costumes and gowns behind me. I turn dramatically, away from the cabinets and towards the mirror. I bow, for I am him. Grimaldi.

A passing thought: perhaps, now, I am her.

Despite my stretches and darting poses, I am not as tired as I usually would be. Health issues have made me slower, quicker to tire in recent years but the buzz of excitement lives in me. I cajole my partner, Mathew, to try on the costume. I say it is to allow me to see it better on another frame but I'm not sure that this is true. I want to see if it awakens his movements. If he, too, moves his body in ways it has not bent. To luxuriate in the complexity of movements even if untrained and clumsy; a feeling that has not lived in me for years. In one way, it is a return to childhood but with so many years since passed, it is powerful and new.

Mathew slips the shorts over his black jeans, fleece lined for winter. Grimaldi's jacket fits perfectly over his black button up. Somehow, he looks more complete than I did. Perhaps because this was made for a taller, leaner person. Or maybe the all-black outfit he wears underneath allows the red and yellow trim to jump out; my rainbow knit with woven glitter flecks had been competing for centre stage. Mathew's black leather boots fit much more with Grimaldi's image than my padded sneakers had. They are not too dissimilar from the boots I see later in the exhibit; ones made a size too big and with square toes. I imagine them on Mathew. I smile; they'd look like duck feet.

In the costume, Mathew straightens himself immediately. He is by a mirror that reaches up to the ceiling and he watches himself as he moves his shoulders back. Filling out his chest. Mathew's toes are pointed outward, much like my own had instinctively done but his movements are different to mine. He begins to twist his arms, pushing away air in bending movements. He moves away from the mirror quickly, hands on hips and in large steps, draws circles around the

room. His movements are quicker than mine had been – fast little steps then long lunges. His instinctual routine is more ornate and without the stretches that I had breathed into and held. Watching him, I snap photos discreetly as he darts. But unlike me, he does not wish to inhabit a clown's movements for minutes upon minutes. He strips off the jacket and shorts quickly. He is assured, less consumed by the world of circus. He returns to the corner of the room, ready to layer on the ordinary pile of coats, scarves, hats and gloves that await us.

Later in the day, as we sit in a red bus and travel away from the gallery and back to the hotel room that is central but spare and cold, I think about how our bodies took to Grimaldi's costume. I think about how Mathew and I have always been considered similar. Unusually so, our friends have told us. We laugh at the same jokes, talk about chess a little too enthusiastically and show anyone who possesses even the slightest interest photos of our greyhound cross. Even our birthday falls on the same date, two years apart. But despite this aspect of similarity, how we embodied this costume and our movements within it were wholly different. While we both felt that wearing it spurred us to move – dancing around the gallery room in a freedom that is especially rare to me – the clothes possessed us to act in a way that was deeply personal. There was a physicality that goes beyond personality and into something deeper. Perhaps it's an expression of self in a way that is not changed – filtered – by words.



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It's in the weeks after wearing Grimaldi that I find myself surprised by the power of unfiltered movement. I begin to think of the history of my body; how it has shaped me and I it. I think in some way, I have always lived in my head. Artificially separating mind and body has meant that my relationship with my body has always been somewhat fraught and self-conscious. As a child, I was taller than the other kids. Breasts and hips came quickly and I endeavoured to hide them alongside the round of my belly. I would wear rash vests and loose t-shirts swimming while my friends

danced and flipped into the water in bikinis with thin strappy ties. In my loose clothes, I learnt that I wasn't gifted the invisibility I so craved; it just attracted more attention. Looking back on the few photos I allowed to be taken, I feel a deep pull of empathy and pain for this shy kid with a body they could not like, let alone love.

In my teenage years, my relationship with my body was different but no more kind. I felt the uneasy power of no longer being able to move through a space unnoticed without handbags knocking into my face as I shrunk behind my parents; now, I had grown tall and developed hips and thighs and boobs. I still hoped to shrink but in a different way; I spent years upon years of dieting. My version of a diet was eating as little as I could while being able to thrive in the classroom. On weekends, I would allow myself a treat: I would drink heavily with my friends. Mum would try to speak to me, worried. But I saw it as my only lapse. I tried to believe it was natural, this fulfilling of desires: to get great grades, lose weight and drink. At eighteen, I stopped drinking alcohol entirely but the other two desires followed me throughout university, holding on. They had taken residence underneath my skin.

It took time, but I decided to no longer fight myself and to ease away from diet culture. I began to eat for pleasure and nutrition without thinking about how it would affect my weight. In my body, I'd found a new comfort in allowing it to just be without trying to shape or mold it into something else. It was a year or two of living without forcing exacting standards on myself before a chronic illness came and forever changed my relationship with my body. The illness meant I often could no longer recognise my own limbs and, at times, had to walk with an aid. Becoming ill meant living with pain and discomfort as well as an immense hate for a past self, one who could not appreciate what a well body can do and what a joy that is to inhabit. Once again, the pull of what a body should be enticed me and I've spent years picking this apart in a therapist's office. I find myself now enjoying my body for what it is; I appreciate it for housing me. I no longer think of myself as a mind encased in something I cannot control. My body is my mind is my body. It's all me and I am happy for it, even if I cannot understand other people's experience of physicality. Of movement.

Years and years – a life – of changing how I think of my body and how I inhabit it meant that I thought I knew it completely. How quickly that changed slipping into a clowning costume that felt like another skin. I didn't know I had that sense of movement within me. I was caught off guard by my own playfulness. It was unfamiliar, an artefact from childhood perhaps but even then, I did not create and inhabit my own worlds in the same ways the other children did. I shied away from fantasy novels and chose heavy tomes on dog breeding and care. At eleven, I read Stephen Fry's biography and pondered in an abstract way his cocaine habit and the life of a single gay man

in 90s'-era London. I wanted to inhabit worlds that were not my own but where I could be assured they were 'true'.

This world of fantasy and performance – Loretta's world – is one that I have read about in circus history books but never fully grasped the joy of until now. To be in costume is to inhabit another body that you know intimately. It is to be another, but to love yourself as you perform. To love what your body can achieve and to be free of shame. I wonder if Loretta had felt that painting her face and putting on billowing costumes allowed her to overcome her own shame and fear? Or was she so unlike me that these were not her concerns? I wonder if Loretta's fears were more immediate. Her body was her income and so did it become a tool of all she was – pleasure and pain and survival – rather than like mine, a casing? I can't envision that she felt uncomfortable in or trapped by her own movements. To my eyes, she was fearless. It has become important that this is true.

I look again at a photo I've kept of her sitting beside Harry. It's a small image from a newspaper clipping. The background is all bricks and Loretta is on a high bench, Harry teetering on its edge. Loretta is wearing a black dress with three large buttons running up her left shoulder. Her skirt is spread neatly and her dark hair is tucked up into a hat with a flower on its side. She is turned away from the camera, looking at Harry with a half-smile. Harry is in his clowning outfit: wide legged white pants stiff with bleach and a shirt with an oversized collar over his white-lapelled black blazer. Everything about him is exaggerated, from dark thick-brimmed hat to the paint on his face which thickens his brows, runs down the bridge of his nose and turns his smile into a curve that twists up to the centre of his face. Harry has one finger by his lips teasingly, the other hand grips Loretta's. Looking at how they sit, I think it would be easy to think of him as confident and teasing. Her, as diffident. But I don't believe it. I return to the photo often, running my eyes over each detail. Loretta has crossed her ankles, swinging down off the bench. Her shoulders are back and she sits straight but looks comfortable. Her hand rests lightly in Harry's palm while he grips on to her fingers. She seems more at ease than him despite what the caption beneath them suggests – HARRY LA PEARL INTRODUCES MRS. LA PEARL. He is very much performing. He inhabits another body while she watches him, her expression unclear. I think that perhaps it's one of love or maybe a hint of wide-eyed scepticism. Harry is much easier to read than her but he is within his character. His spread legs make him seem bigger. He appears as *more* but Loretta is herself. I find that her motivations are harder to parse than a clown whose sole wish is to make the audience laugh. Of course, that makes sense. She is a person with flaws and habits and kindness and neuroses. A clown is not. A clown is duality: comedy and tragedy. It's easier to understand what they are while Loretta remains inscrutable. I feel as though the more I reach for

what she was – what she could have been – the more I’m pushing myself away from who she truly was.

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Thomas W. Duncan writes that ‘clowning in pantomime is very nearly pure art. Its target is ... [toward] the audience’s vitals. At their emotions, the heartland of art’ (76). I’m caught by this idea of art and purity, particularly in understanding the relationship between performer and audience. As a writer, I must admit I’m sceptical of this ‘pureness’. I even bristle, slightly, reading Duncan’s words. I wonder if he means purity in that clowning and pantomime uses movement to make an audience feel – targeting their ‘vitals’, as Duncan puts it. But I cannot think of art that does not wish to make a viewer feel. From gallery walls to decaying pages, it’s all to elicit emotion. I wonder if the purity Duncan is getting at is in form. As I felt when wearing a replica of Grimaldi’s costume, there was no thought between myself and my movement. I was exploring; I was having fun. But this is not what clowns and working circus folks do. They practice and perfect. When they are not performing, they may be working on a new routine. Clowning may have the appearance of being haphazard, but the hits and falls that Loretta enacted were not real. They were practiced and skilled. Clowning in pantomime, as Duncan addresses, would perhaps be more tightly rehearsed than the changing elements of the Big Top. After all, a lion who does not wish to listen to the ‘animal man’ and enter the ring may extend the clown’s performance by minutes.

My discomfort at the term purity – it is, after all, a term I think we cannot reach and should not endeavour to even if I am a person whose therapist believes has ‘perfectionist tendencies’ – makes me consider my own work. Writing means time and quiet and going over sentences again and again until you no longer believe what you have written is any good. Or even makes sense. Then, I think, it’s ready for a reader because my eyes can no longer consume it. But this is very much not what I imagine Duncan means as purity. I see his idea of purity as unmediated interaction between performer and audience. A skilled performer absorbs the audience’s attention until the performer and audience feel as one. A writer is more distant. We imagine our reader but do not see them; we may hear from them later but mostly, we are wholly separated by the page. Maybe it is because I live with this separation that wearing Grimaldi’s performing clothes so affected me.

When I write, I forget my body. Or perhaps, it is that I am entirely connected with my body. Writing, I am all eyes focussing on the screen. My voice comes out through my fingers but I do not notice them. It’s detached yet, it is where I am most connected to myself. Feminist writer Hélène Cixous talks of her own connection between creative practice and the body: ‘Personally when I write I write with my body. My body is active, there is no interruption between the work that my

body is actually performing and what is going to happen on the page. I write very near my body and my pulsions ... there are texts that are made of flesh' (27). Writing is embodied, I think; when I write, I do not have a body. I am body.

Loretta's performance is unlike my own. Her body is much more active; it allows her art to grow. But I wonder if she forgets herself, like I do in front of the computer, and an hour passes by without notice? I wonder if she feels the experience of when your body knows what it is doing so intimately that you do not quite realise it is performing. I think of the years where I was bone-tired and driving north of Adelaide to work each afternoon. I would often arrive, swinging into the carpark that was always empty. My body had taken me there. My mind was absent and I could not remember the journey. The same began to happen when I gave the lessons I had given the previous year or two. My body tapped into the performance and my mind rested as I spoke the same words that I had before. For that half hour drive or as I spoke, it felt like I was acting. All body. I fell into the rhythm of performance and my mind was able to take a back seat.

Elizabeth Hess discusses in *Acting and Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance* the physicality of an actor's performance and how it affects their selfhood. She writes that:

This search for an immediate yet resonant truth plunges one into the unknown, where aliveness comes from an embodied experience of being, moment by moment. This "beingness" can be both exhilarating and terrifying as it calls forth complex inner vibrations and responds with compelling outer resonance. (Hess 1)

Loretta's performances occupied a "beingness". She played The General at the John Robinson circus with the other Joeys. She lived as a man who is foolish; he could not play the clarinet and was surrounded by others who are unskilled much like he was. I wonder if this 'embodied experience of being' in performance opened up aspects of her own selfhood. Did she think of the piano and what it meant for her to play it well when she blew too hard against the splintering clarinet reed? What thoughts of selfhood flickered through her mind?

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Hess continues her mediation on inhabiting another persona as an actor, remembering reading Sylvia Plath's poem, *Two Sisters of Persephone*. The poem:

speaks of two girls, one of whom sits indoors, the other outside. All day long shade and light play between them like a duet. I had the sense that I was like the sister who sat without and wanted to venture within, so as to have an experience of both light and dark; to plumb the depths and bring their contents forth and thereby play both parts of that duet in an empathetic and inhabited way. (2)

I see Loretta, like Hess did with herself, as inhabiting both parts of this duet. Light and dark. She is caught being on two sides of a binary: woman and man; wife and clown; and when clowning, comedy and tragedy. Simply, maybe it's the light and dark of Loretta and the General that captures me.

Seeing Loretta in this way – this duality – I think of my own brushes with performance. I have read my work in front of a crowd, seeing glasses of wine half empty on small tables and faces settling and then reacting to my words. The nature of writing means that it does not stay entirely on the page but can morph into performance. Increasingly, I find the distinction of life and performance unclear. When I read memoir describing my experience of illness to a crowd, the

words feel abstract. This is what Carolyn Ellis calls when ‘life becomes performance and performance becomes life’ (161). Speaking the words I have written, it as though they no longer apply to me. As if it is no longer a description of my life, but a story I am telling. I imagine Loretta feeling this way, too. Perhaps her act became removed from emotion. No longer a part of her. Repeated over and over, were the jokes no longer funny? Did the fake slaps no longer resemble the violence they were posing as?

Thinking of Loretta’s performance against my own, I consider whether her body was a site of autobiography. Beatrice Allegranti writes in *Embodied Performances: Sexuality, Gender, Bodies* that the ‘excavation and re-visioning of the autobiographical process can unfold through the body as well as verbally’ (17). Memoir does not need to be spoken, but as Allegranti argues, embodied. Jennifer Coates writes that ‘through story telling we create and re-create our identities and experiment with possible selves, in a context of mutuality and trust’ (115). I imagine Loretta forging her identity through performance as I do when I write. Each act, each tent, she constructs herself through her own movement. Allegranti interprets biologist Fausto-Sterling’s work on self-construction, writing that ‘as we grow and develop, we literally, not just “discursively” (that is, through language and cultural practices), construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh (24). Our experiences – and within this, for artists, our performances – construct and shape our very flesh.

But when Loretta performs she is not alone like I am at my desk. She creates alongside and as a part of her troupe. Her audience sits before her. Allegranti relates the audience witnessing performance, whether circus or otherwise, to the study of the Macaque monkeys’ mirror neurons. The study showed that upon seeing the movement of another, the Macaque’s motor neurons fired in the same way as if they had performed that movement themselves (30). Allegranti writes that for humans, ‘we have the propensity for feeling what the other person is feeling’ (31). This ability to feel for another, to witness their movements and biologically process them as our own has interesting connotations for the relationship between performer and audience.

For the audience, watching someone’s movement on a stage is embodied. Two years ago, I went to the cinema with a friend to watch the remake of the supernatural horror movie, *Suspiria*. Sitting in that dark room, I watched Susie as played by Dakota Johnson jumping, spurred on by Madame Blanc (Tilda Swinton). Blanc yelled ‘higher, higher’ as Susie perspired and pushed her body up. The sound of her socked feet hitting the floorboards pulsed and my body tensed. Nausea gripped my throat and instinctually I wanted to grab at my own ankles to protect them from the impact of the floor that was not beneath them, but on the screen. I felt as though I was Susie; I feared for her safety as if her ankles were my own. Even while knowing that I cannot perform as she does, I felt it was my body jumping. My neurons were firing; I inhabited Susie’s movements.

I wonder if I could have had this same sense of witness with Loretta as I did with Susie. If I had been able to view Loretta's performance, perhaps I could have experienced that empathy. If I travelled back sixty-seven years before I was born to 1926 and across the word to the John Robinson lot, I wonder if my neurons would have mirrored hers. Would this have been my opportunity to experience her movement? For my body to join hers?

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Loretta performed the same act in the same tent in a different town each night. I start to wonder how this would have affected how she thought of home. Was home not a place but a performance? I wonder whether, as a performer, she felt safer on stage than in her physical home. Did Loretta hold this sense of home in her body or was it in Harry's presence that she felt grounded?

I find Lucia Zora – one of the first women animal trainers – and wonder what her work could mean for me in understanding Loretta. Zora writes in the 1928 memoir of her life, *Sawdust and Solitude*, of what home is like when you live and travel with the circus:

everybody in the circus business should have a little home, ready for them to go into at any time. A person never knows, in the show game, when you are going to have to say good-by to it. Maybe it'll be a wreck in the night or a smash-up on the hippodrome track, or a blown-down that'll fix you so you've got to quit trouping. That's when you'll appreciate a home that's been paid for and is waiting for you when the crowds don't want you any longer. (19)

This impermanence is striking enough without considering how often it implies accidents would occur. Fires were not unheard of – one technique of waterproofing tents was to brush a mixture of gasoline and paraffin wax on the canvas. Having somewhere to go in case of disaster was a gift, if you could afford it. I think of Loretta and Harry's house in Huntington, West Virginia in 1924. Harry had tried to break into advertising in the railway boom. Their home is now a small Indian restaurant nestled in a large carpark of cracked bitumen. But this is the closest I can ever be. It is the only house of theirs whose address I know. Harry lived on a chicken farm for a year or two in New York State but this was before their marriage. They lived in Indianapolis for a time during the off season, but I do not for know how long nor exactly where. It is hard for me to track them as they moved much more often than the US census that was held every ten years. The mechanics of their lives are another barrier to my understanding Loretta. It seems their movements were too complex and ever changing for me to keep up.

Zora documents her own schedule: performing March to November and within that, rarely spending more than twenty-four hours in a place. 'The usual procedure for a circus is to arrive at dawn, unload, hurry to the circus grounds, and begin its feverish preparations so that by one o'clock

it may be ready to receive the crowds thronging to witness the matinée performance' (17). Even while the performers are moving before the crowds in the night show, the cookhouse where they ate an hour before is being packed away to be taken to the next place (18). It's this constant motion that intrigues me. How does this change a person? Always pushing pushing pushing. To the next town, for another performance. I can only imagine it was the thrill that kept pushing them forward, even as their bodies were weary. Perhaps, less excitingly but painfully familiar, it was the promise of an income that pushed them onwards.

Loretta spent much of her life in this pattern of transit. I know she wished to be with Harry and another income would have been welcomed while not vital, but I wonder too if travel gave her power. Loretta toured America in a way non-circus women were not able to. Especially women who like Loretta were not wealthy. She lived in California, New York, Ohio, Indianapolis and West Virginia. I've found traces of her in Oregon and imagine she's travelled the length of both coasts. I think of myself and the hunger to move over the past few years. I've lived on little so I have been able to look for Loretta in America. I've gone to Budapest for Christmas then flown to Greece and watched the New Year's Eve fireworks atop a rock by the Parthenon. Inhabiting a place fills my mind with new images, temporarily stripping me of anxiety and thoughts of my illness. My favourite moment is driving away from the airport, watching and absorbing the new place as it flicks by. No matter how many hours I've spent on a plane, this wakes me and I am able to escape thought. I just ingest what is around me. Could this be a small part of what she felt too? This hunger to look at something new; to see the next town.

I wonder if, despite the joy she may have gleaned, Loretta felt the hardships of moving for much of the year. Physically, they must have weighed on her. Let alone the emotional impact of not possessing a space that is entirely your own. Perhaps this is why, with Harry, she constructed a small trailer to tour the country with. In a 1937 article for *New York American* titled "Living Problem Is Duck Soup for Them," the unnamed journalist writes of their visiting: 'Mrs. Harry LaPearl [sic], the only woman circus clown in the country, was revealed yesterday as being Manhattan's only known trailer resident'. The article continues: 'the idea of living in a trailer came to the LaPearls out on their farm near Indianapolis. They used to see so many trailers trailing past their front yard they got the idea themselves and have traveled that way exclusively for the past two years'. For their season in New York with the Cole Brothers-Clyde Beatty shows, Loretta and Harry lived in a parking lot. '250 W. 41st st., just east of Eighth ave'. I look up the address on Google Maps. It's 320 metres from Times Square, next door to a three-star hotel with rooms for \$248 a night. Googling this is a useless exercise except to note the inflation of Manhattan real estate over the past eighty years; I learn nothing more about who she was or how she lived.

Unsatisfied, I return to the *New York American* article. Above the text is one of the few pictures I have of Loretta without complete clowning makeup and dress. It is the only photo of her where she is open mouthed and laughing. It shows her and Harry seated at the small table, a stack of shining apples behind them. There are patterned curtains, a dish towel hanging from a rail to Loretta's left. I note the little details of home but I'm not sure what to do with them. I look to Harry; he's in a striped long-sleeve shirt, face painted on thick but unfinished. He no longer has his hair and I wonder if this is when he is ill with cancer but still performing. Harry holds a bowl to his face, his mouth wide to receive it greedily. His eyes are small and dark compared to the starkness of his flat pale face. Loretta, seated across from him, has much more detail for me to look over. Her hair is pushed back and smooth curls sit close to her scalp. Her shirt looks as though it glitters through the black and white newspaper image. Over it, she wears a plain apron. This surprises me although it shouldn't. I find myself without thought ascribing my own desires on to Loretta. *Even if I missed a sense of permanency, I think, if I were her, I would not cook as I travelled. For then comes the preparation and cleaning. I would eat at the cookhouse instead.* Looking over her apron, I do not consider whether Cole Brothers-Clyde Beatty in New York City would have had a cookhouse. Rather, I am taken up by my own narrative where I am surprised she cooks. I once again find myself realising that I am not her and I do not understand who she was, try and research as I might.

I'm so preoccupied with her being different to what I imagined that it takes another parse of the article to see that her name does not appear. She is 'Mrs La Pearl'. She is referred to as 'his wife' more than once – not Harry's wife but *his*. She is never called Loretta. I wonder if this is how women are forgotten, even as they are being written about. She is the 'only woman circus clown in the country' but she is not herself. Harry, too, is not Harry but is instead called 'the clown' and 'Mr La Pearl'. His titles have more authority and while this could be dismissed as formality of the era, Harry is not once referred to as a part of Loretta. Harry is not a husband but 'the clown', even when the article speaks of Loretta's performing abilities. As Simone De Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, a man is 'first a citizen, a producer, secondly a husband' while a woman is 'before all, and often exclusively, a wife' (2010).

In the newspaper article, gender cracks between the lines like a fire eating wood. The writer seems to make a point to speak of Loretta as a woman more often than a clown. She is 'an ace-high cook, and darns socks like a farmer's wife'. Assuring his audience that this clown wife can also perform in the home. When Loretta speaks of clowning, she is quoted as saying: 'I like it. Of course, I rebelled at first. No woman likes to hide her face under grease paint. But it's a great life and it keeps me close to my husband'. Can her performance as a clown be separated from her performance of her gender? Judith Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*: 'If gender is a kind of doing,

an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary' (1). Loretta – like us all – performs gender. This is how she moves in the world, but also what she tells the *New York American*; Loretta cooks and darns and wants her face to be seen. Of clowning, it is only said that she likes it. A way to be close to her husband. By the time the article was printed, Loretta had been performing nearly 20 years. As always with Loretta, I crave to know more. What if I could see beneath what was written and understand what was true? I'm frustrated too that her words are mediated by men. I find myself wondering if she, like the writer, saw herself as more woman than clown when the article was printed. Did she want to be called by her name or was she pleased that the article's first sentence was about her? Was that progress enough?

The more I think of Loretta's home, the more I realise that it's not just her residence I'm looking for. It's the way she inhabits her body, yes, but maybe most of all how she inhabits gender. She is a woman performing as a clown who, underneath, is supposed to be a man. Her audience would have assumed her to be a man, without question. Yet from the few quotes I have of her, she also actively performs her own and the era's conception of being a woman. When I met her grandniece Bobbi, she told me that Loretta was a woman before a clown and I had been so surprised at her words. How could Loretta want that, I think. It takes days to understand I am not asking her, but myself. She cannot answer me. I am left with myself and the words form in my mind: why would Loretta want to be a woman first when being a woman can be so painful? A clown is hurt but never injured. This is not true for women.

Throughout her work, Butler explores how gender can injure. Though a 'performance', 'gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure' (531). I wonder how Loretta could have loved this part of herself when I find it so challenging. Perhaps, like Butler says, Loretta experienced pleasure in this performance. That inhabitation might have given her joy, where I feel it pinch. It brings anxiety within me.

When it comes to Loretta, I keep circling back to myself – over and over until I am bored. She is a mirror into myself for she was everything I am not. Adriana Cavarero touches on this idea in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. She writes of Ulysses who 'does not seem to know who he is, until he meets up with himself through the tale of his story' (17). Cavarero recounts Ulysses, incognito, sitting in the court of the Phaeacians when he hears a man singing tales of the Trojan war. He weeps at hearing his story recounted; Hannah Arendt says 'he has never wept before and certainly not when what he is now hearing actually happened. Only when he hears the story does he become fully aware of its significance' (Cavarero 17). Arranging a story into a

narrative forces us to interpret events in our lives. Jia Tolentino interprets Cavarero in *Trick Mirror*, writing that identity is ‘not something that we innately possess and reveal, but something we understand through narratives provided to us by others’ (124-125). I am able to place myself through writing Loretta as my opposing force. It is her narrative, rather than my own being told. Yet, her story makes me think through who I am.

When I am shaping her narrative, I imagine Loretta as physically strong; she was brave; she was a performer; and she happily inhabited her identity as a woman. When I think of myself, I see illness. I see difficulties, how I fail to be good like I might hope. Unlike Loretta, I do not think of gender when I see myself. I am seen in this way, but it is removed from my own perception. Seeing myself as different to her in these ways, I realise the conflicting poles of our identities are tangled. (This is complicated by the reality that her identity is one that I project through surviving archival material). I crave the simplicity, the comfort of learning that she was like me. I feel that if she were the same, I would not be caught up in self-examination. I would be able to escape all this questioning.

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John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing* of the gendered nature of looking:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. While she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

Berger’s words awaken a memory: as a curious preteen, I shuffled Nietzsche off my parents’ shelf and started to flick through the pages. The quote – probably bastardised by memory and my child brain, and subsequently unGoogleable – said that women read only to be seen as reading by men. I cannot say if this is what he said (the closest I’ll find is ‘Women are considered deep – why? Because one can never discover any bottom to them. Women are not even shallow’). But as a child I read this idea and paused. I looked back on myself reading until then, wondering if it were designed to impress rather than as something I enjoyed. I

thought deeply over it, convinced it must be true if this is what a man wrote in a book with a black cover that was stamped with the Penguin logo. As minutes passed, I realised that *no. This is not right*. I was not yet a woman – I wonder what Nietzsche’s view of girls were; I think I shall never check – but this is my first memory of realizing people look at women intently. Even cradled in the intimacy of a book, women are objects to be admired. If they know this and act accordingly, they are vain. If they are unaware and act in a way that don’t please the dominant narratives of their time, they are monstrous.

It is beyond tiring to not only be seen but to watch yourself. I begin to think that, actually, it is trauma. A cumulative one that wears women down to smaller, more self-conscious versions of themselves. I live with an illness where I experience depersonalisation – a state where I intermittently see myself as other – and the act of self-surveillance is similar to this in a peculiar way. Depersonalisation can be and is often brought on by trauma. It protects, in its own fashion. Removing yourself from the body so that what is in front of you seems abstract. Often, people’s only experience of depersonalisation is trauma-induced, as in a car accident. This is how people most often see outside of themselves. A chronic experience of depersonalisation – like mine – is far less common.

Within depersonalisation, I step back and my hands are not my hands and I am no one. This, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* says is mental illness. But to survey yourself is to position your body to be at its most attractive; to survey and find your laugh perfectly placed and genial; to be hyper aware of your own movements, that instead is framed to be a woman.

Thinking of how I monitor myself as I move through space, I cannot help but relate it back to Loretta. As a white woman in early twentieth Century America, her movements were watched for respectability. The circus was often conservative – a backlash in response to the perceptions and prejudices of ‘towners’. And so, I think of how Loretta inhabited a world of abstract self-surveillance. To be aware of her body was very much part of her work. Loretta needed to know how to fall so that her back was arched; so, when a slap came to her, she could jerk her head away in feigned (not real) injury. I think of her navigating awareness of her own limbs in two spheres: as a clown, who underneath is a man, and herself. How did the two differ? She would have been watched as she moved through the world; a working woman, always teetering on the edge of poverty. I wonder: was there freedom for her in being a man clown on the stage? Eyes were on her in this space, too, but at least there’s a protection in this. In my vision of her, she is being watched for what she could do, not surveilled for who she is.

I think of sociologist Erving Goffman who considers the theatrical nature of how people socialise in *The Presentation of Self to Everyday Life*. He writes: ‘all the world is not, of course, a stage but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify’ (11). Often, a persona is inhabited whether consciously or otherwise, and with this comes the ‘lively belief that an unseen audience is present’ (50). This is especially true for people whose identities are politicised and hyperpoliced. I wonder about the intersections of self-watching, identity and performance. For performers, is this monitoring seen as work?

I’ve thought of Loretta for months, years. I’ve researched her; read theory of what it is to look and be looked at. It feels as though I’m living off the traces she has left behind. I feast on crumbs and when I grow hungry, I see her by looking at myself. She is no longer here but she performs in my imagining of her. I am always looking, and I wonder if this does her a disservice. Is my gaze carrying on her memory or obscuring it? To an extent, the questioning questioning questioning of myself and my motivations is irrelevant. I cannot stop; I cannot pull my vision away.

All the world is not a stage, but Loretta lives on a stage inside me. Try as I might to strip back the performance, her embodiment of the clown – of gender in early twentieth Century America – is what I know most intimately of her. I cannot take away the stage that is left of her. I find myself, almost resigned, allowing it to be. All I have left is to enjoy the performance.

Chapter Three

Oregon, 1925

‘There’s the Joeys.’ Harry is eager.

Loretta had seen the Joeys play before; guffaws had erupted from her chest as the ‘band’ played. Watching them, her years at the Conservatory felt so far away. Form was so important then, but this band plays their instruments sloppily and with contorted faces. Joy comes first, music last. At that first performance, Loretta thought that despite their differences, both the Conservatory and the circus specialized in making movement look effortless. Natural.

Harry charges towards the group of clowns, pulling at Loretta’s hand as they approach. Loretta’s wedding ring rubs against her finger and his insistent tugs make her wince. She tries to keep up with him, her lace up boots sinking in the fresh earth.

‘Boys, this is Loretta. Loretta, this is the troupe you’ll be joining. They play twice a day. Remember, keep it inconsistent.’ He raises an eyebrow.

Loretta slowly makes eye contact with each man in the group. There’s an older man among the faces; he’s maybe in his late fifties with brown skin and a thin frame. His clown makeup has settled into his wrinkles, the white paint making him look older. The rest of the men are much younger. Boys really. Loretta looks at the youngest of the group. He can’t be older than twelve. His thin frame makes his rounded costume seem cheap and loose. They look like a sorry lot, but she’s seen them perform. On stage, they come alive.

Watching them on stage the season before, Loretta had felt the ache in her chest disappear. She’d been carrying it since their marriage the two years before. She’d stayed at their small home in Indianapolis while Harry toured. The days felt heavy without him. No family. Working over the years – as statue, as pianist in the parade – she’d grown used to the constant hum of the Lot. Once she was married, she was on her own for the first time. The days were painfully noiseless.

A boy coughs and she comes back to them. ‘Lovely to meet you all.’ She resists her urge to shake their hands. Unlike the suburbs, the circus isn’t the place for unnecessary courtesies. Harry had reminded her on their way to the grounds.

‘Alright, I’m going to make sure the equipment is up to scratch. Roland, can you get Loretta settled in our tent?’

The old man nods at Harry and moves towards Loretta. He walks past her quickly, a quick smile passing his lips in hello. She follows.

‘How long have you been with Harry?’ she asks, trying for conversation.

He's a few steps in front of her and she pushes herself forward to keep from falling behind.

'A while now.'

She waits for more, but he doesn't continue. They arrive at the carriage, he takes her bag.

'You don't have much here. How long are you going to be with us?' His voice is gravelly but maybe underneath, there is a hint of gentleness.

'Didn't Harry tell you? I'm here until Winter. Just like everyone else.'

Roland pulls her bag out of the baggage compartment. He nods at her. 'Very well, this way.'

As they walk through the grounds, Loretta is caught by the laugh of the zebras. She looks over and sees them speaking to one another. Snouts side by side, smiling and looped with rope. Two young boys – they can't be more than ten – are struggling to yank the muscled animals apart. Memories flood back to her.

'Ma'am?' Roland is metres ahead of her now, standing outside a yellowing canvas tent. She can see the spray of mud from the carriage plastered across her luggage. The brown leather had been a wedding present from her mother. The night before the wedding, she'd presented it to Loretta nervously. It was their first time speaking in years. 'It was mine before I met your father,' her mother had said while looking at the floor. Loretta had sent a letter weeks later, but her mother hadn't replied.

Loretta nods back at Roland and increases her stride to the tent. She'd fallen behind. At the tent opening, Roland places her bag down. She thanks him as he turns, pacing back across the Lot to return to the troupe.

Loretta takes a moment before stepping inside. She ducks her head, but she needn't have. She looks around, thumbing the thick canvas walls as she paces the perimeter. The canvas is rough and casts a yellow glow as light streams in. It isn't big – she walks across it in five steps to her cot. The bare mattress is stained grey but she ignores it, removing her boots. As she loosens the laces, she smells the sweat and rain of the day. *I'll be okay. This is the right thing.* She knows clowning is not like her previous work, but she can't help but relax at the return to familiar surroundings. Harry's cot is on the other side of the room and from where she stands, looks darker than hers. She lies down – not caring to dress it in the sheet she had packed – staring at the ceiling that isn't a ceiling. She listens to the shouts of the performers and the yelps of the dogs coming from outside. Loretta closes her eyes, smiling at the noise.

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'Harry, what do you think?'

Loretta stands before him the next day. Her baggy white cotton trousers and olive green military jacket, complete with golden tasseled shoulders, cover her small frame. The makeup, a painted-on smile, hides the roundness of her face.

‘Harry?’

‘Well,’ he replies, ‘you look like the General.’

She is happy, feet twisting rings into the dirt. She had watched a young man clumsily play the character the year before. ‘I suppose I do.’

‘You’re ready for rehearsal then.’ He holds his hand out to her and she takes it, not gently like Loretta would but with a rough slap. *I am the General now*, she thinks but she’s not sure she fully believes it. Her hand twitches and she rubs it against the soft cotton of her pants.

She follows Harry out of their tent to the main stage. The Joeys have it every morning for an hour. She looks across the field, grass already punctured with winding lines from the wagons and deep tracks from Big Charley, the old elephant that too often pushed aside trainers with his trunk. Harry had told her since Charley had sprained a young acrobat’s arm, the circus had doubled their supply of poison. ‘I’m not sure how much longer Big Charley will keep it together,’ he’d said as they watched two young men load three enormous pills onto the wagon. Roland was beside them but didn’t speak; he was the only clown who would volunteer to feed and care for the animals. Including Charley.

The heat of tent air hits Loretta’s face. It smells of sweat and chalk. The men are shouting and screeching. They punch and fall and throw themselves back onto their feet. The air becomes foggy with the ferocity of their movements. This is the scene after the band plays. Harry had described to her how it descends into chaos and violence. ‘Without a few punches,’ he’d said, ‘the crowd wants their money back’.

The clowns have already been practicing for an hour. She can tell from the way their faces shine with sweat. White paint drips down their necks.

‘This is what you need to learn,’ Harry says. She hadn’t noticed him, caught up in the tumbles and turns of others.

‘To yell?’ she says.

‘To fall.’ Harry steps in front of her, a big grin spreading across his face. Without another word, he drops and lands on the ground with force. Dust bursts into the air under his back. His tongue lolls out the side of his mouth.

‘Very funny,’ Loretta says, her boot gently kicking his calf. The troupe continues practicing like nothing had happened. Out of the side of her eye she thinks she catches Roland looking out, but when she glances up, he’s tumbling across the stage away from a boy holding fistfuls of rubber snakes.

‘How’d you do it?’

Harry gets up as quickly as he fell down. His smile is back now and his arms stretch out in a flourish. Loretta claps slowly and as she does, for the first time, there is the weight of the General’s clothing on her shoulders. The tassels shake and catch the light as her arms move.

‘Are you going to show me? Or were you just looking for applause?’

‘Try it.’

Loretta narrows her eyes at him.

‘Fall. Full length. On the floor.’

She stands before him, aware the men have stopped rehearsing.

She swings back on her heels and drops before she can think too much about it. The floor meets the base of her spine and for a quick moment is stunned. The high, flouncing hat Harry had laid on her head that morning has flown away from her and there is dry dirt against her hair. As quickly as the shock sets in, the pain spreads like heat arching up her spine. Harry goes to pull her up. She pushes his arm away.

‘No – I can’t. Harry, it’s broke.’

‘You’re okay.’ He places a hand on her shoulder, scooping it towards him.

Loretta’s eyes are shut, willing herself to stand. The pain burns. When she opens them again, Roland is beside her. He helps Harry hoist her up into a sitting position.

‘All the young’ins fall,’ Roland tells her. His brown eyes are bright against the white paint smeared over his eyelids.

‘You’re braver than the rest. Billy wouldn’t drop for months.’

She nods at him, gentle with her movements. She tries to move her hips, hoping to wiggle feeling back into them. Harry looks into her eyes. She knows he’s testing her. It occurs to her how often he must think, ‘Can she do this?’ Loretta looks down at her hands; they’re the only part left of her shining through this uniform. Small soft things. There was such excitement as she scooped them into the pot of white makeup that morning. She begins to stand. Uneasy at first, but she gets up brushing the dirt away from the whites of the General’s uniform.

‘Show me.’

She hears the men rush back to performing, yells filling the air. Harry walked over to where her hat had fallen, taking care to place it on her head. Roland returns to the stage of the Big Top.

‘Alright, you’re a First of May now,’ Harry says. Loretta has heard him talk of Firsts before. After their wedding, Harry had returned to the circus. He’d written in his first letter home that Joe was old enough for his first season. Joe had been the First of May then.

Harry stood before her, rounding his shoulders like the stray cats she’d caught nearing the lion food the night before.

‘When you hit the ground, it should be your shoulders that take the force. You need to roll, roll, roll. Keep moving so the shock doesn’t hit one part of your body.’

Harry drops again in front of her but this time, Loretta watches his shoulders hit the ground first. He arches. He rolls himself up the length of his spine, pushing himself upright until he’s kneeling.

‘The trick is to watch your toes. They’ll tell you which way to roll.’

Loretta arches her back, mimicking her husband. She lifts herself up on her toes, preparing to fall.

‘Loretta – stop.’ Harry is loud. Alarmed, she drops back onto her heels.

‘Are you kidding around? You’ll be black and blue tomorrow. I can’t have one of my Joey’s bedridden. Save the practice for next rehearsal.’

Loretta smiles at him for the first time since they walked into the Big Top.

‘Got it, boss.’ She tilts her hat at him before running, tassels rustling, to join Roland and the troupe on stage.

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Indianapolis, 1924

They had spent their fourth anniversary together in their own home: a small farm in Indianapolis, with no animals to speak of. The next day, Harry had to return to John Robinson.

It was a place to call theirs away from the tents filled with half naked clowns splatted in paint – but the house was sparse. The seasons came quick and often. There had been no time or money to do anything but fit it with necessities. The first item Harry bought was a claw-footed dining table. He was taken in by the warmth of the wood; it reminded him of a horse's coat. When he thought about it later, he understood it was Ace he imagined. His mother's horse. But when the table was delivered, it was too big for the modest farmhouse kitchen. It filled the room in such a lonely way that, when Harry was working, Loretta had had taken to eating her dinner at Harry's desk.

But now they were together. Harry lay in bed with a book in his lap. His attention was taken away from reading, too caught in the novelty of their last night together for another few months. Sometimes he caught himself in wonder at it being *their* home. He'd never thought this day would come.

Harry watches Loretta as she hangs the day's dress on a thin wire hanger. She shakes out the skirt. The Summer breeze must have picked up wheat flecks from the neighbouring farms and swept it against her calves.

'Harry, I've been thinking about the next season.' She smiles as she arranges the dress straight in the wardrobe.

'Yes?' He thinks of how concerned she had been at the thought of him returning and her living on the farm alone once again. She would bring it up often but as his departure date came closer, she stopped mentioning it.

'Well,' she pauses. Harry looks at her eyes, catching her thinking through the taste of the words she has yet to express. 'I'll join you at John Robinson.'

'Loretta, we've talked about this. You know there's not enough money for you to come on tour.' He sighs, unsure what to say before tacking on, 'I'll be home as much as I can.'

He can't see the shape her face takes. She is on her knees now, folding a winter blanket that had lingered too long in their bedroom. He imagines her using the wooden lines of the floorboards to make precise folds. She'd always been neater than him.

'We'll travel *and* perform together.' She stands, smoothing the blanket once again in her hand. Harry sits upright in their bed, his back no longer rests on his hard pillows.

'Perform? As?'

'Isn't it obvious?' Loretta tucks the blanket into the bottom drawer of the shining cedar wardrobe. She pushes the brass handle gently so the drawer closes with only a slight moan.

'I can't bend like the acrobats, have never ridden a horse bareback and I'm not three feet tall. I must be a clown.' As she says 'clown', she grins in the same way she had walking down the aisle four years ago. Her teeth are hidden but her lips spread across her delicate face.

Harry laughs. It's a high squeak. He stops as he looks at her, standing by the wardrobe in her loose silk night dress. A silk tie is knotted around her hips and Harry can just make out the curve of her stomach shrinking and expanding.

'Loretta, there is absolutely no demand for women clowns.' He looks nervous, as if he is telling her the dogs next door died.

'Then make me up as a man. Do you think anyone knows you're Harry La Pearl under all of the face paint and those baggy trousers? It's not as though I'll have "Loretta" painted on my face.'

Harry processes her words. He speaks softly but is firm: 'It's a lot of work. There is the travel, sleeping on a c—'

'Harry, I know how to work. I've been working at the piano since I could walk. I was a statue for years.' Loretta rocks as she speaks, her weight shifting between her right and left.

'But is this something you'd want?' Harry had only known the circus life; he was born into it. She had spent just a handful of years there. Harry's first performance was at five as an acrobat; by seven, he was known for his skills as a contortionist. Loretta had never experienced the way little boys would pelt peanuts on the stage or shoot peas in their air guns at the clowns during the morning parade. She didn't know the joy or sorrow of living as a clown.

Loretta walks over to the bed, sitting at the end of Harry's side. He shuffles in his spot as she looks down at his hands, running her finger along his little finger. He sees her finger pausing over the hairs stretching up to his knuckles. How strange he had never noticed them before.

Loretta begins to speak. He leans forward so he can make out the words. 'Harry, we've been married four years. I've given being on my own and looking after the house a chance. Don't you think it's fair I have a chance at being a clown with you, too?'

He goes to her, placing the book he had long given up finishing on the nightstand. Her shoulder fits neatly in his palm and he takes in the warmth of her. 'I didn't know this is *truly* what you wanted.'

'It is,' she whispers. Smiling now, she continues, 'If you'll show me how to be a clown, that is.'

'A clown *and* a man, you mean?' Harry mirrors her smile back to her. He runs his hot palm down her arm, slowly going back and forth on her bare forearm.

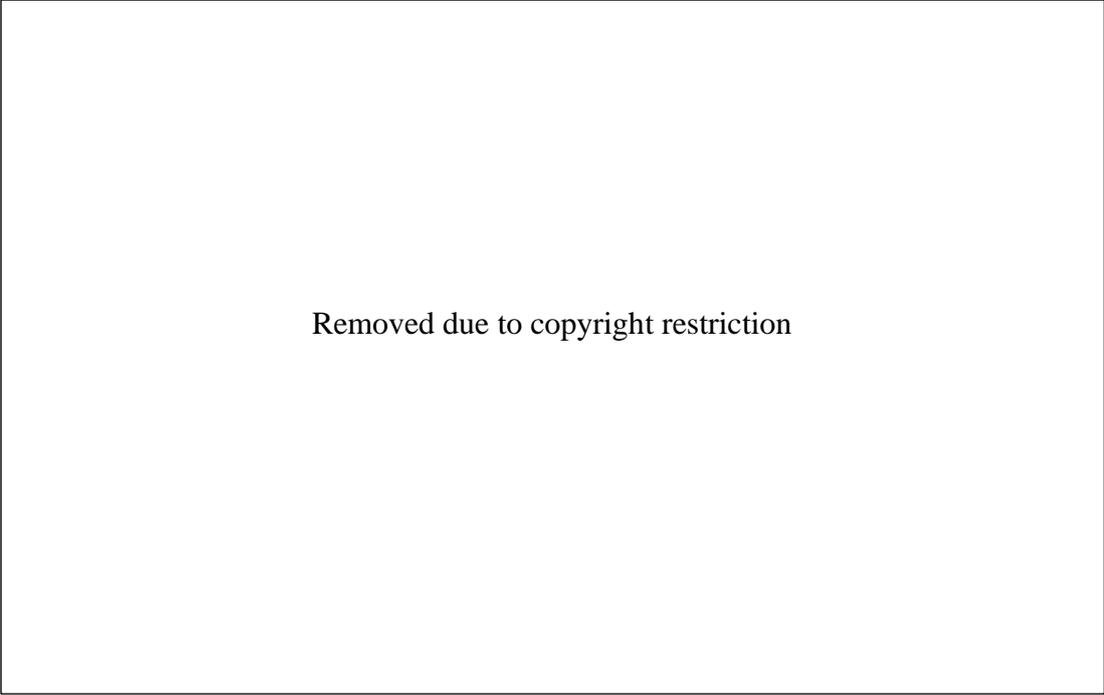
'Do you think I can?'

'Loretta, my love, if you can accept me and my life then I guess you can put up with the Joeys, too. And you're right, no one will suspect it's my wife under those clown clothes.'

She leans forward, pressing her wet lips to his mouth. They'd kissed many times before, but this felt different. Harry was joined to Loretta now not just in marriage, but life. As he kissed her,

he knew that it wasn't their years of marriage that had changed something between them. It was the life ahead; a life measured in seasons.

She was to be by his side, throughout the seasons. On stage and in their home. Loretta was not his wife alone but a clown, too.



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California, 1925

The hardest part of being a clown, Loretta thought, is this damn springless seat. She had sat on it each morning for the past week, travelling from one town to the next. The wagon was roofless so as it bumped along from the base of Oregon down to Northern California, she was met with an endless drizzle which turned into thick rays of sun as they approached the desert.

Loretta looked back at Harry on the wagon behind her. His was larger than hers and he and Roland sat atop it while the zebras pulled them forward. She could see Harry laughing, even Roland was shaking his head and grinning. She wondered what Harry could be saying that would make him react like that. She couldn't hear him, drowned out by the growls and thumps of the two lions pacing in their cage. Loretta realized that the circus was a louder business than she remembered. Not only the people yelled and shrieked, but the animals too.

Loretta was transfixed by Harry interacting with the world outside of their home. The way he would speak, loud and assured, to the other circus men was a shock. She was used to the gentleness of him at home, his shyness in slipping off her nightdress as they went to bed. She watches him slap Roland on the arm. *Perhaps he had said something outrageous.* Loretta would never know those words. She turns away – her neck aching now – and looks ahead of her. Her eyes settle on the golden ‘JR’ emblem painted on the wagon in front. The way it’s painted on everything: tents, animal cages, and even the bottom of the china cups in the cookhouse amuses her. It’s as though John Robinson thinks of the circus life as a permanent business. Harry had told her how they’d sold every animal and hoop when his father’s circus went bust. There was no permanence in the circus trade.

Charley’s chest and back are strapped into a dark iron harness, connected to the wagon by chains. As he moves forward, thumping one foot in front of another, the wagon groans and the chains jingle lightly. It’s like music – the deep groans and light melody – Loretta thinks. She’s taken to practicing her favourite, Liszt’s *Liebstraum* No 3 on her lap during the morning travels.

The trainer beside her, Jon, she thinks his name is, whips Charley as his footfall begins to slow. Loretta has learnt this always happens towards the end of the journey. Charley stops walking when his metal harness begins to cut into his wrinkled grey skin. One morning, she joined Roland at feeding time and her gaze traced the shape of the harness, stamped in cuts, against Charley’s chest. She’d fed him thick slices of watermelon from her flattened palm.

The whip cracks the air, reminding her of the slow rush of Oregon’s rain as they move forward. Charley is faster now and the aching in her rear grows as she hits the seat quick, the wooden wheels pushing against the dirt road.

‘Only one more mile,’ she hears Harry yell out behind her. She grits her teeth. She’d hoped Crescent City would be closer. The sun has dried her clothes and warmed her skin, but now, the flush of hot across her nose worries her. Loretta wonders if she’ll be applying white makeup to peeling skin tomorrow.

As Charley makes his way along the sloping mountain, its rich green points and trees taller than the Big Top, Loretta sees wagons at the end of the road. Townies travelling home. What a sight we must be, she thinks.

As the John Robinson trails into the edges of Crescent City, Loretta takes in the small brown buildings. A group of young boys are watching them wide-eyed. One runs along Harry’s wagon, eyes fixed on the lions behind the bars.

‘Not too close, boy. They’re awful hungry,’ Harry yells. Loretta chuckles as the boy stops running, dazed by Harry’s words. She stops when she sees an older woman dressed all in black staring at her atop the wagon, with her scuffed black boots and dark flowery bonnet.

‘Perhaps I should have dressed as the General for the trip,’ Loretta says to herself, head down.

Jon chuckles in response, more out of kindness than the humour in her words. A comfortable silence settles between them and Loretta lifts her head up to see the town. As she looks back down to where the woman was standing, Loretta sees that she’s already gone.

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The trainers were late to dinner at the cookhouse. They trundled into the tent smelling of fur and sweat. Loretta was at her table eating when she heard the chef try to turn them away.

‘Sorry, but the flags down. That’s that.’

A trainer kicked the table stacked with dinner plates and it rattled crisp throughout the tent. Harry stood up from his own plate to try to placate the men.

‘Boys, what’s the problem?’

A man so tall that he forever stooped through tent doors spoke up, ‘They won’t give us dinner. We had to work late ‘cause Charley’s set off the other animals again.’

A boy with ripped pants, maybe only eleven years old Loretta thought, spoke next. ‘The giraffe’s taken to rubbing its neck against its wagon hole. We’re tryna calm ‘em down. Who’s goin’ to pay to see a giraffe with a bald neck?’

The trainers nodded and stamped their feet in agreement. Like the animals they trained, they too moved in unison. A pack of hyenas, Harry had called them one night on their way to join the season. He’d spent most of the journey emphatically explaining the place she would soon call home

‘Alright, okay. I’m sure Chef can find something to give you.’

The chef looks at Harry, face tight and curt.

‘And if he does, I’ll make sure we bring him more of Loretta’s peaches next season?’

The chef stops bristling, nodding quickly before returning to the kitchen without a word. Harry returns to Loretta, leaving the trainers bickering amongst themselves about the various states of hairlessness the animals are in.

‘Always something with those trainers.’ Harry exhales before taking a large bite of bread, butter smearing onto his lips.

‘Hey, boss. Settle a fight?’ One of the young clowns has turned to Harry, the others watching for his reaction. Maybe it’s Carl who’s asking, Loretta hasn’t placed the names of the troupe yet, besides the youngest, Joe. And Roland. Johnny plays the tuba in the band, always hooting and howling before blowing with all his might into the instrument. He’s thrown it across the troupe so many times during the parade, it’s matte with scratches.

‘What do ya need?’ Harry is now soaking his bread in gravy, running it back and forth around the rim of the plate.

‘Well, I think clowns are the least respected part of the circus – kids always making faces at us, townies laughing as we get hit – while the acrobats walk around in their fancy suits that are all sparkly.’ Johnny’s small face is framed by roughly cut chestnut hair. There’s a strip of pink sun kissed skin across his nose. Harry chews slowly as he listens to the boy, looking at Johnny as he tears off the bread’s crust.

‘And what do the others think?’ The troupe falls silent.

Roland speaks, his voice low like the aching of the tents during a storm. ‘It’s simple. The clown is the heart of the circus.’ He clears his throat as though he’s not used to speaking. ‘The clown is the one that makes the kids – and parents – happy. We may not fly like the acrobats or be as big as Charley, but we make people smile. That’s something.’ Roland nods as he speaks, punctuating the end of each sentence.

Johnny rolls his eyes, poking his tongue into his right cheek. A boy not much older than him pats Johnny on the back. Harry puts his crust down, moving a thick hard slice around his mouth.

Roland speaks again, moving to better face Johnny. ‘It’s honourable. You’ll know so one day.’ Loretta wants to touch him; she senses the vulnerability of him keenly. She looks down into her plate, running her finger along its edge. By her side, she sees Harry take a large swig of coffee. His meaty hands overtake the small china mug.

‘Johnny...’ He sighs and starts again, ‘Boys, let me tell you a story. As some of you know, I was born into circus life. My father, James La Pearl had bought a circus and my mother...’ Harry clears his throat for a moment and Loretta tries to hide her boredom. She’d heard Harry’s stories since the day she met him nine years ago. She recounts them to an audience without a second thought.

‘My mother, she was a bareback horse rider. Roy, Ruby and me, we grew up performing and watching our parents perform. Each evening, mother would be strapped to a board under these flickering naphtha lights and my father would throw these sharp knives at her. The crowd would shriek and yell as the knives grazed her clothes. My brother and I would sit in the audience, gasping along with them.’

Loretta looks around the table as Harry spoke. Each clown – more like a mix between clown and man with their faces bare, only flecks of white makeup remaining behind their ears – had put down their coffee cups and bread and were listening to Harry. Even Johnny, whose nose seemed to have returned to its normal pale hue with brown dirt smudges, was caught in her husband’s tale. *Perhaps they haven’t heard this one before. Or maybe they’re better actors than I thought!* She tries not to grin at her own joke as Harry continues.

‘Now, watching your parents – even just for a moment – capture the attention of a tent is an amazing thing. I wanted to become them. I would bend my spine in odd ways working as a contortionist. Standing on two chairs, I would lower myself into a backbend. Shoulders below hips. I’d stare through the audience taking in their silence with triumph. It was hard work. Hours of stretching a day, but I felt as though I was more than a boy but a performer.’

As Harry speaks, his hands cup and scoop the air. Loretta thinks of the way the young fortune reader moves her hands when talking to townies, her yard-length sleeves billowing. At the cookhouse, Loretta had watched her wipe elderberry jam off her mouth with silken cuffs.

‘But, it comes to this. I spent the next eight years bending myself into ways I shouldn’t be bent. I kept running after that gasping, that electric quiet of the audience. It became harder to move how I wanted to. I was lengthening out in ways that were unfamiliar. Hair sprung up along my arms. And the more times I would force my feet up to the back of my head, the more it pained me. One day, I was limping – nothing unusual, I’d sprained my right hip – and my mother came up to me. She wasn’t the type of woman who would often speak to her children but today, she did. She said, “Look here, Harry. If it makes you limp, why do you keep at it? What’s wrong with ya?”’

The troupe hoots as Harry imitates his mother, his tone becoming nasal and taking on a Chicago drawl. Loretta looks over to Johnny and sees a light smile crease his face.

‘I took my mother’s words and thought them over slow. I knew I could no longer take in the audience’s attention when most days it hurt to move. That night, I joined the clown troupe. I figured there was nowhere else I could go, my back was too shot to be an acrobat and I didn’t have the patience to be an animal trainer. I wanted the stage and to take in the room the way my parents did. My first performance as a clown was a week later and while my falls were all over the place and I tripped over my wide pants, the audience were happy. They weren’t silent like when my father would sharpen his knives before throwing them deep into the board where my mother spread out, fearless. The amusement moved with us. As we tumbled and fell, it followed us and filled the tent with an electricity like no other. I’d been living at the circus for fifteen years then, but this night felt like I’d come home.’

Harry takes a swig of coffee and a drop runs down his chin and neck, soaking into the white of his shirt. Loretta holds the napkin in her lap tight, wanting to pass it to him. But too aware that if she did, she would break the flow of his story. She’d made that mistake before and learnt he’d go back to the beginning.

‘Now, being a clown isn’t always easy. We fall and get shot at. Townies love to see us fail a good half the time. But we bring out the life in our audience. Almost anyone can perform a dangerous act and shock a crowd but soliciting a laugh – that’s a joy like no other. It makes the kids

excited for the weeks to come and the parents forget the stockpile of bills at home. Roland was right. Us clowns are the heart of the circus.'

Harry stops. Roland's eyes are firmly on Harry while Johnny fiddles with his fork, running the tines up and down his palm.

'That's enough of me, boys. Let's clean up.' Ceramic clatters as the clowns roughly stack the plates, throwing down forks and knives. Loretta collects her own, taking care to scrub each item in the buckets of suds and water at the edge of the cookhouse. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Johnny and the other clowns give their plates a cursory swish in the water before running out to see the animals or speak to towners. Harry is at the edge of the tent, joking loudly with the cook. Loretta walks out onto the Lot and towards their tent, breathing in the cool night air.

People Don't End Up in West Virginia: On Discomfort and Home

Mathew and I have driven an hour out of Charleston – tracing along roads surrounded by forest – and finally we're here. It's Loretta's old home, except that the building in front of me couldn't possibly be ninety-eight years old and the sign says Nawab Indian Cuisine. It's 2019 and Loretta, of course, is long gone. I find myself in an empty car park, staring at white wooden panels and the fluorescent green sign and searching for meaning.



Mathew leans against the rental car while I look over the details: the faded road lines, the bush outside the restaurant, conspicuously shaped into a rectangle amongst all the cement. I know the Ohio river is just beyond us. I can't hear it over the sound of the Chesapeake highway but imagine Loretta listening to the push of the current each morning. I stand here, trying to find her amongst the details and feel nothing. I'm surprised; I thought this moment would jolt me closer to her. I thought her presence would be imbued in bricks of where she lived. But she feels closer when my eyes are shut and I think about the woman she was, or could have been.

We leave the car and walk along 4th Avenue – Huntington's Historic District. Mathew's strolling while I am lurking, trying to find that elusive something to connect me to her. To understand that she did, in fact, once live here as the 1921 census claims she did. I've always felt connected to where I live; the streets I walk along shape who I am. Being here, I'd hoped it would be the same for her. As if I could reach across almost a hundred years by walking where she did.

We walk, my eyes watching the cracked cement smooth as we approach the historic buildings left from the town's railway boom. We pass a marble walled bank with a mounted clock in its arch. I try to hold back the anxiety at the thought that this, like so much of my search of her, is another dead end. She remains hidden to me. I move past the park and see a free little library box, painted a bright 70s teal blue. Inside, a 1955 equestrian romance and a book called 're-churching the unchurched'. I take a photo and I think of the white family I'd seen in the supermarket carpark the day before. The father had bought mochi and handed them out to who I guess are his wife, sister and children. The women had twisted their faces and squealed more than the children. Later, I'll read that the state's population is 93 percent white.

I stop at the Cabell County courthouse, calling Mathew and his quick stride back to me. My attention is caught by the brown-chested robins darting at each other and the historic ballooning of the roof. A man on the courthouse steps watches me approach. He stares, like he knows I don't belong. I feel as though he can spot my accent despite my silence. I walk to a brass bell, turned sea foam green, and hear him in the distance practicing a court address.

We are gathered to...

I move away from him, trying to avoid this sense of unbelonging. Without a connection to Loretta, I am no longer distracted from the feeling of other. I find Mathew, looking sceptical next to a large stone imprinted with masonic proclamations. I point at a squirrel and we watch it scamper from us and into a bush with a round nut in its mouth.

We leave the courthouse and walk back to the car, unsure of what to do next but drive and loop through the town. Mathew sees *Smoke Time Sams* next to Loretta's old home. I think of the block as *hers*, having to remind myself that this is another country and not another time.

I follow Mathew into the cigarette store and pace as he picks out cigarillos. I look at the heavy bags of tobacco hanging on the wall, unused to such a sight. In Australia, we have small pouches with thin tobacco strands. On them, pictures of maturing cancer. This is different but I have been in places a bit like this before; Mathew smokes when we come to America. It's cheaper, the range more extensive and leaving the country means he has a deadline to stop. I hate the damage I imagine happening inside of him – the lungs greying of the kindest person I've known – but I stuff this fear down inside me into something I cannot voice. Instead, I look at my surroundings. Over the years, I've ogled busy service stations off the freeway and specialty cigar stores as he's bought packets for under five dollars. Once, at a rest stop he gave a pack of *Lucky Strikes* to some young people travelling across country. One of them had dropped onto their knees and kissed his shoe; at this, I felt Mathew tense. And while I hated the smoke at first, it has become another sensory layer to the States. The smell of artificial cherry mixed through a cigarillo or the sweet density of a Lucky Strike are a part of being here.

I'm still staring at the bags, trying not to think about smoke and instead wondering how Loretta would have walked these streets – down to the river? To the 1920s gilded Keith Albee Theatre, now advertising for Steve Martin and Martin Short? – when I hear the slow curve of the West Virginian accent.

'ID please.'

Mathew pulls out his wallet, surprised. He's not often thought to be under twenty, with his thick beard and crinkling eyes.

'Woah.' The man at the counter turns to his friend, a man slumped into a chair and watching a television outside my line of vision.

'This guy's all the way from Australee-a.'

Mathew smiles back, removing a small stack of one-dollar bills from his wallet. I lean over the cabinet, looking at the cigars beneath me.

'You're a long way from home. How long've you been here for?'

'We're just visiting,' Mathew replies, his hands resting on the glass cabinet and comfortable in a way I cannot be in public spaces.

The man talks half a step back. It looks like he's never heard this before.

'Huntington?'

'Charleston, I pipe up. But Huntington looks great.' As I speak, I think of the shape of the buildings, the green of the forest around the town and the squirrel that had danced away. Charleston is different to what I had expected but it has its own beauty.

'That's a bit better but just telling the truth. This town is shit. All bums and drugs. Walk around at night and you'll get mugged, or worse: killed.'

I look over to the TV watcher to gauge whether this is all a joke for our sake. But the watcher is standing now, looking at us and nodding at his friends' words.

'Dude was beat to death right next door.'

I stare steadily at him, my mind working through his accent as he speaks.

'Fuck, really?' Mathew says.

The man nods and a woman comes into the store, walking in the back way. She passes us, reaching into the fridge for a bottle of cola.

'Just telling them the truth. The people here are shit. Ain't that right, Sandy?'

The woman doesn't look at us as she handles the bottle onto the counter. 'Oh yeah. It's shit.'

We chat a while before we leave. The TV watcher tells us he has a friend in Australia, one he games with online. His friend looks an awful lot like Mathew and he laughs, asking if it is in fact, him. We laugh with him before we leave, walking out into the crisp Huntington air. Mathew

flicks his small blue plastic lighter and I wonder at where this search has taken me; where it will take me next.

*

The Charleston state archive is the most crowded I've seen yet but it is still almost empty. It's a Saturday and Mathew and I join five others scattered throughout the desks, boxes of documents stacked on trollies before them. I've come to find some trace of Loretta; she moved around so much with Harry that I can't find out how long they stayed in Huntington.

I speak to the archivist. Her long hair is coloured that soft mix between brown and grey. She brings me a Polk's from 1924 – that era's White Pages. Loretta was recorded as living with Harry three years earlier but I can find neither their names nor the company Harry worked for at the time: 'Motion Sign Co.' All I find are startling remnants from the past. So caught up with Loretta, I hadn't thought about the list of names in Polk's: how the women's names would be in brackets behind their husbands; how people of colour and their businesses were asterisked. I had thought about the era and the way white supremacy and patriarchy had controlled people's lives but, naively, I hadn't prepared for how historical documents would not only show me asterisks, but reveal the vilest depictions of racism and misogyny. I go on to spend much of the afternoon scrolling through digitised newspapers and wincing at vaudeville advertisements, rife with blackface. I feel at odds with the other researchers here. By the signs around the room, I guess they're looking at family histories where relatives fought in the Civil War. I am self-conscious of the screen before me; my instinct is to turn it off. But I keep looking, forcing myself. Knowing I need to bear witness.

I remember arriving the morning after a red eye flight and looking at the intricate Civil War mural in the airport, by the baggage claim. My knowledge of the war is patchy at best and so I hastily connected to the airport WiFi as Mathew waited in line for the rental car. Hunched over my suitcase, I learn that West Virginia had separated from Virginia to join the Union, becoming the only modern state that declared independence from the Confederacy. I read that while a Union state, West Virginian soldiers fought on both sides. On Wikipedia, I clicked to a picture of a Confederate memorial with freshly planted Confederate flags. My jaw set and I locked my phone to join Mathew in the queue.

I take the Polk's back to a heavy wooden desk that looks like it has been there since the cultural centre was built. The archivist passes me a stack of postcards from Huntington throughout the 20s and 30s. Their ridged edges sit firm in my hand. She tells me what she found on Motion Sign Co: it was a sign company originating in Illinois – Harry's birthplace – and it looks as though

Harry was one of its representatives. Harry and Loretta were in Huntington during the industrial railway boom and, like in Illinois, West Virginia was experiencing a mass expansion of industry.

I'm taking notes as she speaks until she pauses, frowning slightly as she thinks through what she wants to say.

'Look, people don't just end up in West Virginia. They come here for a reason.'

She emphasises 'come' as she speaks and I think about the two men in *Smoke Time Sams* and the body that was found in the car park. I think about the two flights we took to arrive in West Virginia from LA. One regional and half-empty. The Uber driver who told Mathew and I that not many folks come here, unless it's to hunt. She must be right; after all, I came for a reason too.

I tell the archivist that Loretta and Harry circled from Illinois to Indiana to Ohio to West Virginia. They spent the first year of their marriage in New York; the last in Los Angeles. Perhaps obviously, their movements before their marriage were not recorded officially. But they moved a lot – these are only the highlights, gleaned from censuses and newspaper articles. It makes it hard to trace the story of their lives.

'I'm stuck in the unknown,' I tell the other archivist, a man who has moved into the fold of the conversation and is kind as I mince my own words in a mix of frustration and excitement.

He speaks and I have the urge to close my eyes so that I can fully listen to the cadence of his voice – that rich, not quite Southern but melodious accent.

'If it was easy, everyone would do it,' he says. His hands gesture to the somewhat empty room around us. I take his point with a smile, returning to the stack of vintage postcards to try and find my way to a place that no longer exists. To 1921, West Virginia: Loretta's home.

*

Mathew and I leave the archive, out of the Capitol Complex and through the garden where children have gathered to search for Easter eggs. We decide to walk the hour back to the Airbnb and spend the money we'll save on a rideshare for lunch. We find a place with bright paintings and brick walls. I order eggs; Mathew, tacos. This trip, Mathew has taken to asking about food he does not recognise. In Texas, he asked a woman at a drive-in what a corn dog was and she looked at him with such incredulity, I wanted to escape the ordering booth and run back to the bus stop. Now he's asking about grits but this time, the waiter is amused and her eyes crinkle as she tries to explain something she has lived with her entire life. With our food, she brings us a small serve in a plastic tub to try and as the corn meal warms my throat, I feel a hint of the comfort of this place. The grits and the orange and reds of the trees. The sun. It's this moment that makes me realise the discomfort

I've been sitting with here. The gnawing sensation I've been unconscious of until I felt a hint of comfort; a taste of uncertainty I can't seem to dislodge.

It's the second day of our week in West Virginia and when we return to the Airbnb – an hour after snaking through overgrown grass and walking beside a train track because there is no sidewalk, just four lane roads – we learn that the hot water has gone. I get a partial refund but we have nowhere else to go. Mathew and I spend the week having cool baths, one of us running back and forth from the stove heating Ikea pots filled with tepid water.

One evening, we sit on the floral pink couch, Mathew watching *30 Rock* and I typing as my feet rest in his lap. The days spread out here. It's like a pause in a trip where we're moving from state to state quickly. Here, I wash our clothes and hang them over the iron chairs on the balcony. Mathew buys a cherry pie from *Krogers* and as the days pass the pie grows smaller. At home, it's Easter long weekend and I think of my family gathering in a week's time for Orthodox . Mum following instructions for dying eggs red and squinting at the dye packet, her mind working to translate the Greek; she is unused to it being written down. My uncle coming to the house with a pot of αβγολέμνο, a tea towel and rubber band keeping it secure. The taste of it; the hit of lemon and warmth of the stock. Γιαγιά's recipe. How only the Greek folk at the table can eat it; Dad and Mathew find it too weird. Hot soup with a layer of egg white foam.

I'm in West Virginia and my memories of home colour my time here. How can I exist in this place with Loretta – the bursting green of the forest, moss on the sidewalk – and also there? Those memories are more immediate than where I am now. As if I inhabit home more than the space I'm in. As if I can't place where I belong.

*

At the Charleston archive, I find mentions of Loretta in newspapers that had not come up in my online searches before. I screenshot them and read them back at the house, in bed, wrapped in blankets and jumpers while I wait for the heater to work. I read the *Mount Airy News*, August 8, 1929: a full-page advertisement for the John Robinson Circus.

Prominent among the noted "joey's" will be Harry LaPearl [sic], Cook Brothers, Louis Plamondon, Hal Nicholson, Mickey Blue, Jimmy Thomas, Buster March, Larry Anderson, Loretta LaPearl and others.

I didn't expect her name to be so far from Harry's. To be separated in this way – is she an afterthought? Is Loretta, not 'noted' in the same way? It's 1929 and Harry is 44, so she is 32; Loretta has been married and performing for a decade. Loretta may be younger in life and her professional career but clowning is a common occupation for teenagers, too. Harry had worked as a

clown since he was sixteen years old, performed as an acrobat and contortionist in his childhood. How is Loretta the last on the list? I wonder what it means to be last in a list of the ‘prominent’ as my feet start to numb while I hunch over the computer.

Next, I read the *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye Gazette*, June 16, 1935. A journalist interviews Harry in a promotion for the Russell Bros. circus program and I relish the first-person quotes scattered throughout the small newspaper print.

If you question Harry, he will tell about himself and he will speak with pride about Loretta, his wife, “not only the only woman clown but one of the best in the business.”

I love the way he speaks of her. I can’t help but project this onto the rest of their marriage, their lives – his admiration catches in my throat. I read on.

You remember reading years ago of a clown being married in Madison Square Garden, where the circus was playing at the time. This was LaPearl, and the couple was married in their makeup, a surprise feature of a party for newspaper and publicity men.

I’ve read of the wedding before. I found it in *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle*, under Harry La Pearl. It was April 3, 1910. Back when Madison Square Garden was where visiting circuses would perform. The article mentions his marriage but fails to mention to *whom*. In *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle*, Harry married ‘Frances Maginley, a non-professional’ (166). I have looked for Frances intermittently for months, finding nothing. I’ve spent idle hours wondering if she is from a circus family – I’ve seen the Maginley and Carroll Circus advertised while searching in the archives. For a time, Frances disappears to the edges of Loretta and Harry’s story. That is, until elsewhere I find her listed as ‘Frances Macginley’.¹

That little ‘c’ makes all the difference. I find an article on their marriage in *The Spokane Press* April 23, 1910. The photo of Frances and Harry is familiar. I’ve seen something like it before. I recognise the buttons on her dress. Her pointed boots. Harry’s face is painted and they are on a tall skinny bench. This is so much like the photo I’ve held on to: HARRY LA PEARL INTRODUCES MRS. LA PEARL. It must be another photo from the same shoot. In this one, his arm is around her and her hand holds his as it rests on her shoulder. Her smile a hint. Beneath them, it is printed: MR AND MRS HARRY LA PEARL, HONEYMOONERS. It clicks together in my mind. This first image of Loretta, one without her clowning makeup that I’ve been staring at and wondering for months. It is not her after all; it is Frances.

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I feel I have lost some understanding of Loretta by looking at the wrong woman. In the grain of the black and white newspapers, they look to be the same. Dark hair tied up, big brown eyes that take up most of their face. Both Loretta and Frances are beautiful, and beautifully alike. Months later and back in Adelaide, I tell my family.

‘They are not the same but they look so much like it.’

Dad laughs. ‘It’s common enough,’ he says, ‘to marry someone who looks like your first partner. In family law, I’ve seen it firsthand.’

I’m frustrated. For a time, I had suspected they were the same woman. Loretta married Harry almost ten years to the day after Frances did. Both couples married in New York. *Maybe an anniversary*, I thought. If Loretta was Frances, it would explain why her birth records had been so hard to track down. Loretta La Pearl always sounded artful, perhaps she changed both last and first name for the stage? The 1927 *Popular Mechanics* article by Earl Chapin May that claimed Loretta as the first woman clown said Harry and Loretta had been married seven years. The Madison Square Garden wedding was *seventeen* years before. *It could be a typo*. I’d been so quick to make these connections, so excited to cobble together some knowledge of her early life that I saw her *being* Frances. Frances was Loretta. But those twelve years repeat themselves in my research. Loretta is younger; Frances is not. And after two days of searching my files, feeling the chill in the West Virginia air in the wood panelled Airbnb, I finally find it in *The Billboard* November 9, 1918:

A letter from Harry La Pearl, well-known clown, who since the closing of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Shows has remained in Chicago waiting for the ban to be lifted on amusements, states that he was recently granted a divorce.

Six months later, Harry marries Loretta Bruns, ‘nonprofessional from Cincinnati’ in Warren, Ohio. Loretta is her own person. After all my digging and wondering, it’s an old and familiar story: man remarries a younger woman. I sigh, weary. I am unable to get warm despite how much I bundle myself in clothes and blankets. What if I make another mistake in my searching? Perhaps there is nothing for me to uncover; I’m just looking at the obvious.

*

On the drive from Huntington back to Charleston, Mathew and I pull over at a secondhand store. Inside, two older women are giggling while they rearrange the shelves. I smile at them and they nod, returning to their conversation. At the centre of the store is a large plastic table covered in discounted items. I pick up a unicorn snow globe, glitter fluttering. I look it over, drawn to it for some reason. *Strange*, I think. I’ve not thought of a unicorn since girlhood, where I would read the story of a vain unicorn befriending a conscientious toad over and over, alone in my room. The weight of the snow globe in my hands begins to strain my wrist; there is no way it will fit in my small carry-on suitcase. I place it back on the table and Mathew and I leave the store.

As we drive back to Charleston to return the rental car, I think of the strangeness of this place and, stranger, my being here. The trees flick by as Mathew drives and I ache for a way to make this fit all together in my mind. Each new place I visit, I feel a little more foolish. As if I should have envisioned this whole other world instead, its people who walk these streets and live their lives so far from my own. But that was before I stumbled upon that first image of Loretta in an archive drawer in 2016. I had no idea how ‘Mrs Harry La Pearl’ would go on to shape my life. The more I seem to learn of her, the sillier I feel. I laugh to myself, eyes on the road before me. *How very clown-like.*

*

We leave on a Tuesday midmorning, flying back to Charlotte to connect to New Orleans. At Charlotte, I will see a woman boarding our plane and notice her backpack has a small plastic window. I’ll make eye contact with a cat whose looks suspiciously out of the perspex. Later, I’ll walk past two Australians talking and feel a jolt of incredulity at their nasal voices (do I sound like that? Is that the sound of home?). Mathew and I will eat fries from McDonalds as we wait for our

next flight and a man on the table next to us will study his leather-bound bible and passionately read sections to his wife. She half listens, concentrating on her milkshake and I will feel the strangeness and the joy of other places. The people moving around me, living these lives. Through it all, I think of Loretta and how I am privileged to sit here; to see where others live; to listen; to witness.

*

A year later and I'm home in quarantine. It's winter and the weight of my doona soothes my chest and Mathew and I curl around his laptop. We watch *Logan Lucky*, knowing little about it except it's recommended on my Netflix queue. The film opens with John Denver's *Take Me Home, Country Roads* and the main character, Jimmy Logan as played by Channing Tatum, explains that one of the song's writers John Danoff had never been to West Virginia. Well after the credits play, Mathew and I keep singing *Take Me Home*. Mathew hums it as he sweeps the kitchen floor; I join him as I spray surfaces, my voice cracking as I belt 'West Virgini-ia'. We drive around Adelaide, feeling the sun and the relief of looking at something that is not the four walls of our bedroom. As Mathew loops back and forth through Cross Road, South Road, we sing about the place from a year ago.

Almost heaven, West Virginia

Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River

Life is old there, older than the trees

Younger than the mountains, growing like a breeze

As I sing, I crave the orange and green of West Virginia. While grounded at home, I wish for the place where I felt discomfort and loss and warmth. I'm surprised at this pull. Flying away and on to the next place, I thought that would be it. A final cut between me and this place. But I'm in Adelaide. Home. And I can't stop singing of Virginia.

Country roads, take me home

to the place I belong

West Virginia, Mountain Mama

Take me home, country roads.

Chapter Four

John Robinson's Lot, 1923

Loretta hears the horn of the cookhouse and knows it is not dinner. All is left is instinct and the sense that her heart is as ablaze as the Big Top might be. Her thoughts rush to the children and animals and friends that are an awful lot like family, to losing the few things they own. Roland's words return to her – *not long now*. Just yesterday she was listening to his dream of buying a little block of land and living off what he grew. The way he would talk about pushing the dirt away and being rewarded for harvest with a stockpile of yams had made her thoughts drift in the hot tent. Now, she wished to be beside him again so she could listen closely to each of his dreams.

As she's thinking this, she sees her hands moving. They're connected to someone else's arms. Another person's thin wrists that crack after a night of juggling rings and quick movements that feign a slap to another clown's face. These hands that aren't her own have ripped open a hard-green suitcase and put the silks of her clowning outfit next to the small canvas bag of her life savings. Her savings are not like Roland's, who is approaching his fifties. She'd learnt that most circus folk had a cluster of diamonds tucked away – but for her it's a fifty-dollar bill that has been folded a hundred different ways. It's the most she's ever had. Payday gets eaten by her debts. Ones that she cannot tell Harry about plus a little money sent home; a dollar snuck to her brother who's needed shoes these past two winters. How she misses Sylvie's excitement to see her; the way he would tell her how old he was, down to the day.

Her hands are rushing, scrunching her best dress into the shape of a fist when a giggle erupts. It sounds distant and husky. *Perhaps*, she thinks, *the smoke has already begun to fan out and move through the circus air*. But she is still laughing, imagining the lice that have invaded her clothes-hair-body over the past months. They're probably scuttling along the very dress that is in the corner of her suitcase. She allows herself a moment to think without consequence. *Let them burn*. Let their skin be eaten up as she has been; she's scratched her skin apart for the last two months of Spring. Her arms and legs are littered with cuts like the animal man when a new lion cub is born. She can no longer bear the sound of her own scratching.

Loretta hears the canvas opening and sees Harry. His face looks ridiculous. The lines and shapes of his clowning face are sketched but not filled in. His eyebrows are not thick darting lines as they should be. Only one side of his hooked grin reaches up to the side of his nose. Loretta is unused to seeing him in such disarray. She had been preparing to go to clown alley when the horn sounded. Harry always started his makeup before the others. It gave him time to check the props were laid for the show.

‘We have to go.’

He didn’t need say it, Loretta knew it was bad by the way he looked suddenly years older. His mouth a pursed line. He thought it his job to look after the other clowns, in show or fire. He thought of his safety last. At night, she would push thoughts of fire away. It happened regularly enough but if it was bad, she knew he’d risk himself for the kids. He knew all too well what it was like growing up at the circus. Kids without parents were at greater risk; they weren’t strong enough to lift up the tent and escape. The canvas and wooden poles of a Big Top were consumed in seconds, as if the fire had been waiting for a meal after years of hunger.

Loretta’s heart is beating fast; her pulse swells in her ears as Harry moves forward, clipping her suitcase together and wrenching it off the bed. He grabs her wrist and she lurches forward with his pull. She starts moving quickly in stride with him, out the tent and into the lot. The smoke stings her eyes as they pace – half walk, half run – away from the Big Top and towards the back of the cookhouse. It is where they all gather; the dish soap-stained water is tossed there and keeps the ground moist throughout the two days they spend in each town. She can’t see Roland or the animal men but she counts the heads of children who skip distractedly in circles around their mothers, some in half zipped spangled costumes. Harry places her suitcase beside her, his own nestled between them. She hadn’t noticed his suitcase was already packed in the tent. He must have had it ready, just in case, and grabbed it as he held on to her wrist. She wonders if the smoke that now makes it hard to see across the lot to the parked animal wagons has slowed her thinking. Her eyes water at it and she imagines grains of it settling on her tongue before snaking its way into her.

Harry sees her eyes streaming and pushes his handkerchief into her limp hand. When she turns, he is already halfway to the cookhouse. Of course he has gone to help but her feet twitch. She sets off after him but only makes it six yards before Maisy rushes at her and coughs out a cry.

‘Have you seen him?’

Maisy grips her arm tight and strong. Her hands are all bone. Loretta wants to push her back, hit her. Maisy is desperate and she wants no part in her ill-conceived search. Whoever it may be for, Loretta has Harry to worry about.

‘William, he’s not in the animal house.’

Loretta had heard the young boys complaining about him often. Maisy was the only one who called him William. He was a drunk and known only as Swill by the other trainers. Swill had run out of goodwill long ago, having made debts in the hundreds. But everyone knew he was a good animal man. Charley was dangerous if not for him, having once crushed a trainer’s shoulder beneath his aged grey feet one summer when Swill had been fired for leaving the monkey cages open. The monkeys had run through the town; some were even caught by the local children. Tied up

in yards for a week before police found them. But Charley was worth too much to John Robinson's; elephants were expensive. So, Swill had come back that Spring to work. Maisy with him.

'Have you looked by the cages?'

It's an obvious suggestion – Swill rarely goes elsewhere – but Maisy blanches, a pale white that Loretta could see through the smoke.

'Th-the flames are largest there.'

Anger snakes its way through Loretta's veins. She knew Swill had done this – had created this fear and turned the lot into a wound of heat. She imagines him passed out, pores radiating drink and a cheap rolled cigarette burning down in his hand. She looks at Maisy's eyes, wet from the stinging of the smoke and quivering in preparation for tears. Loretta wants to feel sorry for her like the other circus folk do. Like her little brother would want her to. But she can't – not with Harry having disappeared into the folds of the cookhouse a minute ago. *It is worse to love someone like that than to be him and be loved*, she thinks. Swill has no choice but to drink but Maisy does not have to love him so. Loretta wrenches her arm out of Maisy's terrified grip.

'Stay here. Leave him be.'

Maisy's mouth twitches at her words. Loretta cannot tell if Maisy is filled with rage or distress, but she cannot resist this pause. She darts away from Maisy's trembling form, leaving her to wail or scream or God knows what. Loretta's boots sink into the earth as she runs towards the cookhouse. She cannot hear the rush of shouts and cracking of the flames; all that is with her is the sound of her heavy intake of breath as she makes her way towards Harry.

As she runs into the tent, Loretta realises she has never seen it empty before. She is used to the wooden benches being crowded; the noise of the clowns; the hush of the acrobats as a bareback rider describes their worst fall. In the dark of the tent, it seems smaller. As if this weren't, after all, the centre of her days where the John Robinson folks would come together. It seems like a cheap reproduction of the place that houses some of her brightest memories.

Loretta's eyes dart along each corner of the tent but Harry is not here. He is not even in the small adjoining tent where cook prepares the meals; all that remains in a large and dented silver pot. The smell of meat from last night's meal mingles with the smoke. It sickens her as she moves through the tent and its eerie haze.

The alley.

It comes to her quickly now. Harry must have darted through here to avoid the flames. He'd spent days on some of those props. Bending over himself with a needle in the candlelight of their tent. Cursing, unstitching, sewing, again and again. And Peg and Roo – the youngest of the troupe at eleven and thirteen – would often while away the afternoons in the narrow confines of the alley. They'd eye the props, handling them and putting them down in the wrong place. Harry had cursed

them out just last week, shooing them out to help with the animals or at the cookhouse. To get away from *his* props. The alley would surely catch alight with its blankets and bales of hay. She can almost see how quick it would be.

Loretta snakes her way out of the tent kitchen, through the benches and tables to the other side of the cookhouse and its narrow exit for tossing dirty water. She pushes past the ticket booths (she cannot read the signs atop them because of the smoke) and swings around the back of the Big Top. Most performers had already made their way to wet ground and so it's just her and the odd animal that thunders on its way past. As she finds her way to the entrance of clown alley, she thinks she catches the passing stripes of a zebra, the tip of its tail burning orange.

Inside, she tries to yell but opens her throat to the smoke and a splutter emanates from her chest. She hears the sound of wood hitting dirt beyond the entrance; she is not alone in the smoke. She moves forward, covering her mouth with the handkerchief she had tucked into her pocket. It was one Harry had left her; he wouldn't have thought she'd go after him in this way. She knew moving closer to the fire was dangerous, but she couldn't stand and yell like Maisy. Loretta's feet had to move.

Her foot brushes against something warm and it flinches away from her. Her arms grasp at him. The thin curve of a shoulder. A boy's. Not Harry after all. Her hands move up to a neck that lolls and she makes out the thick black eyelashes and hint of a moustache in the low light.

'Peg. Peg, get up.' She sounds hoarse and dull.

He flinches again at the noise, half with her and half in another world. Loretta kicks his leg again. Much harder now. Peg starts before slumping down into himself. She kicks again, using her lower back now in the way Harry had told her not to. *If you injure yourself, you're a liability to the troupe*, he'd said. Peg yelps. It's a shrill sound. In many ways, he's a child. She pulls him up off the hay bale he was slumped into. Wraps his arm around her shoulders. Peg leans on her. Through the smell of burning, she can make out the sourness of him. She'd never felt him close before. In the ring, he'd rush by her and tumble in circles. Peg was always moving; even the audience's darting eyes could not keep up. Harry had called it potential.

Loretta tries to drag him out of the alley, Peg's feet flopping underneath him. She winces as the props hit her shins. Old wooden chests and miniature stools litter her path and she kicks them away, taken by fear and fury. With the swinging of her limbs, she drops her handkerchief from her mouth. Her throat is raw.

Loretta pushes her face against the rough canvas of the tent opening and as it falls away, she sees the fire has spread. Pulse racing, her body quivers. She's not quite panicking but frantic to find Harry. Canvas tents are burning. Props smoking. Harry's hard work scorched, lost.

The fire is no longer in just the animal quarters but is picking up dried grass and moving towards the side shows. She sees the printed side of the tent, flames travelling up its side. Clyde's being consumed; a canvas *World's Tallest Man* brought low by flame. Smoke permeates her thoughts: they're slow and hard to catch onto. She kicks at Peg's ankle. *Keep him moving*. He groans but this time it's softer. *Can't panic*. He's young; not fully grown. Small for his age, even. In the ring, while more flexible than Loretta, Peg can't hit and throw like she does. *Is the smoke hurting him?*

She drags him away from the heat. Her skin is pink. Chest trembles. This is not Loretta's first fire – one year earlier was much smaller, but she was always by Harry's side. Listening to him cajole and comfort. Now, she's alone, and responsible. The boy leans on her, his thin frame much like her brother's – or at least what she imagines him to be. She hasn't seen him for years now. The last time she contacted Sylvie, she wrote a short note in between wagon stops. The guilt swarms her.

Peg is slack against her. It is Loretta's strength that will move them towards safety. She imagines them next to the women, men and children of the circus. The safe ones. She keeps pushing, heat against her back. Loretta just needs to be within view and the others will take Peg's weight off her shoulders. She can make it that far.

By the ticket booth, Loretta sees through the cleared smoke that she's still in her clowning silks. Boots scratched; her white pants greyed from the smoke. How this is her body? It has transformed. Lifeless, no longer strong. Peg's feet, twisted unnaturally beside hers are dust-covered too. His body frightens her, lolling over itself. He's a sideshow: The Boneless Man.

Loretta's thoughts are broken by a sound in the distance. The noise is fuzzy; she follows it. *The cookhouse horn*. She urges herself forward. She cannot see the tent – her eyes are crowded with tears as the air stings them – but it's close. Ash is on her tongue. She hears the pattern of the horn. Three eighth notes, then two messy sustained ones. It's what she plays as the General. Harry calls it the Devil's sound – it sets a listener's teeth on edge after a minute or two. It must be him. Calling to her. Had she imagined him darting away from the wet ground by the tent? Or had he stayed near all along? Perhaps fetching water for the children, as she plunged herself closer to the fire.

Loretta's right ankle buckles as it hits damp earth. Stumbling, both Peg and her fall. Palms spread out into the cool dirt. Peg is lifted off her swiftly. As though he weighed as little as the small bales of hay the monkeys perch on in the Big Top. Something against her shoulder. A hand slapping her back, beating along with her gasps and splutters. Loretta tastes the grains of wet dirt against her lips. Her lungs slow, resting in the cleaner air. She wants to sleep but someone is pulling her. Up, to a stand. Loretta thinks of resisting, of staying on the ground and letting the damp encase

her. Skin slick with sweat from the fire's heat. The damp calls to her but she looks up and sees her husband. Harry guides her into the crowd. Folks have pulled benches from the cookhouse to seat the children and those who've taken in too much smoke. The troupe surrounds Peg. Roo wipes blackened smoke from Peg's face with his sleeve. Peg is unmoving but Loretta can make out how his head tilts towards Roo.

Harry manoeuvres her onto a bench and squats in the earth. Meets her eye. His painted face is no longer clear; sweat has run his makeup into a grey mix, instead of a bright white. Droplets of paint and sweat have collected at the base of his neck. Loretta would tease him if not for the fury in his eyes.

'Harry, don't,' she says.

'Don't? Is that what you're saying to me? You're the one who disappears as the tents are being torn down by fire and I should stop?'

She cannot tell if his lips are white from the smudged makeup or anger.

'Would you have me leave you? And Peg?'

Loretta is unsure whether he can hear her. The crowd is swimming in chatter and the cries of the children but she catches Harry's dark eyes flicker over to the troupe, huddled around Peg.

'You forget you play a man and are not one. You cannot go into the flames to find a boy.'

She starts to say she went to find him, not Peg but her throat burns. It's not worth it. Harry's anger fades, turning to relief.

'The rest of the troupe's safe,' he says.

'The alley might be lost.' She wraps her fingers around his index finger, touching the ridge of his wedding ring.

'That's not for you to think about.'

Loretta knows this is not true. They use some of the props in the offseason, taking them to community fairs to earn through winter. They didn't have a house to leave the props behind at this year, having long ago sold their Indianapolis home. The fire will affect them. But Loretta doesn't speak. This is a lie he is telling himself as well as her. She swallows. Tastes blood in her throat.

'Maisy'. The thought comes to her quickly. Before Peg, before the smoke that felt like a wall. Where is Maisy and her hands that would not let go?

'Swill's wife? What are you talking about, love?' Harry's looking over to the troupe, watching Joe as he brings a bucket to Peg's mouth. The water runs down his neck, collecting the ash that Roo missed.

'Before I left, she came to me looking for Swill. I told her he was probably near the cages.'

Harry's gaze snaps back. He talks slowly now, extending the moment so not to hear an answer that displeases him. 'And did she go?'

‘I... I don’t know. I left her.’

Harry tries not to grimace, but Loretta sees the hint of it.

‘Stay here. I’ll look for her in the crowd. She could be with Agnes.’

‘You’re probably right.’

The oldest woman in the circus, Agnes would tend to the costumes and help in the cookhouse. Loretta had seen Maisy talking to Agnes for long stretches of the afternoon, blotting her eyes as she spoke of Swill while Agnes deftly replaced broken spangles. But Loretta felt Maisy wasn’t with Agnes; she couldn’t believe otherwise.

Harry darts around the crowd, ignoring the groups of men calling to him and trying to find a pocket of women who know where Maisy is. *He’ll be gone a while. This is when I catch breath.* Loretta closes her eyes, softening the yells around her in her mind and feels each part of her. She starts with her feet; the throb of their soles overtakes her. She rolls her right foot – then left – to the side. Beneath her foot is the squelch and resistance of the mud. She’s used to moving, checking for injuries after a night in the Big Top. In the first years of her career – so thick the adrenaline pumping through her – she wouldn’t notice the pains until the next day when stretching, bending or straps would no longer help.

Eyes still closed, she runs her fingers along her calves and shins. The excess fabric of her pants bunches beneath her fingers but she has grown accustomed to it. There’s swelling beneath her legs. She thinks of the heavy wooden crates she kicked away in the alley; the bruises would last a week. She touches her lower back. Her thumb resting on her hip, her fingers massage the muscle that has strung itself tight from lifting Peg. She bites the tip of her tongue at the tenderness. She may not be able to tumble for a day or two. The Big Top may not survive the fire and wind. If it burns, the troupe won’t be needed to tumble between the big acts. They’ll be performing the band routine outside a new lot, one set up with whatever survives while the others rebuild. Loretta wants the rest of a day or two performing with the band but doesn’t wish for the destruction of the Big Top – and the alley with it. Before she can move to stretch out her shoulders, Loretta hears Harry jog towards her – his tread is a little lighter than the other men – and her eyes fly open.

Harry’s face is wiped clear of makeup now, with a little white collecting around his ear lobes. *The women must have insisted on wiping him down.* She imagines them cooing over him with a sweat-dabbed kerchief.

He gently lowers himself onto the bench next to her. He would speak in a whisper if the children practicing their contortions near her weren’t squealing. His finger glides over her knee and the muscles in her lower back grip.

‘Maisy is with Agnes.’

Loretta imagines Maisy after she had run to the cookhouse. She would have run to Agnes, of course. She needed someone to cry at and Agnes would listen. Loretta cannot believe she thought otherwise. That Maisy would have run to a tent consumed by fire. She wants to exhale but by the way Harry lingers on ‘Agnes’, she knows there’s more.

‘But she’s sobbing real hard. Swill hasn’t been found yet.’

It had been about an hour since Loretta escaped Maisy; Swill should have found her by now.

‘Maybe he’s sleeping it off somewhere?’ Loretta speaks low so the children around them cannot hear.

Harry leans over, lips brushing her ear, like he were about to tell her something sweet and not talk of whether Swill was dead or alive. ‘How could a man sleep through this? He’d be woken by the thick draught of smoke.’

Loretta tried not to think of Swill in the fire, being trapped in a tent or wooden carriage – tending to the animals with his gentle, swaying touch only minutes before.

‘Someone must have seen him,’ she replies, scared to move her ear away from Harry and see his disbelief.

Harry groans. He’s tired; he had been up in the Ring all morning practicing a routine while Loretta lay in her cot and watched the slight billow of canvas wall in the wind. He once told her he had seen his first circus fire when he was eleven. The horses and zebras had broken free of their leather harnesses and run into the woods. A lion had burnt, trapped in his cage before the animal men could get to him. Harry told her how the smell of seared flesh had lingered with him for days. The night he told her he was trembling. He was practicing in the Big Top when the fire broke out. His thigh had a scar – a red blotch of burnt skin – from where the paraffin waterproofing had melted from the canvas. She’d only seen it up close for herself once or twice; he did not show others his injuries. Not like how the animal men revealed their scars from wayward big cats.

The crowd around them angles towards the town’s main road. The noise of the flames and thickness of the smoke must have dulled Loretta’s hearing. She cannot hear approaching traffic from the town. The firefighters are here, Harry tells her, although she might have guessed. *Finally. Where were they when Peg wouldn’t move?* She turns and watches the flash of the headlights, round as moons. Robinson, the Ring Master, breaks away in a run to meet the two men as they jump off the truck that’s parked on an angle by the ticket booths. The firemen are dressed in long trench coats, despite the summer day. Heavy helmets shield their necks. The hose is unwound from the side of the truck, thick and grey like an elephant’s trunk. She’s watching the men work now; the events taking place feel outside of her. Beyond this small Lot; beyond her home.

Harry lifts his head, shifting on the bench. Loretta puts her hand on his leg, just below where she imagines his scar.

‘Stay, just for now.’

Harry doesn’t reply. He’s warm beside her and she imagines a life where they weren’t here on this scratched-up bench, sinking into the mud as everything that could not fit in her suitcase burns. Harry had recently been speaking of the railways starting up in West Virginia. She wondered if they could be happy there. She felt a pull to the crowd, no matter how tough the carriage seats were or lice bites that lived on her skin. But the fire had created an ache that was not there before. She was worn. She thought of the American flags that blew heavily in the wind, positioned high by poles attached to the Big Top. Each year, they’d trim the flags down by cutting the edges that were frayed by the endless flapping in the wind. She felt threadbare, too.

Loretta thought of the shape of her life as firefighters pushed through the lot, distributing thick streams of water over charred remains. The animal cages were decimated, burnt down by the flames and collapsing under the strength of the firemen’s hose. But, despite the spreading heat, parts of the Big Top were saved. Canvas would be replaced and drawn tight over blackened poles. Half of the props survived in clown alley, Harry and Joe picking through the rubble into the night. To Harry’s relief, there was enough to perform with for the rest of the season.

Swill was found in the animal quarters. His remains only identifiable to Maisy, who recognised the shape of him. Broad shoulders; feet a size too big for his frame. The firefighters thought it was Swill who started the fire. A stray cigarette. They told Robinson but he just shook his head. There was no point in blame. Maisy wept for days, sobs turning to whimpers at night. By the next summer, she had stopped weeping and when she thought of him, she would only dab at her eyes out of habit.

The ground smoked into the evening, blackened only temporarily. Within a week, new growth would emerge but no one from John Robinson’s would be there to see it. They’d have moved on to the next town, leaving the residents to retell the events of that day to their children, then grandchildren. The story lived on, told a little differently each time by people who didn’t see the flames but only the lightest hint of smoke in the distance.

Clowns, Horror and Monstrous Women

A friend tells me about the Museum of Death and so Mathew and I go with no expectations, just the aura of a name and the freshness of our first afternoon spent in New Orleans. Close to Bienville Street, we walk into a building with ‘Death’ lit up in what looks like old Hollywood lightbulbs. The first room is full of skeletons: human, horse, rodent. Jars of human teeth sit neatly on a shelf; an alligator skin is nailed to the wall. Rows of pig fetuses suspended in alcohol make me want to clutch them; to squeeze my love onto them as if they will reawaken from my desire alone.

Mathew and I stay here for a while, looking at death – or probably more accurately, remains – in a way that we have not experienced before. I have watched many people die, so many in early life that I used to think Mum was dead when she went on a work trip or I was at kindergarten. But that is grief, longing, sadness. Not the blood and bones and preserved flesh of the museum.

When we enter the next room, passing through an old lace curtain that reminds me of the ‘70s decor sharehouses I’ve lived in, the paintings catch me immediately. The shapes of one, crude circles of primary colours, are familiar. Balloons. I walk to the canvas, getting closer than you could in any art gallery and see the signature on the bottom right: J.W. Gacy.

The painting is a self-portrait. A popular genre in the serial killer room, where men like Charles Manson paint their thick hair and sunken eyes. Unusually though, Gacy paints himself as a clown. His face is painted a pure white. Blue eyes. Red nose. He is not a talented painter by my estimate. The portrait is just shapes layered upon one, it is a vague attempt at realism. I think of my own failed attempts at drawing. Books that instructed me to draw a horse one oval at a time, always keeping an eraser close. Maybe it’s not surprising that Gacy’s portrait lacks nuance; I later learn that painting was a financial decision for him. He worked from prison. He painted self-portraits, graves; for a fee, he would paint the portraits of anyone who wrote to him and enclosed enough cash; work was not born from an artistic desire but the need to create income. Gacy’s self-portrait is, to be blunt, creepy. The absence of technique adds to the slightly off feel to his work, but one that I can also imagine was intentional. He profited off his creepiness. In a way, he played to the crowd much like a clown does.

My eyes are scanning each of the shapes that make up clown Gacy, comparing them to the photograph framed beside the portrait, when I feel Mathew beside me.

‘What the hell is that?’

I turn to him and as I do so, I notice the man to my right carefully inspecting drawings of a naked women done in black ink by another ‘artist.’

‘You don’t know John Wayne Gacy? Killer clown that wasn’t a clown?’

Mathew looks amused at my surprise. Creepy is not his wheelhouse as much as it is mine.

‘Oh,’ he says after a moment and I can tell he remembers Gacy from the podcast on clowning and horror we listened to a week earlier as we drove past the rocky green cliffs and crashing ocean of Malibu.

‘So, he didn’t actually kill anyone while he was a clown?’

‘No. It was a side gig. Another part of him. But it makes for an interesting story.’

‘Almost like if they arrested a serial killer who worked in a coffee shop and called him “Killer Barista” even though he didn’t kill while brewing?’

I laugh. It’s one of those laughs I feel most self-conscious about after it erupts, a cough of a thing filling up the museum air. ‘Exactly.’

I place my hand inside the crease of Mathew’s elbow. His skin is cool from the aircon and we look at Gacy for a moment longer. I can’t connect this man to Loretta but being in America, looking for her makes my patterning instinct strong. And I hate that he’s more known than she will ever be. I’ve known his name for ten years. I was in high school when another student, seeing I was looking up serial killers at the computer bay, turned to me and said, ‘Have you heard of the killer clown?’ and we squealed in shared disgust.

Perhaps most, I hate that Gacy profited off his association with clowning while Loretta died alone and poor in obscurity. When Mathew and I leave the Museum of Death, I’ll walk through the shop and see, among the pins and beetles in perspex, an iron-on patch: it’s Gacy in his clown uniform. A version of his self-portrait living on forever. For sale.

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It’s mid-October and I wake up from a nightmare. Not unusual for me, fitful sleep is just one symptom of my slew of anxiety disorders. It’s the content of the nightmare that unnerves me. Usually, it’s teeth crumbling out of my mouth or being lost and ill, crawling through rough thicket. Tonight, it was clowns. I’ve never found clowns frightening; not as a child, when mum placed a ceramic clown doll in my room. Not even after watching the Pagliacci episode of *Seinfeld*. The most I felt was indifference. I haven’t seen the film adaptation of Stephen King’s *It* – the story of a clown who lives in a sewer and terrorises children – but due less to squeamishness than practicality. Warnings from friends alerted me that high frequency flashing occurs in the film, which could provoke my seizures.

But this dream is prickly. It sticks to my skin as I walk around the house the next morning, making coffee and feeling my dog Suzie’s nudges and stares for breakfast. In the dream, I’m being chased. Or rather, followed, as the clowns walk beside me. Up to me. I can’t outpace them and they

are not shy. These clowns come in packs and look nothing like Loretta or Harry. They're wearing loose, grey costumes. Faded colours, edges caked with dirt and grime. Their masks are curling away from their skin, transforming their features into frightening howls. They look more like something Mike Myers would wear, not the way a real clown would paint their face.

The clowns in my dream travel in packs, following me as I walk home -- which in this dreamscape is my old rental in the CBD that had black mould on the bedroom ceiling that looked like stars. I try to avoid them – they are walking wide and stumbling along, yelling at me – but as soon as I lose one group, another appears. I call Mum and she pulls up in the wide, dented Camry from my childhood. She parks and for some unknown reason we walk together, across a thin bridge and along a lake. But the clowns become more emboldened, walking up to us and leaning down within centimetres of our own faces. In my dream, they have no smell but I imagine it now as sawdust, booze and sweat. They start to push us and I wake.

At first, I think it's a manifestation of anxiety about this book. It's about clowns, so let's make the work *literally* chase you. Imposter syndrome, manifested. *Can you do this? Try and run.* But then, hours past when the dream should have faded, I realise it's a riff on a memory. Years ago: Paris with Mum. That year when I first became unwell. Walking past Notre Dame and onto the Île Saint-Louis, a man dressed as a clown was charging for photos. He was dressed in a brightly covered sateen onesie, his face in white paint, his eyes outlined as black diamonds. As he walked along the street, he whistled in a high-pitched beat, as he placed his arm around women and tried to hug them. I watched as he grabbed a woman's hand and forced her into a spin in the street. She grinned but my stomach tensed and I strode forward, pulling Mum along and away. For the rest of the afternoon on the Île Saint-Louis and along the Seine, I kept seeing him. But before I saw him, I would hear that high cracking whistle.

Upon realising this memory has stayed with me, I first feel anger. I hate that he's come back to my mind, sneaking in through my dreams. I'm angry that the horror of a masked man grabbing women has merged with thoughts of a woman I admire. But I suppose such a mixture of feeling is not uncommon when talking about clowns; they seem to live both as the light and dark sides of us.

*

Willa Paskin in her Slate podcast *Decoder Ring* explores how clowns came to embody horror. She argues that 'two things happened that changed public perception of the clown': one being the circus and the other, television. Early circus clowns were for adults, but circuses began to market to families to expand audiences. The content and persona of the circus (and its clowns) needed to become more family-friendly. The next shift came with the introduction of television. Clowns were

used to entertain, and they sold cereal and burgers to children. The iconic yellow and red clown emblem of the McDonald's restaurant chain, Ronald McDonald was invented and first appeared on television in 1963 and by 1990, was recognisable to 96% of children in America. He was the second most known figure to children, only losing the top spot to Santa Claus. As Paskin says, who a clown was had changed:

By the 1960s... the clowns Americans were most familiar with had been oversimplified. They're contractually obligatorily sunny. They had to be inoffensive and cheerful and happy all the time. All the more complicated aspects of their persona had been suppressed... conditions were ripe for a backlash.

This backlash only intensified when 'killer clown' John Wayne Gacy's crimes gained notoriety in the 1970s. By the 80s, clowns had begun to show up as images for fictional horror:

Poltergeist (1982); Stephen King's *It* (1986); *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* (1988). Horror movies and novels not only reflect our fears but shape them for the next generation. In one study, Joanne Cantor interviews college students to explore lingering effects of frightening media. A student writes of their experience viewing *Poltergeist*, in which a clown doll becomes animated by evil:

I still hate clowns. My grandma, the sweetest lady in the world, used to dress up as a clown and go around children's hospitals cheering them up. I love her... until she put that clown suit on with the wig and make-up and everything. That was the moment when she became something else. I was deathly afraid to ride in the same car with her. I had a fear of clowns for years after, and to this day they really scare me. I remember a few weeks later being at my best friend's birthday party, [at] which a clown was the star guest. I began crying and had to leave the party. To this day I am scared of clowns and will never have one in my house, even when I have children. (291)

For this student, a fear was created that was so intense that it turned their grandma into not a person, but 'something else'. But as Willa Paskin says, killer clowns are not just blunt fear. They are more complex: 'Scary clowns are a window into the dark side of humour. Everyone loves to laugh but not everything that makes us laugh is good, is safe, is nice, is moral.' There's a humour to clown horror that fits in with the greater clowning tradition of contradiction. In 'Schlock Horror and Pillow Punches,' Anna-Sophie Jürgens et al. write of the liminality of clowns: 'In popular culture, this ambivalent position is reflected in the manner in which clowns performatively hover between humorous entertainment and freaky, frightening otherness. They may thus entertain, but also horrify and torment; and they are not limited only to the field of comedy' (3). Clowns have always been complex, exciting fear and joy. And so, while the 'good' clowns we imagine on the circus lot can horrify, 'bad' clowns on the silver screen can also amuse us. While the image of a scary clown can

feel wrong – grins that stretch too large and a face that does not feel human – perhaps it represents what a clown was born to do: inhabit contradiction. Much better than the ‘obligatorily sunny’ clowns of 1960s television.

*

My first taste of horror was at nine years old. I am crouched down on the dusky pink living room carpet, looking at the curved glass of a television screen. Dad and I sit in a room with towering bookshelves, piles of books stacked tightly upon on another. He has put on ‘Alfred Hitchcock Presents Man from the South’ (1960) with Steve McQueen on VHS and for the first time, I feel the pull of wanting to look away but not being able to resist seeing what will happen next.

In ‘Man from the South’, a woman has gambled away her fingers to a man so she could win his car, his house, his everything. The man has taken pleasure in removing all of her digits but two with a knife. In the last shot, the camera zooms in on her hand and I squeal at the thought of this greedy little man (played by Peter Lorre no less) snatching fingers. By the time the credits roll, I feel the horror of what I have seen: a tightness settles in my stomach, my jaw. I turn to Dad and he is laughing in his rare way. He never smiles, not in photos or out of politeness so it is only when he erupts into laughter that I can see the small gap in his two front teeth. He leaps out at me, pushing his hands forward like he is the woman. I shriek and roll over and join him, all the anxiety of what I have seen dissolving into my throat. How quickly fear turns into something else; for me, this was the first time horror and humour melded into something sticky and hard to understand.

*

I think of John Wayne Gacy and the allure of his story in public consciousness. He is known and remembered in a way that the thirty-three people he killed are not. Online, he is detailed on *Murderpedia* and *Criminal Minds Fandom*. His clowning persona, Pogo the Clown, is tied up with his identity as a serial killer. I’m frustrated that this fanfare and celebrity circles him while all that is left of Loretta are archival traces. For Gacy, the ‘killer’ is amplified because of the ‘clown’ yet for Loretta, the ‘clown’ obscures her. After four years of searching, I have not met another person who knows who she was: America’s first woman clown. I know that there is little to compare Gacy and Loretta; other than she was not a killer (at least, as far as I know) and he was. All I see is that his monstrosity is celebrated, his image as the ‘evil clown’ amplifies his notoriety. But Loretta, whose clowning was an attempt at freedom, who followed a path of hard work for more than fifty years, and who pioneered women in clowning, died alone and unknown.

I'm not the first to notice that violent men are mythologised and remembered in stark contrast to how women exist in history: so many disappear with no details of their lives existing in spite of their achievements. Killers have lore; women do not. Lisa Downing writes in *Fuckology* that: 'Where the (male) serial killer is an unlikely hero, a bad boy celebrity, the feminist warrior is not even articulable' (n.p.). Richard Tithecott writes in *Of Men and Monsters* on Jeffrey Dahmer and the concept of serial killer fame: 'The celebrity status of Dahmer, who killed apparently to satisfy an insatiable appetite, depends in part on his victim tally, and a culture which boasts of its levels of consumption' (86). We consume these stories ferociously – buy such stories again and again – but there is also complexity in this picture.

Interestingly, Sady Doyle writes in *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers* that for both true crime and the slasher movie, the audience is largely women and girls:

Slasher movies are a release, in part because they give a name and a face to the problem.

They transform our culture's underlying sexual violence into spectacle and story, giving us monsters to fear and heroines to root for; they cathect all that low-level anxiety into a quick, bright, bloody burst of fear. (38)

I connect to these words. I know the way the fear dissolves into release after a jump scare, that this is soothing. I watch *Poltergeist* and I am alive with tension as the little boy looks around for his clown doll; I can only relax when the clown jumps out at him in attack. The seeds of fear disperse once the worst has happened, after I have watched. Of course, it also helps that it is ridiculous. My preferred horror has an air of camp. I watch *Slumber Party Massacre II* and cackle as the 'driller killer' pauses mid-chase to perform a solo on his half-guitar-half-murdering-drill. If this were to look like the crushing daily violence experienced predominantly by women, I could not look. There would be no release, just foreboding.

With true crime, I can't help but think that the allure is that it's stranger than fiction. At the time, the FBI recorded Gacy's crimes as a 'bizarre series of murders' (The Federal Bureau of Investigation). Is his notoriety because his horrors are so odd that it all feels more like a movie than life. Of course, there is also comfort here because the monster was vanquished; Gacy was killed on May 10 1994 by lethal injection after spending 14 years on death row (Lohr). His story has a neat ending. That is, it disregards the ongoing trauma of his victims and their families. It is also retellable: as Gacy noted before his execution, at that time he had been the subject of '11 hardbacks, 31 paperbacks, two screenplays, one movie, one off-Broadway play, five songs, and over 5000 articles' (Lohr). There is no other way to put it: he is a celebrity for what he did.

He may be one of the world's most famous clowns, right next to Grimaldi.

*

Thinking of men and bones and violence, I am reminded of visiting the Northern Territory in 2016 and the shed I let a man lead me into; scrunched beside his ute and boat, he shows me shelves of boar skulls. I feel the air still in the tin of the shed. The man tells me how he cuts the boars' heads off, using his wrist to illustrate the quick movements he makes with the knife to cut efficiently through bone. He talks about burying heads, letting the bugs do the cleaning for him until he digs up the skull a week later. As he talks, I look at the skulls arranged as one would gleaming trophies in a display case – but there is no bronze or sparkling, it is dim – and I think of the first time I watched *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Mathew and I sat in red chairs in a historic cinema, gripping each other's hands as death filled the screen. The taste of gummy bears on my tongue. In the shed, I have to remind myself that what I am seeing is not a movie, this is *real*. A man is showing me death and bones and I don't know where to look. He picks up his favourite, a skull where the tusks are long and sharp. There is nothing else to do; I take a photo and memorialise the results of his violence.

*

I watch *The House on Sorority Row* (1982) and women, clowns, gore and humour converge beneath the surface of the pool when the house mother, Mrs. Slater, 'accidentally' drowns. The film is good enough to keep its grip on me as I watch; I suck my cheeks in as the women living at the sorority – dressed like she's caught between the 70s and 80s – try to work out who is picking them off one by one. The most terrifying scene is the ending where Katey waits in the attic decorated as a child's room with a gun. Weapon pointed on the attic opening where she has arranged a jack in the box to lure the killer, she shakes and sweats against a clown-printed curtain. The box stops playing and the shot zooms out, revealing a life-size toy clown against the wall. Slowly, its head moves and it dawns on me that it is not a toy but a man dressed in harlequin print with a clown mask painted in white, red and green. I pause the film on my laptop, screenshotting the clown's expression before Katey realises he is beside her. I look at his face; it is menacing, yes, but now paused, I find a smile forming as I look at the painted red gawk of his mouth. A frozen pom pom from his jester's hat hangs in mid-air and I want to laugh. I'm not sure I've ever felt fear in the vicinity of a fluffy white pompom before. I press play and his meticulous white gloves wrap around a sharp hammer and Katey weaves around him. She fires the gun and misses. She throws it at him, missing again. It's silly, made sillier by her grabbing a doll and ripping off its head to reveal a spike with which she then stabs her attacker with repeatedly until he falls back down the attic stairs from whence he came.

Though ludicrous, *The House on Sorority Row* is not then kind to women: a woman's head is found in the toilet and Mrs. Slater who is the first victim is shaped to be the villain after all. It is *her* son who comes for the girls after her death. He is not well, we find out, because she underwent an illegal fertility treatment. As Doyle writes, it is often argued that 'a woman who raises a monster *is* that monster' (190). 'After a life of being violently warped and scarred by patriarchy, women are given the responsibility of recreating patriarchy, by raising their sons to hold dominion over the world and women. We are also given the blame for everything that may go wrong' (191). Mrs. Slater raises Eric the murderous man dressed as a clown and for that, she is condemned as the first to die.

I watch this film as an adult, tucked in bed with my dog kicking in her sleep beside me and groaning in protest when I laugh, but it is connected to my childhood too. There is a clear line between *The House on Sorority Row* and 1997's *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, a film I watched over and over with friends and alone after begging a visit to Video Ezy with Mum. The plot of the two films is almost the same: teens 'accidentally' drown an adult, cover up their crime and pay for their silence one by one. And for me, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* was a graduation of sorts. I had watched Freddie Prinze Jr and Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Scooby-Doo* and now I watched them scream and run from a fisherman's hook and vengeance. This film – *this* plot, however violent and silly and anti-women – has followed me. I have watched it play out on the blue light of my laptop screen at night. And I've aged as I press 'play'. Despite its themes, I return to *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and movies so close in theme that they might as well be (*Scream*, *House of Wax*, *Urban Legend*). Watching them, I feel a return to that girl who somehow felt understood and happy and foolish while watching the gore of a slasher. I have grown from girl to woman and yet this splash of corn syrup disguised as blood connects me to both.

*

Doyle writes of how women are not only feared but framed as monstrous. They argue that fear is a cornerstone of patriarchy:

Fear of women may be the single most important truth of misogyny. A cage, after all, has two purposes. Of course, it serves to keep women confined, hemmed in—to prevent us from going out into male territory and getting what men have, the jobs and money and respect and power that are so much more accessible if you're male. But the second purpose of a cage—the more interesting one—is to protect the world from what is inside it. On some level, the cage exists to keep women from getting *out*. (xv)

The idea of a women's monstrosity being so great that we live in a cage appeals to me, in a way. It's seductive to play the part of a monster because a monster is strong; it's a strength I've never afforded myself. Writing this, I can't help my mind circling back to living in my teenage body. Small and hungry and dressed in black. I remember being on a beach. It's dusk and a friend picks me up and leans me over his shoulder without asking. He is broad and as I push against his arms and back, I feel the tight muscles beneath his skin. He will not put me down; he is walking towards the ocean to throw me in and I stop wriggling and start to plead, to beg. He does not listen, so I scratch and pull his hair until he releases me, panting and cold on the sand. I've written this before, but this memory keeps returning to me. I am small and caged; I cannot be free of it.

I may have endured – living through being picked up and tossed by various men over the years – but I've never been seen as possessing a threatening strength. The idea is novel and I yearn for it. I try not to think of the brutality of what happens to those we deem monstrous, but instead allow myself to revel in pointed teeth and the isolation, the peace of being feared.

But where is Loretta in all of this? I manage to seek her out in this world of the monstrous. How could I not – I'm sure she would have been seen with suspicion at the freedoms she clawed together for herself. For her era, having an income and travelling freely was not the norm. Especially when Loretta's later role in the circus was not women's work: she was not an acrobat nor did she sew costumes. Loretta was throwing punches with the men, pretending to be one of them behind her painted-on expression.

Doyle connects women's monstrosity with the Celtic folkloric tradition of fairy wives and Loretta immediately fills my mind: 'they were women who were hard to keep in one place—women who asked for more than was normal' (64). W. Y. Evans-Wentz writes in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* that 'a man catches a fairy woman and marries her. She proves to be an excellent housewife, but usually she has had put into the marriage contract certain conditions which, if broken, inevitably release her from the union, and when so released she hurries away instantly, never to return, unless it be now and then to visit her children' (165). Fairies were not human; they could be selkies or, when alone, reveal their long snake-like tails. Yet, they had a power most heteronormative women did not. Both in the era these stories were told and since. Their independence was frightening to their husbands, whom they would leave quickly if, in the folklore of the selkie, they opened the trunk they were told not to. I think of Loretta's independence in the early twentieth century, travelling with the circus as a woman dressed as a man dressed as a clown. She sustained herself before and after her husband, Harry. She was physically strong, too, taking hits and tumbling before an audience each day. I wonder if her independence frightened the men

around her and if this was why she took such pains to be seen as feminine outside of her clowning silks. ‘She was a woman before a clown’, her distant relative had told me. But I can imagine Loretta as a little monstrous to some: more fairy than woman. She worked from childhood until death, was financially independent, travelled across America with the circus. When she left the circus, she ran her own business, performing wherever she could to make money. From neighbourhood children’s parties to the annual L.A Rose Parade. And throughout her life, she forged her own path. I’d like to think she was beholden to no one, but I’m not sure that’s possible. Yet she married and dated as she wished; was childfree. Loretta could be constructed as monstrous or some type of fairy. She managed to push against the cage that Doyle speaks of, making it a little bigger. A little easier to live in.

*

As Loretta and monsters swirl in my head, I think about my ache for strength. I cannot not see myself as a fairy or as a monster; my hands do not ripple as I push against the bars. In my home with my tall grey dog following me from room to room, I am strong. I write and brew coffee and pay bills. I come close to being a fairy. But once I leave this enclave, it’s harder.

At a friend’s house for dinner, we sit around the table passing dahl and rice and yoghurt to one another. An older man in a striped polo shirt sits beside me. Later, he tells me that it is my own fault I felt uncomfortable in cafes in Greece. It’s a man’s space and I should respect that is the way it is, even in the country of my heritage. The bright sea and stretching sky of the islands is my home, too, even if it is distant. As he speaks, my hands shake under the table. My mouth opens and I try to reply; he speaks louder, words becoming a shout. Once home and safe, my body vibrates and I am left angry that I did not do enough. Say enough.

I think to become more than anyone thought possible is a kind of violence; breaking free of the hate of difference to become who you need to be. I try to rise to Loretta’s strength but I often wonder what I would have done if born as her. If I could have pushed like she did so and grow big and scary and tall and talented. Really, I’m wondering if I’m strong enough to become a monster – to become Loretta. I’m not sure I can although I wish it to be true. Instead of developing my own fangs, I wonder if I will spend my life admiring the women before me who bent those cage bars?

Chapter Five

Hollywood, 1946

Loretta feels the dry grass beneath her feet as she circles the yard. Her three dogs sniff at the borders of the fence, staying close to her in this new place. Harry died a week ago; she cannot believe that it has been a week since she felt the warmth of his hand in hers. It hurts that time moving forward will only make that memory more distant. She lets the thought go as soon as it comes. She has to settle in LA, and soon. Her trailer contains all of her earthly possessions. Within it, her savings: thirty dollars in small, smudged bills hidden in an envelope taped under the kitchenette table. The most valuable thing she owns are her dogs, and her ability to work them. The knowledge of her poverty has always lived within her but now, in this new patch of grass that is to be her home, it is raw once again. She has no one to rely upon; if she wishes to eat – to live – she must shape it into being.

The back door of the house swings open recklessly. The children rush out – two girls – squawking and ready to play. Loretta has not lived so close to children since the circus with Harry. And even then, they would wander the Lot and try to be with the animals. The acrobats' children would roam in packs, trying to find sticks larger than their own bodies that could reach into the elephant cage and scratch behind the beast's papery ear. The children weren't interested in the two clowns sitting across the table from one another, eating barely-warmed vegetables and joking about stories of towners. Being away from Harry was not all that was new, it seems. These two little girls, Bobbi and Sue, viewed their long-lost Aunt with trepidation and interest.

The girls rush out across the dry grass. The dogs inch towards them, their small Chihuahua feet hesitating at each touch to the ground.

'Sandy, Marilyn, Earl,' Loretta calls out in almost song, the tone the dogs always listen to. 'It's okay.'

The dogs break out into their almost dance, dashing in zig zags around Bobbi and Sue.

'They're friendly, see?' Loretta says and the girls, heads downturned in shyness to this new Aunt who has moved her trailer into their yard, have faint smiles.

The day is coming to a close; school is finished and, once again, pieces of Loretta's day have been lost to thought. This morning, she had lain in bed trying to recall Harry's hands. She brought the image to her head, once again: those thick browned fingers and palms snaked with deep creases. She held on as long as she could, trying not to lose the thought.

You can't do this anymore. There's no money, no time, she thinks to herself. Bobbi and Sue continue to play, now draping a stick in front of Earl's snout. He sniffs it carelessly and Loretta can

no longer bring herself to watch. Without a word, she pulls herself up into the trailer and the warm air gives her a brief moment of comfort. Her shoulders loosen in response and sits down on the cot. The cream sheets have a brown tinge to them. Too many days on the road. She couldn't wash them at the end, for Harry was always there. Spluttering and weak as she boiled water and wet cloth to lay on his upturned wrists. Before he'd gone, he already looked like a ghost.

She shakes her head, as if the action could shake the memories loose and disperse them amongst the garden. She hears Earl bark outside her window and too tired to scold him, lies down on her side of the bed.



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Loretta's shoe strap pinches against her stockings as she sits at her kitchen table. It's hours before she has to leave for Hollywood Forever Cemetery but she is dressed. She had woven her hair into a braid in the dark – each limp strand fight against her – the sun having not yet risen.

Her hand rests against the faded grey enamel of her cup and she the heat of the tea inside is absorbed by her wedding ring. Thoughts don't shape like they usually do but instead are at her periphery. Loretta cannot imagine how she will speak today; words feel too complex and yet,

ultimately, meaningless. She sees the light of the day come, shining through the gap underneath her front door. Then, in the surface of her tea, cold and the cup now half empty.

Marilyn stirs and her slight whine travels through the trailer. Sandy and Earl are beside her at the foot of the bed. Loretta has often thought of the three of them as some kind of puzzle; they only make sense when they're together. Harry used to say that three Chihuahuas equal one dog. It hurts how intertwined her memories are with him. Just as she thinks a moment will pass without him, he returns to her with memories of the past twenty-six years they had lived together. She can't imagine surviving with the pull of her memories submerging her in grief, but she can't imagine living without them. If her memories weren't there bursting through her each moment, how could she live with the solitude?

The front door of the trailer rattles; a gentle knock. Earl barks in response but when Loretta looks to him, his head is lazing on Marilyn's back.

'Come in,' Loretta's voice breaks on 'in', as if this is her first time speaking in years.

Edgar Jnr opens the door. His hair is combed back and his suit is as dark as his thin moustache. He fiddles with his glasses for a moment, pushing them up so he can see Loretta clearly.

'Would you like to come to the house for breakfast?'

Loretta tries to say no but she is silenced as she looks into Edgar's eyes. The nervousness of him disarms her. She knows that he had grown up in the circus, too. He must have known loss intimately but still, he looks at her with fear. Like he could catch the ache that lives within her.

'Loretta?' Edgar places his hands in his pockets, like he felt obliged to move in the presence of her immobility. 'The girls said to ask.'

She nods slowly and rises, using her palms against the table to steady herself. Her thick heels clack against the laminate of the truck floor and Edgar, still in the doorway, goes to guide her down the step. Loretta ignores him and crosses the yard, feeling the sink of the earth beneath her. She hears Edgar clear his throat behind her, striding forward so he can open the back door to the kitchen.

Loretta hears the girls before she sees them. The clanging of their spoons as they eat, the barely subdued giggles. Their mother, Laurie, shushes them as Loretta enters. Laurie's glasses are steamed at the edges from standing over the hotplate. Loretta had always thought Laurie and Edgar made a perfect match; they pushed up their glasses in the same way and always echoed each other's smiles.

'Can I fix you some eggs?' Laurie says.

Edgar moves behind Loretta to the counter, pouring himself a glass of orange juice. Seeing the colour brings a tang to her mouth.

‘No.’ Loretta sounds rough. ‘Thank you. Do you have tea?’

‘Yes, dear. Sit right down.’

Laurie fills the beige enamel kettle with water and places it on the hob. Loretta lowers herself into a chair, sitting across from the girls at the scratched wooden table. Bobbi’s eyes are on her – searching for familiarity in her Aunt’s expression – but she looks down at the table, sweeping her eyes over half-eaten eggs. Sunny-side up.

Edgar’s chair scrapes beside her as he sits. ‘Mother said she would meet us at the cemetery.’

‘Will Ruby be alright getting there on her own?’ Laurie asks as the kettle begins to bubble; the familiarity of the heavy rumbling makes Loretta feel at home in the white surrounds of the kitchen.

‘Her new, ahh, husband will be coming,’ Edgar replies, looking down into his juice. Laurie doesn’t reply, busying herself with pouring Loretta’s tea and placing it in front of her. Laurie then walks over to the girls, smoothing and tucking their hair with the tips of her fingers.

‘The girls and I will change and then we can leave. We won’t be long, okay?’

Edgar nods while the words wash around Loretta, barely registering. As Laurie and the girls walk away and Edgar clears the table, Loretta places her hands around her mug. She watches the sea of white foam swirl at the top of the black tea.

*

The Hollywood Forever Cemetery is walled by thick stone, yet the green expanse makes Loretta think the plots are endless. In the centre of the cemetery is a lake, built twenty years earlier by a man with too much money. At its centre is a colosseum meant just for him and his wife. Loretta had overheard Edgar Junior tell Laurie this a few days before, as he broke the news to her that he’d promised to pay for Harry’s burial. Laurie had been good, Loretta thought, saying, ‘Of course’ in her hushed tone. Loretta had once again thought of how well they worked together.

Harry’s ashes were to be placed in the Columbarium, at the front of the cemetery. Loretta sits on an engraved stone bench, her eyes wandering over the headstones and rows of palm trees that lay before her. Edgar is at the edge of her consciousness; he is talking to his mother, Ruby, and the man in an expensive suit beside her. Laurie is with the girls, a hand resting on each of their shoulders. No one from the circus has come; they had long scattered throughout the country following the most lucrative county fairs. Loretta knew many of the clowns she and Harry performed with now lived in Florida, but doesn’t know more than that.

So, it is a small group that walks through the cemetery hall to the Columbarium: Laurie and Edgar, the girls, Ruby and her husband, all followed by Loretta. They walk through the iron gate and rows of stain glass windows depicting bright waterlilies towards Harry.

The Columbarium brings a cool touch to the air as Loretta enters. The ashes – locked away in their glass cabinets – are speaking to her. *This is a calm place. A place to rest.*

But Harry didn't like rest, she wants to shout. He couldn't even be tranquil in sleep. His legs jittered and jerked; his chest muscles tensed. The truck would often groan and squeak as he tore restlessly through sleep as he did his life.

Ruby breaks apart Loretta's thoughts, 'Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, share with me my beloved, this eternal light...'

The words wrap around the balcony on the first floor, black paint carefully shaped to match the curved iron railing. Beneath the quote lit by the expansive skylight, and a step away from Loretta, is a fountain. It trickles slowly, trying to bring peace to a room throbbing with grief.

The clerk walks through the chapel doors, meeting them. He speaks some quick words with Edgar; Loretta doesn't catch them, nor cares to. The clerk shows them all to the North wall – a bronzed mounted shelf with as many empty spaces as full. Loretta sees Harry, his name engraved amongst the others.

Wm. H. (Harry) La Pearl

1884 – 1945

A shudder collect in Loretta's shoulders, a tremor that runs its way through her. Her wraps fall a little, a slip of shoulder hitting the cold air. Laurie places her hand on Loretta's, using the other to pull up Loretta's wrap. She wants to yell, *what does a wrap matter? What can a bit of fabric do?* But she is also warmed by Laurie's simple movement. She hasn't felt a caring touch since Harry and at this realisation, the anger in her subsides. She grips Laurie's hand tight then turns from the room. She can no longer look at his ashes.

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It's Friday and Loretta, putting on her least worn dress and packing her clown clothes in an old suitcase, catches the bus to the television station. Harry's sister, Ruby, had knocked on her trailer last week while preparing dinner for the girls: her grandchildren. She wore her usual silk dress and fur coat. Loretta had only met Ruby a few times over the years but she liked her. She liked her gruffness – her strength – always wrapped up in expensive fabric. Ruby was beautiful: wide set eyes, a perfectly symmetrical face. Her hair bounced as she walked, set as it was in ringlets. When she saw Ruby, Loretta imagined her pulling her hair tight into rollers each night. Ruby knew how to be beautiful; in her late thirties, she was already with her fourth husband. And so, Loretta was slightly surprised when Ruby had come to her trailer; Ruby had left the circus lot behind after a childhood at the family circus. But Ruby knew the language of money and she told Loretta she had a job, if she wanted it. Loretta was not in a position to refuse and now she was to perform on a television test transmission.

Studio W6XAO is just outside of Hollywood. Loretta watches the orange tiled Spanish houses pass and wonders what she will do when the camera points at her. She has been photographed for the paper many times with Harry but she has never been filmed. She wonders how long she will need to perform for; she could not bring her dogs on the bus and so, had packed a clown's essentials: balls, batons and plates that she could make spin and loop before smashing the

china before shocked towners. It was her favourite trick but she did it rarely, unable to afford to keep replacing the dishes.

Ruby had only given her a time and address so Loretta does not know what she will walk into. She arrives at the nondescript building and is soon escorted by a secretary past the stage and heavy black camera equipment to a small room with two men and the smell of paint. The secretary, who wears a thick heavy floral perfume, leaves without a word and Loretta is left with two men in a white-walled dressing room.

In his fresh suit, he goes to shake her hand. The weight of the thick gold and onyx ring on his ring finger rubs against Loretta's palm.

'I'm Abe. This is Max. I'm going to get you ready for the transmission today.'

'Loretta.' She nods at Abe and Max. 'And what does "ready" mean?'

'Well, unlike at the movies, we're working in low-definition television. The camera can't pick out your features and in trying to, will often flood you in all light giving you an odd, almost flat look. That's why we go in and paint your features in. We call it "Television Make-up" and at Max Factor, we use purples, reds and greens to give your face dimensions.'

As Abe speaks, Loretta looks at the satin smock folded behind him and the large arched mirror. Max is looking away; he'd heard Abe's explanation on repeat for the past month.

'Alright,' Loretta places her suitcase down in approval, 'I'm used to paint, being a clown and all.'

Abe motions to the chair while Max begins to unpack the suitcases filled with small paint pots. Loretta supposes they had packed away the trays of makeup so as not to alarm her with the neon greens and metallic purple. But they had no reason to protect her; the searing reds remind her of home. She helped paint wagons red and gold with Harry to catch the towners' eye. How everyone in clown alley would use the brightest reds to paint on their smile, only changing it in December when they added green too.

Loretta smells the pungency of alcohol as Abe wipes her face down with a cotton towel. Max hesitantly clips her dark hair back and she thinks there's a shake in his hands. Nerves, probably, but she can't help but be brought back to Harry and how he struggled to cut vegetables in the last year of his life.

Max stands by the two suitcases spread out on the dressing room bench while Abe looks over Loretta's features. Unnerved by his gaze and the way he holds her jaw, shifting her neck into different positions, Loretta imagines the monologue playing in Abe's head. *Thick dark brows. Wideset eyes and a slanted nose. Thin lips. An oval face. What can we do about this unassuming jaw? On television, she'll be as flat and pale as a potato pancake.* A smile peeks through Loretta's lips and in the periphery of her vision, she thinks she sees Max echo

it. Abe continues to look, almost frowning, until he says firmly, 'Green 004.' Max fishes a thin brush from his shirt pocket and dips it into one of the various shades of green. Abe works quickly, painting in the half-moons of her under eyes. As he moves from her left eye to the right, Abe says, 'Let me know if this stings, now. We had some ladies not take too kindly to this shade.'

'Oh,' Loretta had felt nothing but the gentle and efficient stroke of his brush, 'I doubt it'll do anything to me. I think I lost the ability for my skin to hurt years ago.' Having her face painted for the first time at the John Robinson circus was a shock. The thick paint had settled into every crease and took days to come out of her eyebrows. This felt like slick cold cream in comparison.

Abe pushes Loretta's chin up with his thumb and she starts slightly.

'Seems I was somewhere else.'

Abe says nothing in response, leaning back towards her and dragging his brush from the outline of her nostrils down into her smile lines. He leaves her chin bare and takes the green slowly down her throat in two parallel lines. It takes a moment for Loretta to realise that the pressure against her throat has made the muscles in her chest clench until Max says, 'And now the purple, sir?' Abe steps away, his brush suspended in mid-air and no longer against her. She breathes in deeply. Surreptitious.

'We'll leave the brows,' Abe says. 'They're already thick enough. But I'll take Purple in 006.'

Loretta closes her eyes to allow the moment to move quickly and she hears Max scrabbling through the leather accordion folds of the suitcase.

'Keep your eyes closed, dear.' Loretta makes a slight nod in response to the smooth lull of Abe's voice.

A flat brush sweeps across her lids and the pressure of it brings bursts of blue and orange. Loretta has loved this trick since she was a child. *Making her own fireworks*, she'd told her brothers. One night, underneath the whites of the Ohio stars, the four of them had lain outside and pressed the meat of their palms deep into their eyes. They described what they saw to one another. Loretta saw oranges and reds, sometimes touches of blue and green. Sylvie saw purple and white.

Abe removes the brush from her left lid and Loretta feels the tension of not knowing what he is doing. She doesn't let the thought of her vulnerability fully form. *There's no use to thinking like that*, she tells herself.

'Purple 002. You may open your eyes now.'

Loretta's eyes blur and then straighten; she sees Max swirling a pin prick thin brush in the brightest purple paint she's ever seen.

‘That’s beautiful,’ she croaks from being silent for too long, ‘is there a place I can buy it?’ She knows she can’t afford much more than food right now, but she tries to forget it in the moments she is presented with a need.

‘That’s a Max Factor patent, for television make-up. We aren’t selling those.’ Abe’s words roll off his tongue; he’d been expecting her to marvel at his creations.

Loretta moves in her chair, as though she is trying to spread the discomfort out from the burning of shame in her chest.

‘Oh. They’d be perfect for clowning,’ she mutters and Abe, not responding, begins to pencil her lips in the vibrant purple. The waxiness of the make-up sticks to the loose skin on her bottom lip and resists the urge to run her teeth along the surface.

Abe steps back to look at the entirety of her face but unlike before, now he smiles.

‘Perfect.’ He speaks with his back no turned to her, grabbing a camera. Max unclips her hair so gently that she wonders if he was there at all. Abe flashes the camera, a large black brick that seems to shrink his hands.

‘You can go to the stage now. They’ll probably have you perform in about an hour.’

Unable to resist, Loretta turns so she is facing the mirror mounted on the wall. Her hand rushes up to her mouth as she sees herself. She looks tired, sallow even with the green paint settling underneath her eyes. But it’s the bright purple of her lips that amuses her. How foolish she looks. She was used to seeing herself painted as someone else, a black and white mask transplanted on top of her face but this was something else. This was her, but a little bolder. *A little witchier*, she thought, taking in the green on the sides of her nose.

‘This is swell,’ she says, turning to Abe who is already distracted by rubbing the tips of his brushes with a handkerchief. Max smiles at her and, with the pink of his cheeks, he looks young. Loretta dips her head, takes her old green plaid suitcase and walks out of the studio. *The girls will love to hear all about this*, she thinks and as she walks, she notices a small bulge in the front pocket of her bag. She waits until she is in her assigned spot near the stage, waiting for them to tell her they’re ready. She makes sure there are no flustered secretaries or unimpressed make-up artists near when she unzips the front pocket. As soon as she sees the pot’s bright purple hue, she is light with joy. Later that night, lying in bed with her dogs, she realises it is the first time she has felt that way since Harry.

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‘Aunt Loretta, tell us. Tell us.’

Bobbi and Sue had lingered in the garden, keeping their eyes on her van until Loretta had let the dogs out. The girls rushed to her, begging to hear about her day at Studio W6XAO.

‘What did you do for the television?’ Sue asks as she wraps her right leg behind her left, twisting herself, making herself smaller to invite Loretta to speak. Her amber hair almost glows in the afternoon sun, giving her a not-quite-earned air of innocence.

Loretta smiles at them, unused to the pattern of shyness then the slew of demands from small children.

‘Let’s see,’ she says and folds herself down onto the grass, bare feet underneath her. The girls mirror her and she spies their bruised knees and scraped shins as they settle.

‘First, they painted my face all types of colours. And then I did lots of tricks while a mean-looking director pointed cameras in all sorts of angles.’

Bobbi frowns and as she does, Loretta thinks on an eight-year-old gruff looks are rather funny.

‘What do you mean tricks, Aunt Loretta?’

Loretta looks around their small patch of grass. She spots a couple of old pieces of garden hose by the brass tap near the base of the house. She pulls herself up and collects the two pieces, feeling the roughness of the scored fabric and rubber in her hands. She does not look but can sense the two girls’ eyes on her, wide as always in her presence.

She turns to them, a piece of hose in each hand. She begins to toss them, higher and higher, ‘til they reach two feet in the air. Loretta switches between each hand so the hoses are arching back and forth and as they get higher, she begins to sink. Sue notices first, elbowing Bobbi.

‘Look, look. She’s stretching.’

Bobbi shrieks when she sees, so transfixed she had been by the hose teetering in the air. Loretta’s legs spread further and further until they are twice as wide as her shoulders; her face, like in every performance, is stretched into a carefree smile. That is one of the first things Harry had told her: ‘Don’t let them see it’s work.’

‘And now,’ Loretta booms in her best impersonation of the ringmasters she had known throughout the years, ‘...the finale.’ On the word ‘finale’, Loretta drops suddenly. Her legs stretch into a full split as the hose arches up into the air for the final time. The moment the hose hits the ground, Loretta folds forward in a bow. Her head rests on the grass and when she sits up grinning, Sue spots a grass seed sitting in the wisps of her aunt’s dark hair.

The girls sit in silence for a moment before Bobbi begins to clap. Sue joins her and as Loretta rises, she has the urge to go to the girls and smooth their hair with her sweaty palm. The dogs who had until now been uninterested in Loretta’s performance in favour of smelling the damp patch of earth by the spigot, trot over to the girls and nudge their clapping hands. Sue curls over Earl, kissing the rounded puff of his cheek.

‘Did you really do that for the television?’ Bobbi asks with a newfound deference for her aunt. Bobbi and Sue had only seen Loretta perform once before at the John Robinson Circus with Harry. Loretta had not been as favoured as their uncle who, during the clowning performance, had run up to the girls holding a Dachshund in an oversized faux white hotdog bun.

‘Well, I didn’t bring the hose. But I brought my batons and hoops. And of course, wore my best costume.’

‘Can we see?’ Bobbi’s eyes are wide and the afternoon sun catches in the brown of them. Sue looks to Loretta, excited but perhaps slightly disappointed that she hadn’t asked first.

Loretta nods and walks with the girls to her van. She hears the tinker of the dogs’ collars behind them. This is the first time the girls have entered her home. It is small and must look smaller to them with the tabletop and kitchen counter at their line of vision. Loretta takes her suitcase from her crumpled bed to the kitchen table – three steps then back by her count. Bobbi and Sue don’t seem to understand their Aunt lives unlike most women her age, so transfixed by what her suitcase holds.

The suitcase zips whirr as she reveals its insides. The girls grip the edge of the table and their fingers leave behind wet smudges.

‘Careful now. These aren’t toys, y’know.’

The girls reply in a high murmur as she lifts one of her batons before them.

‘It looks like a bowling pin,’ Sue says.

‘It’s much heavier than that,’ Loretta says and bounces the baton in her palm to show its weight.

Bobbi edges closer to it and her breath creates a fog on the chrome baton. Loretta places it gently back in her suitcase, rewrapping it in old satin cuttings from a costume Harry had sewn her.

‘And next...’ Loretta makes a display of fishing into the suitcase as if it held all a magician’s tricks. ‘The three rings!’

As her voice washes over the van, she scoops up the three rubber rings onto her wrist. Blue, red and yellow, she twirls them in tight circles creating a spin of colour. Sue puts her freckled hand out, spinning her own wrist with a phantom ring to copy Loretta’s movements. Loretta snatches the spinning rings off her left wrist with her right hand, placing the yellow on Sue’s wrist and the red around Bobbi’s neck. Invigorated, Bobbi spins in a quick circle and the red of the rubber ring blurs around her neck as she does. Sue giggles at her younger sister and for a moment, Loretta joins her.

‘Okay, girls,’ she says, husky and gentle. She removes the ring from Bobbi’s neck and Sue passes her the other. ‘That’s enough for today.’ An ache has set in Loretta’s bones and each movement takes renewed effort. Bobbi and Sue trail out of the van, the now evening air cooling their flushed cheeks.

Loretta leans against the van's doorway and a short, sharp whistle leaves her lips. Sandy, Marilyn and Earl rush to her, leaving the cool patch of grass they had fallen asleep on. She closes the door behind them and boils the kettle, making a cup of black tea for dinner.

Chapter Six

Sometime during the 1960s, Ohio

Loretta wakes to the tap of Carmen's paw on her chest. She groans gently in response, her mind still living in a dream – the faint memory of stretching her body out, eyes blurring at the beige of the canvas tent ceiling. Carmen taps again, nails scratching at the faded cotton of Loretta's nightgown.

'Carmen,' she says, 'we have nowhere to be. You don't have to wake me so early.'

Loretta cannot see the tilt of Carmen's head upon hearing her. Her features have become a white blur. But she imagines the quiver of the dog's cheeks, excited for breakfast. Her wide eyes and paws that tap along the floor of the trailer.

Carmen yelps, only once, but the tone of it is unmistakable. *Wake up. Breakfast.*

'Okay, okay. I'm moving.'

Loretta props herself up on her pillows, readying to become upright. Too quick and the rush of blood fills her ears. She fell once, hitting her right knee hard. Her hand massages it at the memory. She heard the crack of it beneath the whooshing noise in her head. Tears streaking her face in pain, she'd thought how much the whooshing sounded like the ocean. She hadn't seen the water in over a decade; her life in Los Angeles belonged to someone else.

Carmen pushes her head under Loretta's hand, flicking it up in a quick movement. She laughs at the life of this small dog.

'Like that will make me move faster, Carmen. I'm not young like you are.'

Carmen places her two front paws on Loretta's lap and she feels the weight of this little dog through those two paws. She brings her hand up and touches the wooliness of Carmen's fur, stroking her head down to the base of her neck.

'Alright, love.' Loretta tells her, pulling herself up. Stiffness consolidates into a shooting pain down her right knee. She groans through it. It doesn't help but letting herself speak her pain is one of the pleasures of living alone. There's not another person for a mile – her trailer is parked on an old circus friend, Al's land. Loretta has learnt that she can groan, shout or swear. No one can hear her.

She moves to the kitchen, instinctively reaching for Carmen's food. She pulls back the ring and her trailer fills with the smell of pink fatty meat. Her jaw moves in disgust, preparing to gag. Carmen's tail thwacks Loretta's shins as the dog circles her feet in excitement. She places the can on the small square kitchen table with rounded edges. She'd long given up bending down to place the food on the floor; Carmen knew to jump onto the chair and then the table to eat. Loretta liked it better that way. It meant someone used the second chair she couldn't bring herself to be rid of.

She listens to Carmen's hasty gulps. She doesn't know when she last had an appetite like that. These days she doesn't eat much. A cup of black tea for breakfast and again at lunch. Maybe a cookie. A can of soup or beans in the early evening. The elders at the Lot would complain that as they grew older, they slept and ate less. 'My body doesn't have to make it so obvious I'm on my way out,' a clown had joked. Her own ageing had felt so distant then, pulled forward as she was by making enough money to survive the next month. Hell, the next week. Now, she was grateful she wasn't hungry. It stretched out her savings. She was lucky that Al had a friend nearby. Every month he'd send his teenage son to drop off cans of soup and dog food, boxes of tea, cheap soap and packets of cookies. Each time, she'd give him her wrinkled cash and offer him a cup of tea while Carmen barked at the stranger. He hadn't stayed once.

Brat, she thinks. At least Al's a good man.

She tries to remind herself of her luck: to have Al look out for her, to have the extra money from when he helped her sell her car – she can't leave the trailer now but it's not like she could drive, anyway – and of course, Carmen. They look after one another.

Carmen walks across the table, jumping back into Loretta's lap. She starts; her mind had drifted elsewhere.

'Hello, little one. Are you finished?'

Loretta feels lightness of the small rectangle can. She'd had to ask the teenager to stop buying canned fish for her; they were too similar in shape to Carmen's dog food; Carmen had gulped down tuna twice for dinner, unable to believe her luck. Loretta's stomach also didn't like the richness of it. She had grown used to the blandness of tomato soup and on Sunday chicken noodle. It was her way of honouring the meal she'd cook for Harry when they were on the road. He'd always ask for her oyster chicken on their day off. She was grateful; it was one of the few things she knew how to cook when they first lived together. Later, the other circus women would share recipes with her.

Loretta idly wonders how Doodles is. She'd been the only other woman clown she had met. She'd also been travelling with her husband, Fred. They used to write to one another, back when Loretta's vision was good. In her last letter, Doodles had said that she and Fred were settling in at the winter quarters in Sarasota. Loretta had other friends who'd gone there but she knew it wasn't for her, having given up on the circus for the better pay of state fairs for decades. Even after all these years, she felt more at home in Ohio. Having spent her life in central America and the West Coast, she wasn't prepared to move to Florida. 'I'm too old for that,' she'd told Carmen the day Doodles' letter had come.

Loretta places the can in the bin and twists the gas, jiggling it so the flame catches. It had been playing up lately; some days she could smell the gas spread through the kitchen as she fiddled

with the switch. Her fingers move to the box of black tea, placing a tea bag in her mug. Loretta pours hot water into her mug once the kettle begins to hiss, the strain of its weight on her wrist. A few drops of water fall onto the hand steadying her mug and without thought she wipes it onto her nightgown. She imagines the front of it streaked with stains from her absent-minded wiping. Loretta thinks of it as brush strokes from her life. Once, years ago in a museum, she saw a thick block of dried paint. It had been collected from an artist's studio – she could not remember whose it was. He had wiped off the excess paint on the wall in the corner of the room. Over the years it had built up to be inches thick. The museum had cut it out and displayed it, slicing it in half so Loretta could see the years' worth of layers. She had thought it looked like a diagram of the earth's surface; layers upon layers. It took her mind a while to process it was paint. It made her smile to think of how that artist thought this corner of the room was junk, but the museum thought it good enough to display. She liked to think that way about her own life. A dirty nightgown that she would scrub come the end of the week, or a pile of old letters kept in a shoe box could be thought by someone else to be worthwhile. Loretta found this thought surfacing most at night, when she would lie in her bed – shifting to avoid the sinking parts of the mattress – listening to the guttural hum of the crickets outside.

With the mug of tea hot in her hand, Loretta shuffles to the trailer door. It's Summer so she's wedged it open, just the screen door is closed to keep the bugs out. It's only somewhat effective; Carmen has torn streaks through the mesh by the base of the door. The hinges squeak as she pushes it open with her elbow. The dog rushes out by her feet and Loretta hears the brush of long grass as her small white body whips through it in circles. Loretta sits in an old iron chair and table Al had brought over when she first set up on his lot. That had been when her vision was better and she'd smirked at the chipped paint, an atrocious fire truck red.

Now, in the summer morning air, Loretta closes her eyes. The sunlight is gentle on her face and her nose warms. There is barely a breeze and the two wind chimes she'd strung up sound more like crockery being boxed and moved than the harsh jangle that comes through the screen door on winter nights. Mid-morning is her favourite time of day; it's when she moves with the most ease. She has done none of her chores yet, so her day has structure to it. She finds the afternoon – dishes tidy, Carmen sleeping with the occasionally whimper – the hardest to get through. These are the hours most guard against by having children, she'd often thought to herself. At least that's what her mother had said to her when she was a child. *I'll never be alone with you kids*. Now that she was well past her mother's age when she died, she saw the foolishness of this. Her birth had not shielded her mother from loneliness, not when she'd enforced years of their estrangement. Sylvie, Ferdinand, William and Charles were there, Loretta thinks. But they had their own families and work; they weren't enough to fill each afternoon. In her final years, her mother was as alone as she is now.

Both had husbands die decades before them. Loretta doesn't have a built home like her mother had, but her trailer is enough. She'd fitted it out with Harry, it was for the two of them. For herself, it is plenty.

Carmen barks in a heavy staccato. *A bird*, Loretta thinks. Carmen had taken to making herself known in the face of any nearby animals. If she wasn't so tired by nightfall, Loretta thought she would've tried to hunt crickets. For such a small dog, her natural instincts were there in full force. One moment she'd be barking at birds that were almost her size and in another burrow into Loretta's chest. The dog begins to growl in a growing crescendo and Loretta shushes her, annoyed.

'Come on, girl,' she says, and she hears Carmen rush back to her through the grass, circling her ankles in affection.

Drinking the last of her tea, the tannin dry in her mouth, Loretta moves back inside to begin the day's work. Carmen follows, sitting on the kitchen chair, watching, as Loretta wets a rag cut from an old shirt. She drags it over the kitchen table, the cooktop and the cupboard handles until her knuckles begin to ache. She likes to do it twice, knowing with her blurring vision that she will miss spots the first time. Loretta washes her mug, clipping up her tea bag in the afternoon sun so she can use it again this evening. The table now dry, Loretta takes a cushion off the bed and places it on the surface so Carmen can stretch out and sleep. Carmen clambers up quickly and Loretta sits beside her, stroking her cottony head as her breathing grows heavy with sleep.

'Hush now,' Loretta whispers, grateful for the peace of their late mornings together.

She watches Carmen as the sun heats the trailer, her nightgown growing damp under her armpits and on her lower back. Loretta shuffles back to her bed, opening the nearby closet to toss on an old shift dress. It reveals her shoulders and the air moves across them, cooling her. She lets out a small sigh, split between the pleasure of coolness and her boredom while Carmen rests. She picks up her knitting – she'd long given up sewing. The needle had become too difficult to thread and when working with fabric. Oh! She'd spent hours spent crouching over dog costumes. Most folks complimented her on the ballerina costume. She can see the pink tufted collar which matched the fullness of Sandy's skirt. She'd chosen a bright pink tulle rather than an almost beige, hoping it would be more resistant to the dirt and damp of the fair grounds. Less folks noticed the Popeye outfit she'd made for Earl. It looked simple but her hands had been sore from seam ripping and stitching. She'd made the sailor top with a bright red tie in hours but tailoring the pants took three days of work. Nobody seemed to understand how odd it was to make pants for an animal who walks on all fours. Just thinking about having to redraft the pattern made Loretta huff in frustration.

Knitting didn't come as easily to her, but it was simpler. Her fingers could feel each stitch on her thick plastic needles. Slipping off a stitch was almost meditative. She didn't return to her memories as she so often did but felt her mind clear through gentle concentration. Loretta knew her

work wasn't anything to be impressed with but knitting scarves and blankets for winter filled the afternoon until stiff hands demanded she stop and soak her knuckles in warm water. When Carmen was awake, she'd turn on the radio and listen to hits from the 50s and, often, dreary news that confirmed her ill opinion of the world. But on summer days like this, with Carmen asleep and the consuming quiet punctured by the click of her needles, Loretta is happy for the hypnotic power of it all.

*

Loretta wakes to the sound of Carmen shaking back and forth. Coming back into consciousness, she realises she is upright and at the kitchen table. She blinks quickly and there's a metallic dryness in her mouth.

'I must've dozed off there, Carmen.' She is raspy and thick with sleep.

Carmen runs to the screen door and starts pawing at it and whining.

'Coming, coming.' As Loretta stands, her vision turns white and blood rushes to her head. In the distance, she hears a padded thud. Her knitting must've been on her lap as she was sleeping.

'Shit,' she yells and the fierceness of it silences Carmen's whines. Loretta's hands grasp at the sideboards as she pulls herself along the length of her trailer until she can roughly push open the door, kicking the old box she uses for a doorstep into place so Carmen can nose her way back inside. Carmen rushes out before the door swings back with a thud. Relieving herself and probably looking for something to hunt, Loretta thinks. Her eyes are filled with white and she realises how much she relies on the shadows of her sight. She pulls herself back across the trailer, falling onto her forearms when she gets to the bed. The movement from upright to horizontal means her mind spins. Loretta clenches her hands, riding out the nausea brought on by the rush of her head. The spinning slows and she takes in air, but too quickly and she falls into a coughing fit. As the coughs dwindle, Loretta lowers herself gently onto her stomach, then rolls over onto her back. She breathes – the air burns in her lungs – and looks up at the ceiling. She counts as she stares, the white shroud of her vision dissipating. Shadows returning. It had been only a short sleep, but her thoughts are slow with exhaustion. She had been careful when she sat up, after a fall years before. But sometimes, she made mistakes. She knows to be wary, but her body forgets. Loretta wonders if she is caught up in the way she used to be. She remembers the stretches and planned falls more than the aching joints and low blood pressure.

In the first months of clowning, she would massage her bruises gently. Pressing into the painful spots, testing how deep the hurt went. Harry would roll his eyes at her nightly routine, but it was also how she kept in touch with herself. She had known she was changing, her body charting

the experience. It was important to archive it in her memories. All these years later, she could not be more different. She ignores the twinges, not even mentioning them to Carmen. Groans will sometimes erupt but they are most often for the lightest pain, sometimes not physical at all but memories of the past. Always returning to her without warning. Loretta hates those most of all: images of arguments with Harry about money; hitting Sylvie when he'd ripped up sheet music when he was little. She hated that those memories hadn't faded with age. She knew the more they appeared in her mind, the harder they would be to forget.

Loretta hears the rhythm of Carmen's barks outside and a faint smile passes across her lips. She knows the trailer will be full of bugs after leaving the door open at dusk but she can't bring herself to curse the size of Carmen's bladder. Another heartbeat in her small home means she's not living for herself alone. Loretta feels the weight of tiredness and closes her eyes. *We look after one another*, she thinks, letting her limbs sink into the mattress and waiting for another day to pass.



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To Be The First/The Only

It's 2016 and I find an image in the stacks at the Oregon Historical Society. I do not yet know this will change my life. That night, her image swirls in my head. Googling combinations of phrases, I find just one article: Loretta La Pearl is the first woman clown in America. The article is by Earl Chapin May, written in 1927 for *Popular Mechanics*. May writes that the 'only woman clown tells of the clever tricks which win laughs from the "Townners"' (595). In the article, Harry introduces his wife, Loretta, as 'the only woman circus clown' (596). May writes that 'Loretta La Pearl became a clown because she married one seven years ago' and when '[Harry] told her there was absolutely no demand for women clowns', she said 'Then let me make up as a man' (596). Loretta does not call herself 'first' or 'only,' but Harry and Earl Chapin do. Their words are written beside hers, contextualizing. Molding.

Five years later, having followed Loretta halfway around the world, through archives and online, I question whether this 'first' label is true. I read Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene in *Women of the American Circus, 1880-1940* who write that 'for a hundred years, articles and books about clowning have given reasons for women's lack of participation, usually citing their insecurity and vanity, which make them unwilling to perform in outlandish costumes' (184). But throughout 1880 to 1940 and 'regardless of public declarations, women were indeed performing as clowns, albeit as a minority, even though in each decade publicity portrayed a woman as the "first" or "only"' (184). Adams and Keene reference a series of women who were working as clowns and receiving attention for their efforts: Amelia Butler in the James M. Nixon's Great American Circus in 1858; Miss del Fuego in the Robinson and Franklin Circus, 1896; Evetta Mathews was 'the only lady clown on earth' in the *New York Times* in 1895. Years pass and more women are written as the 'only', the 'first'; well before Earl Chapin May's article in 1927.

Adams and Keene attribute a lack of recognition for women clowns to oppressive ideas of womanhood. They cite Louise Peacock, who wrote in 2009 that 'status is only readily given away by those whose status in society is secure. Hence the fact that most famous clowns in western society have been white men (the only exception is the Cuban clown, Chocolat)' (78). Peacock is saying that only those who already feel secure of their power (e.g., white cis men) are willing to act silly in public. It's a confusing claim and one that does not consider how white supremacy or patriarchy might affect a clown's ability to become 'famous.' And, as Adams and Keene later posit, Peacock's statement is incorrect. There *are* nonwhite, nonmen performing as clowns both now and historically. In researching Loretta, I have incidentally found half a dozen women across America and Australia who performed in clowning. I imagine my results would be much richer if I

systematically searched for women in general performing as clowns, and that's not even taking into account women who, like Loretta, dressed as a man and, unlike her, kept this secret.

Of course, it is better marketing to be the first or only. Especially in the circus where to be unusual is to be a selling point, an audience pull. To be the tallest, the strongest is an attraction. I wonder if Harry acted on this knowledge. Having grown up in the circus and worked in sales, I'm sure he was aware that to position Loretta as the 'only woman circus clown' to May was to market her (as well as himself). Harry could have been making a strategic choice or it could simply be that he believed her to be the first. Perhaps – for both him and in the public realm – memory of women clowns before Loretta was erased. As quickly as they were heralded as pioneers, they vanished.

I'm not so interested in categorically proving that women clowns exist (they do) but am compelled to explore the desire to categorise a woman as first and/or only. As Adams and Keene write, 'critics, managers, and audiences did seem to find it controversial for women to appear as satirists, poking fun at family traditions, and to engage in skits that might include entrance into the stands and interaction with circus goers' (187). Is it this 'controversy' – the surprise at finding women working in physically demanding, comedic jobs – that means each woman is viewed as an anomaly? I wonder if this is what influenced Loretta to dress as a man to do her job.

I question if we are stuck, claiming first over and over, because then it is not a tradition of women being bold, physical, hilarious. When there's only one, we can explain away the woman clown as an anomaly. Perhaps it then makes her all the easier to forget.

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In 1993, marketing experts Al Ries and Jack Trout a book, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, on the importance of being first. The first law is the 'Law of Leadership', where they write 'it's better to be first than it is to be better' (2). For a memorable brand, it is vital to pioneer. Ries and Trout cite brands like Kleenex or Xerox where the item is often known by the brand name. Not all of their examples hold up in the thirty odd years after the book has been released (*USA Today* still exists; IBM is not without competition for leading computer seller) and in the third chapter, they are quick to clarify that first means first as *perceived* by the consumer. Yet this idea of first making or breaking a company is still repeated in marketing today. Ira Kalb writes for *Business Insider* in 2012:

Whenever I teach a marketing course or seminar on branding, I ask the question, "Who was the first man on the moon?" In all cases, I get the answer – "Neil Armstrong." When I ask the question, "Who was second?" a couple of people timidly mumble, "Buzz Aldrin." Then, when I ask who was third, I have never gotten a response – right or wrong.

This is sometimes known as the first-mover advantage. Kalb explains that ‘it is usually a big advantage to be first, but unless it is properly recorded and communicated, few will be able to remember who or what is first.’

Reading through *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, it is not the idea of being first that catches me but the slipperiness of the second law, ‘The Law of the Category’: ‘if you can’t be first in a category, set up a new category you can be first in’ (10). They begin the chapter by writing:

What’s the name of the third person to fly the Atlantic Ocean solo? If you didn’t know that Bert Hinkler was the second person to fly the Atlantic, you might figure you had no chance at all to know the name of the third person. But you do. It’s Amelia Earhart. Now, is Amelia known as the third person to fly the Atlantic Ocean solo, or as the first woman to do so?

(11)

As well as ‘woman’, Ries and Trout go on to examine how companies can define themselves within a niche, specific categories like ‘high-priced domestic beer’ and ‘minicomputers.’ It’s a brief insight but it is clear. Women as subset, a more specific category of person. While ‘man’ and ‘person’ are seen as synonymous, women are the ‘other’. When you say a woman’s achievements only fit within a narrow definition, you imply they are less impressive.

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In the 1927 Earl Chapin May article, Loretta gives a rare quote: ‘the first trick I learned was how to save myself’ (597). How could I not be enamored with her? She hints at knowing how to live and I feel the pull towards her every time I hear her voice. Of course, in the article, she is not talking about living but about how to protect herself from tumbles and falls in the ring. Yet my mind goes beyond the literal. I cannot help but project: *how can I save myself?* Her phrasing is alluring; she could have so easily said the first trick she learnt was to soften a fall. Instead, this idea of self-protection. Fearlessness. It feels like a hint, as if she knew I would come all these years later.

*

Holly Grout discusses celebrity and the creation of publicity in the nineteenth Century for *Aeon*. Talking about Thomas Edison, Lord Byron and Franz Liszt, Grout identifies their transition to ‘celebrity’ as ‘creating and performing a personality, a public persona that was unique but – crucially – reproducible, they distinguished themselves during their own lifetimes, and ensured their posthumous legendary status’ (n.p.). Grout’s definition is interesting in that it balances uniqueness and reproduction.

I think of fame and the usual suspects come to mind: Marilyn Monroe, Kim Kardashian, Kanye West, Donald Tr*mp. All American. All specific enough that if pressed, I could muster an impression. I wonder if fame is when someone appears as a caricature on SNL? Perhaps the power of impressions in making and perpetuating fame cannot be underestimated. After all, as Ian Crouch writes for *The New Yorker*, SNL political impressions have been ‘credited by pundits as having a real effect on voters’ sense of who won the actual debates’, and that the show ‘reinforced the widely held verdict that Clinton had won and Trump had lost’ their infamous televised debate. But fame is not only a political mechanism, it is a financial one too. As Grout argues, circus owner P.T. Barnum also understood the mechanics of fame:

Perhaps no one mastered the phenomenon of creating and publicising 19th-century personalities more effectively than the American showman P T Barnum. A clever entrepreneur and shrewd promotions man, Barnum used his museums, circuses and travelling-company productions to launch the careers of newcomers such as the two-foot-tall ‘General Tom Thumb’ and the opera singer Jenny Lind, whom he billed as ‘the Swedish Nightingale’. Rather than focus solely on talent, Barnum exploited Thumb’s small stature and showcased Lind’s sweet temperament and foreignness. He then used the media and the marketplace to transform both performers into international sensations – into celebrities. (n.p.)

Barnum leveraged the effect of creating a unique persona for financial reward. Perhaps the most famous example – and one key in understanding the mechanics of persona in the circus – is ‘General Tom Thumb’. The name, taken from folk lore, was chosen by Barnum for Charles Sherwood Stratton when he employed him in 1842. Stratton, who was a little person, was then four years old. He stayed with Barnum throughout much of his life; Barnum went on to publicise Stratton’s wedding to fellow performer and little person Lavinia Warren. Some say the wedding was arranged by Barnum but to this, Stratton wrote:

It is true we are little but we are as God made us, perfect in our littleness. We are simply man and woman of like passions and infirmities with you and other mortals. The arrangements for our marriage are controlled by no showman. (Hawkins n.p.)

Warren went on to write in her memoir that Barnum would ‘rent’ babies for Stratton and Warren to pose with, pretending it was their child. Later, conflicting evidence shows that this child could have been Warren and Stratton’s though Warren did not corroborate this. Either way, there was clear financial motivation for Barnum to objectify Stratton and Warren continually and publicly.

At Barnum’s behest, throughout his lifetime Stratton performed in front of 50 million people, one of whom was Queen Victoria. Stratton’s personal milestones were made into entertainment by Barnum, who profited from public curiosity about Stratton’s life.

Marketer and circus researcher Kate Holmes discusses two other famed circus owners, John Ringling and Bertram Mills. Like Grout, Holmes shows how their celebrity was a deliberately performative and constructed identity, but Holmes goes on to connect these men's constructed identities with the national identities of England and America. Discussing John Ringling, Holmes pinpoints the transition from marketing the Ringling circus as a family enterprise – run by five brothers: Al, Otto, Alf, Charles and John – to John as sole owner (204). The 'Ringling brand' had been well constructed as one that connoted family. Holmes writes that it:

[used] the brothers' image and carefully presented a story that activated a powerful myth of American self-identity. If five brothers could create one of America's largest circuses from nothing, then they were just like any other American watching from the stands, and any American could apply themselves and achieve what they had. (207)

Celebrity was constructed not just around performers, but the Ringlings as owners. The merging of family values, the American dream and the trope of circus as a family community (206) meant that the Ringling circus constructed itself as America's circus. Yet there were contradictions in this self-created image. Holmes writes that they:

reinstated those hierarchies by terming themselves 'Monarchs' of the circus, as on the 1901 poster. This rags-to-riches narrative shows Ringling publicity – and therefore the circus – as reflecting the gap between American cultural self-identity and the social reality of living in America's hierarchical society. (207)

The status of 'Monarchs' came through idealizing self-created wealth. It was when John Ringling defaulted on a large loan, taken mere weeks before the Wall Street Crash (209), that his celebrity shifted gears. 'In losing the circus that he and his brothers had built from a small wagon show into the world's largest circus, John represented the American Dream gone wrong' (Holmes 209).

Both Barnum and Ringling marketed their self-created mythologies to achieve success. While some could say their own persona was, like Grout posits, 'unique but reproducible', it was their ability to shape the multitudes of the people who worked in their circus into a marketable entity. Because of Barnum, Charles Sherwood Stratton became General Tom Thumb. He is remembered as Thumb.

I think about Loretta. She is not remembered, but I wonder, if she had been in the hands of Ringling or Barnum, if she would have been 'the first woman clown'. Would her name have adorned circus posters as tall as I am? Maybe not 'Loretta' but a moniker. *Lady Clown*. Would she have liked this exaggeration of one part of herself? I try to decide whether it is better to be forgotten or remembered as something other than yourself. Once again, I'm left wondering.

*

Ruth Simpson and Patricia Lewis write in *Voice, Visibility and the Gendering of Organizations* that women who work in male-dominated professions ‘are often disadvantaged by their token status – forced into a narrow set of stereotypical roles and largely excluded from the dominant group culture’ (2-3). And while women are hyper visible in the workplace, men are invisible ‘because men are seen to stand in for humanity in general and their experiences are consequently “universalized”’ (3). Invisibility, then, is the ‘strong presence’ that ‘emanates from the transparency that accompanies the norm’ (3). To be invisible is to be unnoticed; to fit in. I think of places where I have felt the chafe of being looked at: being one of two women among fifty men at the South Australian chess centre; ordering a coffee in Athens, only men around me. Being from the diaspora, I know enough to feel uncomfortable, but my knowledge is limited – I entered patriarchal space, unaware. Yet, unlike within a workplace, these were spaces I could leave.

I read Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s famed and often cited 1977 book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*. While Kanter focuses on gender in corporations, studies have since applied her theories to differing workforces and incorporating intersections like race, sexuality and/or disability. She writes of the experience of a ‘token’ group: any group that is less than 15 percent of the employee population and is perceived as different (210-211). Kanter’s theory posits that ‘tokens’ experience assimilation, visibility, and contrast. She defines assimilation as when someone is placed into a role because it is perceived as appropriate for their gender, which in turn often results in limitations in career advancement. Visibility is where an employee is hyper visible and scrutinized, often with the result where they have to prove their skillset, and contrast is the isolation resulting from other employees overemphasizing differences between themselves and the ‘token’ group. The three experiences of assimilation, visibility and contrast are a structural barrier to individuals thriving in the workplace. Simply put, they bear the consequence of being ‘othered’, of being seen, of scrutiny.

These questions of invisibility and visibility that Kanter or Simpson and Lewis have grappled with runs through my understanding of Loretta’s life. In her 1927 interview with Earl May Chapin she says she is dressed as a man to perform. I disagree. I think she is dressed as a clown, who is genderless. Chapin frames masculinity as the default but I believe she moves from presenting herself as one gender to no gender. By dressing as a clown, she becomes invisible to the audience; she blends with the men surrounding her. Loretta becomes visible when she’s the ‘only’ or the ‘first’ woman clown, but and this is a public kind of hypervisibility, which doesn’t celebrate her unique achievements as much as emphasize her difference to her male peers. In press coverage, she is contrasted to her fellow performers (can she perform as they do physically? Is it too dangerous for a woman?) even as she must also conform to the abstract idea of the ‘generic’ woman who does not clown (Loretta cooks for her husband; she is ‘feminine’). To be a token is to be less

than the people around you; less than yourself. And within the context of the circus, the first woman clown markets the space as one that pushes boundaries and will surprise audiences – an association that benefits the industry while risking little through Loretta’s gender identity, which anyway, while in the ring, is invisible.

If you Google ‘first woman to’, millions of results come up. These women are visible as *the firsts*. First woman to win the Nobel Prize in Physics; become a doctor; surf The Right; fly an F-35A in combat. I think these firsts are not just anomalies that are easier to forget than traditions, but also a way to push against the idea of systemic barriers. While what these women achieved is incredible, the underlying message: *If they could do it, it is possible*. We point at the individuals to show that there are no barriers. It’s the American Dream. *If you strive hard enough, you will make it*, it whispers. It’s pervasive.

When I was living in Oregon, a friend told me about a woman who ‘had nothing’ and would pick up old furniture from the side of the road, fix it up, sell it. ‘Now, she has her own business. Even people in the worst situations can turn it around,’ she told me, and a shock set into my chest. I wanted to yell. *No, no. That is not true*. I think of my Big Yiayia who followed her sons to Australia after a life on a small Greek island. She could not speak English, couldn’t drive. To catch the bus somewhere – to move out in the world – was to make a judgement call of risk. She worked as hard as anyone I know, but still. What hope to fulfil unsaid desires when simply moving about Adelaide safely effort enough?

We cannot break systemic, cultural and inherited barriers from sheer individual will. I worry that talking about these achievements loudly – whether the first woman clown or a woman who restored furniture until she was no longer living in poverty – allows us to ignore the reality of life for all the other women who are not being written about in the paper.

*

I first met Loretta’s great niece, Bobbi, after I’d been driving for hours through the Southern Californian mountains. She flings open her door and says to me, ‘I’ve been waiting for you to come.’

She knew someone would write about her family before I did. I’m not sure I’ve felt this, the confidence of being important. I wonder if it is difficult for most of us to believe our story is worth telling. Maybe there are two types of people, after all. Those who believe in the power of their stories being told and those who do not.

I wonder what Loretta would have thought. Loretta always loved the audience, but could she have imagined an audience of one, (a biographer) like me? I don’t want to admire ‘firsts’. I see the

inaccuracy about this as a status, but I cannot change that this was part of the pull I felt towards Loretta when I first learnt of her. But despite this trope reoccurring, for me it wasn't her defining feature. It was May – alongside other journalists – who lauded her firstness. For me, as I relinquish the mistaken flashiness of her being the first woman clown, I become more intimate with her personness. After all, it was the hints of who she was that fueled my search.

I saw Loretta for the first time five years ago. It was an unexpected meeting, like all of life's best discoveries are. I held her photograph by its edges, careful not to smudge its shining surface. I've returned to the scan of this image countless times over the years, each time looking for something else. Hoping that this static representation of her will answer my latest question about the intricacies of her life. The original photocopy that was taken in the Oregon Historical Society sits in my wardrobe in a plastic sleeve, unbent despite it having travelled from Oregon to Adelaide, and subsequently with me on each move I've made over the years, suburb to suburb. This small piece of Loretta's story – one that probably had held no meaning to her – has travelled with me for the past five years. It will continue to live beside me long after this book is forgotten. After I've surpassed her age when the image was taken. Its meaning has morphed beyond a chance encounter to something that thrums with its own life.

Looking at the lights and darks of her photo, it doesn't matter she wasn't the first woman clown. Because if she is remembered as the first – if this book sticks in readers' minds and they take this one part of it away with them – then she will be. Loretta will be the first woman clown in America – the world, even – if she is the first to be remembered for it.

Saying Goodbye

As I am picking apart the sentences in this book, I find one last image of her. I am in bed, and it is past midnight. I cannot sleep and my internet browser is full of tabs of library archives. I find Loretta and Harry with another woman, a ‘circus fan’ named ‘Faye’. At their feet is a fluffy white dog with a spiked-up tail. Mitzi. In the image description, Harry is not Harry, but ‘Henry’. Perhaps this is what prevented me from finding this image until now. Or maybe, as it’s been six months since I’ve last looked, this image has only recently been digitised. Either way, I cannot believe my luck. I stare at the image trying to place which woman is Loretta. It is not easy – in almost all the images I’ve found of her Loretta’s face is painted or the newspaper quality is so poor that her features are blurred. This is the closest I’ve been to seeing her face in the past five years.

The two women pictured are both white women with dark hair, prominent cheekbones and T-bar heeled sandals. Both are taller than Harry. The woman on the left looks younger, shy. Her dress is plain with dark round buttons while the other woman wears a bold print, sloping hat and necklace. The woman on the left is the tallest of the three. The most beautiful to my eye, but by far the least comfortable. I recognise the awkwardness by how her right arm hangs; I’ve seen myself look the same in photos. Trying to be smaller. And so, I finally decide Loretta is the woman in the middle. The bold and comfortable one who is holding Mitzi’s leash. Her arm brushing against Harry. I go back to the database, where I find an image of Faye and Harry without Loretta. As it loads, the sky spreading out on my screen, a circus tent in the background coming into view, I see I was wrong. Faye is the bold woman; Loretta the tall shy one. Once again, Loretta has surprised me; she is different to how I imagined. Five years into searching for fragments of her life – and as though it were an elaborate performance, she had staged – I am still surprised and eager to watch.

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As I drift to sleep, I think of this image, and I realise the last Loretta I left you with was the sick Loretta. The one at the end of her life. I gave you an ageing body but that's not what I want you to remember her for. Yet funnily enough, that Loretta is the one I understand most. The version of her who is closest to me. I know intimately what it is like to exist in the kingdom of the ill – spending weeks not leaving my house. Sun against my skin as I sit in my garden and realise this is the first fresh air I've felt in days. I've lived with chronic illnesses that overlap and twist my insides apart. I've felt the tears come as I lie in bed and scrunch into myself from pain, my dog's head resting on my feet. Loretta's ageing self is the one that's closest to mine, yet this is not who she was for most of her life.

I don't think to be ill is inherently sad. When I think of the last years of her life, I am not sad that she is feeling the effects of age, but that a woman who worked for her entire life – pushing herself to perform – was left with so little financial comfort. I am sad that in her senior years, she was alone apart from her dog. Her great-niece told me that Loretta's last boyfriend, one she met a few years after Harry's death, had left by then. An end of life is not by default undignified or sad, but her end was not all she was.

So, I want the last thing you read is the magnetism of her performing body. The joy of her shown by movement. I want you to feel what I felt when I found that last picture – to be amazed. This is how I think of her. How I love her. I will leave you with this; I hope you can hold it close, as I have:

Oregon

1924

Loretta strides across the stage, her hair firmly tucked under her white hat. Firm, strong. She becomes the man she is meant to play. One who looks down on the other clowns, the ones whooping and hollering on the sidelines. Now they're mimicking the animals that strut under the big top during the parade and Loretta, with the upturn of her chin, pretends to ignore them. She sees Billy doing an impression of a child who has dropped a cheap toy in the kicked-up dirt of the circus lot – she tries not to smile.

For now, the stage is Loretta's and she luxuriates in the eyes on her as she tips her hat and straightens her suit. This is the first moment on stage in her four years performing that is hers alone. Some nights it lasts longer than others, depending on how quick Harry is to meet his cue. She imagines him now, in clown alley, gathering the props in the measured haphazard way she knows so well. Sensing his presence in the wings, she bends down to inspect her shoe. She frowns, a frown that looks almost frightening with the painted laughlines of her makeup. She slowly grabs a bright red handkerchief from her pocket – pulling and pulling this large thing, a gag the audience never fails to love – until it is released. She fussily dabs at her shoe until the dust that never was disappears.

As always, she hears the roar of the audience before she feels it. The grey water, freezing, runs down her face and is sponged up by her hair. Harry, behind her, takes a bow as the other clowns fall over one another in laughter. She runs off the stage to clown alley, emitting fake coughing sobs. Her skin is alive from attention when she sees the towel Harry has folded for her, sitting neatly on top of a prop chest of rubber jewels.

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Exegesis: Searching for Loretta

Exegesis Contents

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Introduction

Finding an image of Loretta La Pearl in 2016 at the Oregon Historical Society, I did not know that my interest in her would carry me to a PhD and three years of research. Then, I was not aware of how partial Loretta's archive was; in stumbling across her story, I simply assumed there was more to be found.

Seeing that first photo, I experienced what French historian Arlette Farge describes in *Allure of the Archives*:

Each time, the person who reads, touches, or discovers them is at first struck by a feeling of certainty. The spoken word, the found object, the trace left behind become faces of the real.

As if the proof of what the past was like finally lay there before you, definitive and close. As if, in unfolding the document, you gained the privilege of "touching the real." (11)

Farge is exploring police archives for research about the social history of crime in eighteenth Century France while I found myself in the archives to write the biographical story of Loretta La Pearl: the first woman clown in America. Yet, Farge's words resonate. The image is also a textual trace of Loretta— underneath, the caption 'Mrs Harry La Pearl'. The whole thing was magnetic. I wasn't 'searching for Loretta' then, so this was a found object that became a passage into the past, that enveloped me as researcher. Yet, within days, I came to realise how fleeting such feeling is; an image is a hint of the past that can never be fully understood. Farge writes: 'The goal is not for the cleverest, most driven researcher to unearth some buried treasure, but for the historian to use the archives as a vantage point from which she can bring to light new forms of knowledge that would otherwise have remained shrouded in obscurity' (54). In using what remained of Loretta's archives as a vantage point, I was able to look at what was left of her story. I pieced together newspaper articles that detailed her husband's work, noting how often her clowning was mentioned as an aside and always as a novelty. I learnt firsthand, as Michael Hicks writes, that 'our facts do not come to us unvarnished, but are loaded, slanted, and embedded in narratives' (69-70). Loretta's story was embedded in her identity as a working-class woman in twentieth Century America. She was viewed through her husband's work as well as gendered assumptions about who she should be. As a biographer, I tried to see past the ways male journalists shaped and doctored her image. But I soon realised that this was not possible; I could not know her as she really was. I also couldn't know her without the imposition of the sexism present in her era. Yet, I could, to the best of my ability, inform a reader of the complications of her life as I saw them. I could research, question, and I could speculate. It was the combination of these circumstances that led me to work with speculative biography. Donna Lee Brien discusses the significance of subject empathy in speculative biography: 'Speculative biographers assert that, by basing subjective empathy and imaginings in the

documented facts (and making clear when this is not thus grounded), biographers can speculate but still ensure their texts are classified as non-fiction life writing' (34). Brien's idea of 'subjective empathy and imaginings in the documented facts' (14) is about envisioning past what is known about a subject. I based my understanding of Loretta through being attentive to what was documented about her life and using these details as a starting point to then expand upon. These imaginings about Loretta's life are, as Brien notes, subjective in that they are created from my own interpretation of her, informed by my lived experience. It was key that empathy formed the basis of my imaginings; by putting myself in the empathetic mindset, I could better understand her motivations. The idea of 'subjective empathy and imaginings' (Brien 14) is at the core of my thesis and at the heart of how I wrote Loretta's story. Like Brien, I found that speculation was essential for the biography of a woman who had few archival traces. 'Subjective empathy and imaginings' was for me also an act of feminist intervention: it allowed a life that would otherwise be 'lost' to be written, to become public again (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 38). Therefore, Brien's definition acted as not only an appropriate approach within the form of biography, but an essential aspect of fighting the erasure of Loretta's life (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 38).

Writing Loretta's story is part of a broader history of feminist archival reclamation. The mission to write unknown or underreported women's lives became prominent in biography during the 1980s (Dever 15). In *The Intimate Archive*, Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman, and Ann Vickery write that the trend began in the 1980s with "search and recover" rescue missions in order to install past women writers in the archival record' (15). The authors note that feminist scholarship has since developed to recognise that archives are subjective, with study into 'how individual archives are constructed, manipulated, policed and experienced by those who oversee them and who use them' (15). I am drawing from this history in my own work with Loretta by trying to avoid a naive view of archives and curatorial practice; I want to excavate the life of someone who has left only minimal traces and present her story as a biography that, while speculative, is authoritative and robust.

Laura Thompson connects the idea of the unknowability of history to the practice of speculative biography and argues that, 'The inability to 'really know' means that all life stories are constructed and thus can be construed as speculative to some extent' (157). But while we expect that biographers will speculate to some degree, in my work both a lack of archival material and my hope to embody Loretta means that my speculations pushes further than most. My approach to countering how Loretta's archives were fragmented and embedded in dominant narratives of the time was to speculate so to build her story beyond what remains in the archives. I integrated memoir through the form of essays that explored how I researched and understood Loretta. This communicated to the reader the complexities of working with partial archives, and thus, the presence and extent of speculation within my work.

Other writers who identify as writing speculative biography, while not necessarily integrating essays as I did, have a similar viewpoint. Kiera Lindsey, offers her own perspective on writing speculative biography, writing that ‘I approach my work with an element of self-conscious creativity that is premised upon an understanding that although we will never know what historian Carolyn Stedman called ‘the great Everything of the past’, we can gain insight, pleasure and meaning from striving to evoke and understand its mysteries together’ (107). Lindsey uses ‘intuition and imagination’ to build upon ‘opaque sources’ (107).

Speculative biography allows a biographer a freedom to go beyond the accepted use of imagination in compiling a biography and integrate imaginings. These speculations are unlike those in historical fiction, where authors are free to be fanciful; they are carefully researched and ‘true’ in spirit if not necessarily verifiable as ‘fact.’ In basing speculation on fact and thus writing ‘true’ non-fiction to the best of a writer’s abilities, and being clear with what is speculative, a speculative biographer maintains an honest contract with the reader.

In writing Loretta’s life, I decided that speculative biography was the most effective form as it allowed me to write her life in full, speculating where there was not enough archival detail to support ‘traditional’ biography. Speculation also allowed me to inhabit her voice, adopting a similar tone to historical fiction. I felt this was important to bring a previously forgotten figure to life in the reader’s eyes. But it was important to maintain Loretta’s story as nonfiction. I wanted her to be remembered as a *real* figure; erasure in the archive should not result in exclusion from nonfiction storytelling.

Exegesis Overview

This exegesis responds to my time researching and writing Loretta’s life and endeavours to explore the theoretical questions raised by this process. In the first chapter, ‘Hybrid Approaches to Contemporary Australian Biography,’ I review hybrid works that go beyond biographical tradition. I discuss and compare *The Convict’s Daughter* by Kiera Lindsey (2016) and *The Book of Dirt* by Bram Presser (2017). Where Lindsey uses a range of novelistic techniques to bring her speculative biography to life, Presser in his hybrid work integrates memoir into a historical novel to represent and explore the idea of forgotten history and the legacy of intergenerational trauma. I go on to discuss Alexis Wright’s collective-memoir *Tracker* (2017) and how it rejects what Wright calls ‘A Western-style biography’ (34) – which could also be considered a ‘grand portrait’ biography where a chronological view of a life is presented (Whitlock). Wright challenges colonial archives and, similarly, Jessica White in *Hearing Maud* (2019) contests nondisabled archives. *Hearing Maud* is a hybrid memoir/biography that represents disabled history, showing how two women can be connected despite time and place. Analysing and interpreting these works, I examine the landscape

of hybrid and experimental biographical works in Australia. These writers carefully consider form to ethically respond to who their subject was, allowing them to push against scarce and biased (due to race, ethnicity, class, gender and/or disability) archival records about their subject. In doing so, they represent the limitations of historical records to the reader, conveying the fallibility of archives and advocating to represent the ‘true’ life of their subject.

The second chapter, ‘Ethics, Forgotten History and Post-Memory,’ turns to a theoretical discussion of writing speculative biography, especially when working with fragmented archives. The ethical demands of this kind of biography are explored through a consideration of post-memory and in particular the duty of the biographer to avoid, as much as possible, replicating dominant cultural memories and forgetting within a creative work. For example, in telling Loretta’s story I am refuting the dominant view that it was only male clowns performing in twentieth Century America. While I cannot entirely avoid maintaining cultural post-memory, as these ideas are embedded within archives and historical writing, I can interrogate the sources and concepts I include in an attempt to be as ethically responsible as possible.

All of this is to say: what is a ‘true’ story and how and why should speculative biographers write one when there is little available information on their subject? This chapter delves into ethics, focussing on the biographer’s subjectivity as it is expressed in the writing. As I argue, revealing subjectivity to the reader might be a solution for a speculative biographer looking to write an ethical creative work.

In the third chapter, ‘Writing Loretta: Method, Form and Doubts,’ I discuss my methodology in writing Loretta’s speculative biography. I focus on my use of indirect speculation where the use of imagination is not explicitly signalled to the reader unlike direct speculation which uses qualifiers like ‘perhaps’ and ‘maybe’ (Brien and Lindsey 8). I explain how I used National Library of Australia archives, specifically, the circus performer’s Agnes Greenwood and May Wirth’s scrapbooks, as well as Lucia Zora’s 1928 memoir, *Sawdust and Solitude*, as parallel resources to supplement my knowledge of Loretta. By using self-created records of other circus women, I was able to build Loretta’s story. The overlap and contrast of practice-led research and research-led practice is also discussed, particularly how the combination of these two practices led to the manuscript’s framework of combining essays and biography. I also infuse creative memoir excerpts throughout this chapter to communicate the presence of doubt as a part of the speculative and creative process.

In the fourth chapter, ‘On COVID, Archives and Looking Forward,’ I address how completing this thesis during the pandemic meant that my access to archives was constrained. I was not able to revisit the archive or to take up a fellowship, and so the demands and rewards of ‘speculation’ created a new and unexpected kind of experiment for my creative practice. I argue that

Covid has not only shaped my creative archival practice but has changed the archives themselves, both in expanding what we consider archives to be and how archives are accessed. In assessing how the pandemic has increased digital access to archives, I look to the future and claim that speculative biography may not just be an effective form for those encountering with partial histories but is a tool for when in-person archival research is not possible due global or personal circumstances.

In my conclusion, I reflect on the major themes of this exegesis, and I ‘speculate’ on how the genre of speculative biography will grow and develop. Specifically, how indirect speculation will grow and become increasingly accepted by readers. I also reflect on the future of my own research, exploring how I can continue to utilise speculative biography to create an immersive and vivid portrayal of history.

*

Harriet Cunningham finds that while writing the cultural biography of a music festival, she is immersed in archival intimacy: ‘The process of poring over these photographs, of identifying who the people in them are, who they are with, how they dress, how they stand, of researching what they are doing in their lives, becomes an intimate and immersive act of speculation’ (276). Like Cunningham, for me as biographer, the speculative process was intimate and immersive. I, too, pored over photos and spent hours wondering what a look or posture could mean. So, in looking at Loretta’s story and the theoretical complications of crafting it, I invite you to join me in this immersion. I hope you will not just join me as I sift through the archives but will also endeavour to speculate: to wonder what Loretta’s life looked like and contemplate this with reference to documented women’s circus history.

To return to Arlette Farge: ‘when working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning . . . you feel immersed in something vast, oceanic’ (4). Together, let’s fall into the history of the first woman clown.

Chapter 1: Hybrid Approaches to Contemporary Australian Biography

Malcolm Allbrook and Melanie Nolan posit that since 2010, Australian biography has been ‘a veritable torrent’ (4). That they write this in the first issue of *Australian Journal of Biography and History* – a journal established to engage with the meeting of biography and history, ‘in response to historiographical developments that are evident locally’ (5) – seems especially telling. A growing interest in biography in Australia is visible in notably expanded readership, publication, literary prizes, and academic scholarship. Allbrook and Nolan also show that biography mimics current social systems of power – namely racism, sexism, ableism, classism and sexual discrimination – writing that ‘most surveys indicate that biography is still mostly written by men about male subjects’ (12). For example, of the 13,000 biography subjects in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 12 percent are women and 1.6 percent are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (Allbrook and Nolan 13). The ‘lingering bias’ of what is written reflects the existing racism and sexism of Australian society as ‘the most popular biographies continue to reflect the social, intellectual and political standing of a subject’ (Allbrook and Nolan 12).

The conservative nature of biography in Australia is also expressed in its form. In a brief history of Australian biography, Gillian Whitlock observes that popular biography has stylistically tended to the ‘grand portrait of an eminent individual’. She writes:

As one critic has remarked, this empiricist, positivist tradition seizes whatever “lives and times” have to offer and puts its faith in extended chronological narrative and the power of a good story to seduce the reader. Others have called the preference for detailed description and narrative, and the shape of the “whole” life in Australian biography and autobiography, a “sociographic” impulse. (236)

As Whitlock argues, the ‘birth to death’ style of biography is highly favoured in Australian nonfiction. Writing in 2000, she tracks this trend from colonisation to her present; in many ways this trend continues today. Allbrook and Nolan, writing in 2018, note that ‘historians have recently published many standard biographies of significant Australians’ (11). Yet, they also note that there exists ‘conservative as well as path-breaking works’ (11) – the latter of which I will revisit later through four examples.

The ongoing dominance of a ‘grand portrait’ biographical style and a preponderance of subjects who are white men are connected. In this kind of biography, the life offered is richly contextualised by evidence. ‘Birth to death,’ as the phrase implies, makes an authoritative claim as a historical record; Allbrook and Nolan use Mark McKenna as an example, a writer who had access

to 198 archival boxes at the National Library while writing the biography of Manning Clark (10). Subjects, who have immense historical records that were collected and stored by archives, are favoured by systems of power due to whiteness, wealth and class. Whose life is kept and whose story is told reveals bias and privilege.

‘Grand portrait’ biography is not possible for subjects whose lives are not as freely available in the historical record due to discrimination because of race, gender, sexuality and/or disability. Yet, this does not mean these subjects should not be written about. While the availability of historical records cannot be changed, restrictive ideas of how much and what type of material is needed to construct a biography should be challenged. As I explore in this chapter, when faced with historical gaps and archival absences, biographers must subvert traditional ‘grand portrait’ biographical modes by using creative methodologies. Despite its limitations, both writers and readers continue to find biography a compelling and powerful genre and so this thesis explores how biographers continue to negotiate with biographical form and specifically, why some choose to do so through by hybridity as well as incorporating speculation. The examples of contemporary biography that I explore in this chapter push at the limits of fiction/nonfiction by utilising a first-person biographer voice to counteract archival gaps and, as in the case of *Tracker*, archival control.

In my speculative biography, I worked with a subject for whom a ‘birth to death’ grand portrait was never going to be possible. Loretta La Pearl was a woman working in a male-dominated field during early to mid-twentieth Century. Further, she actively disguised her gender while she worked and lived in poverty for much of her life. Therefore, there is a remarkable lack of ‘evidence’ in relation to her life and experience. In writing her story, I was faced with the question: can biography be written about those for whom there is little public record?

This chapter offers a precis of the biographies under discussion, identifying key techniques and issues. I explore the speculative biography, *The Convict’s Daughter* by Kiera Lindsey (2016) and the auto/biography-meets-novel, *The Book of Dirt* by Bram Presser (2017), in comparison, looking at how the structure and form of biography reflects not only who is being written about but the kind of or scope of documents available about them. I then discuss Alexis Wright’s collective-memoir *Tracker* (2017) and finally, memoir/biography *Hearing Maud* (2019) by Jessica White. In doing so, I analyse four interesting and diverse examples of contemporary biography to show how speculation informs these works to varying degrees, and why. Specifically, I explore how these authors have experimented with expanding the parameters of form, interpreting what the success of these different approaches means for biography.

The Convict's Daughter by Kiera Lindsey

The Convict's Daughter is the story of author Kiera Lindsey's relative great, great, great aunt, Mary Ann Gill and her relationship with James Butler Kinchela in mid-nineteenth-century Sydney. The 'Parramatta Romance', as it was called by newspapers of the time, was the scandal of fifteen-year-old 'currency lass' Mary Ann's failed elopement with 'gentleman settler' James (Lindsey xi). Mary Ann attempts to elope because her father, hotelier and ex-convict, Martin Gill opposed the connection between her and James. After the elopement fails because of James' disorganisation, Martin Gill seeks revenge and attempts to murder him. Gill then takes James to court under a charge of abduction. *The Convict's Daughter* details the romance, trial and fate of Mary Ann, her family, and James.

In the Introduction, Lindsey explains the work's genesis: a newspaper clipping detailing Mary Ann in the witness box 'too agitated to be sworn in for several minutes' and that inspired her to visit the Australian, Irish and British archives to learn more of Mary Ann's story (xii). Lindsey uses the existing historical record as well as her own imagination in writing Mary Ann's story and she characterises the book as a biography 'not only of little-known colonial adventures, but also a fresh way of charting the transformation of Australia in the nineteenth century' (xiv). In the afterword, Lindsey writes:

I have, like Mary Ann, flouted certain conventions. Mine are concerned with unsettling the role of objectivity and imagination in historical writing, rather than defying the existing mores associated with marriage. I did this because the story has demanded it. (281)

For most of the book, Lindsey uses omniscient third-person narration to depict Mary and James's perspectives. Periodically, she moves out to a narrative voice that contextualises historical events and landmarks of the period. James Vicars argues that this classic biographical style 'allows Lindsey to offer broader historical perspectives and commentary about the period with barely a change of voice' (196). But the Introduction and Afterword use first person: Lindsey uses her own voice as author to address the reader directly and explain her personal connection to Mary Ann and James' story, as well as detail her creative choices and to what extent she uses speculation. This is worth noting as while this sort of explanation is a norm in historical fiction (it is not uncommon for there to be an 'Author's Note' detailing what is historically 'true'), in biography an 'Author's Note' or equivalent is rarely used to address the fictionality of certain scenes and characters. In a further 'Notes' section following the Afterword, Lindsey directly contextualises the extent of speculation and identifies the sources she relied on in each chapter. Through this substantial peritextual material, Lindsey bookends her biography of Mary Ann within her own first-person voice where she establishes herself as the book's historian/writer.

In *The Convict's Daughter's* Afterword, Lindsey details her methodology in writing her biography. She draws on primary sources 'to recreate what is already known about Mary Ann' (284). From there, she says she adds 'embellishments', citing the example of the colour of Mary Ann's gloves and bonnet (284). Lindsey is clear that she does not know the colour of Mary Ann's gloves but that such detail can be informed by knowledge of the style of that era. For her, having these details – while unknown to her – are important to building Mary Ann's world for the reader. Non-speculative biographers also include worldbuilding specifics that cannot be verified by the historical record; yet speculative biography openly acknowledges the limits of a biographer's knowledge and the introduction of their imagination.

Lindsey also discusses what she calls 'creative assumptions'; for example, when she assumes Mary Ann witnesses a theatre production of *The Currency Lass* because her father was managing a Royal Victoria Theatre stall at the time (285). Lindsey notes that there are instances where 'the trail of clues... petered out and I have found myself perched upon the steeping stone of one fact—needing to make something of a leap' (286). On these occasions, Lindsey chooses to 'draw upon the conventions of the romantic and social fiction' from the time as well as her assumptions about the historical characters she has long researched (286). In this way, Lindsey has sought to convey her historical characters with the sort of interior world their fictional counterparts enjoyed and in doing so she weaves a thread of fiction into a book that is otherwise solidly grounded in historical research (286).

These combined threads of history, informed fictional detail and archival fact form Lindsey's conception of speculative biography. Even though Lindsey uses a novelistic style through third-person omniscient voice, she maintains her work is biography and not historical fiction. Lindsey does not explain why the label of nonfiction as opposed to fiction is important in *The Convict's Daughter*, but it is arguable that it concerns Lindsey's identity as a historian and thus her aim to create authoritative nonfiction scholarship on mid-nineteenth Century working class colonial women for a public readership.

The Book of Dirt by Bram Presser

Like Lindsey, Bram Presser in *The Book of Dirt* retells an intimate biographical family history, but he chooses the form of a novel. The book centres on fictionalised versions of Presser's grandfather, Jakub Rand, and his grandmother, Daša Roubíčková, as well as Daša's mother, Františka. Presser follows these family members as they survive the Nazi occupation of Prague, including Jakub and Daša's subsequent transport to Theresienstadt concentration camp.

The Book of Dirt is in fact two narratives, a novelised account, in which Presser's grandfather is one of the protagonists, and first-person essays that interrupt the fictional story, and

where Presser tries to understand and clarify the family history he is narrates in the novel. Presser tries to make sense of his grandfather's forced work at Theresienstadt: sorting and categorising Jewish books for the creation of a 'Museum of the Extinct Race'. Presser only learnt of this after his grandfather's death, as it was reported in an article for the *Australian Jewish News* (19). Apart from this, Presser finds there are no official records of his grandfather's work. All that is left is memory: Presser calls the story of his grandfather's forced work 'all hearsay' (22). This 'is what sets the Czech wartime experience apart from all the others—a ghoulish spectre from an alternative past, haunting the Jewish imagination' (22). Presser eventually learns the 'truth' behind the 'Museum of the Extinct Race' when visiting the Jewish Museum of Prague. The museum Director tells him that the Jewish community 'convinced the Nazi authorities to ship all Jewish artefacts [...] to Prague and allow them to select the most precious, the most valuable for exhibition' (169). It was 'a balm of sorts' (170) to appease the Jewish community and disguise the Nazi's motivations. Presser tries to come to terms with the fragments he learns about his grandfather's life and about the 'Museum of the Extinct Race' throughout the book. He visits the Czech Family Camp on the anniversary of his grandfather's arrival – sixty-eight years later – and lies 'down in the dirt [...] I try to see the horror but it grows distant, blurring into the autumn sky' (188). There is a distance between Presser's grandfather's story and his own. Presser reaches throughout *The Book of Dirt* but cannot quite grasp what he feels is the 'truth'.

Anna MacDonald describes the book as 'Sebaldian': a structural 'approach to history and memory' evidenced through the 'use of images alongside word-text, or the presence of a peripatetic narrator, or the rejection of conventional generic categories such as "fiction" and "non-fiction"' (n.p.). For MacDonald, *The Book of Dirt* 'inhabits the dynamic region between fiction and non-fiction' and it is through the juxtaposition of what have often been seen as competing ways of storytelling – nonfiction and fiction – that Presser shows 'the archive, and the problems associated with memory and historical representation are ever-present' (n.p.).

Presser draws on family photographs, archival documents, maps, and letters both reprinted and imagined to form the historical thread of *The Book of Dirt*. While he is clear that this is a novel, within the essayistic peritext he shows that the work 'makes use of a number of original historical images and documents' and in 'A Note on Historical Sources', he explains how he has maintained what he calls 'historical fidelity' (293). Presser altered details and facts for the novel (for example, the *Australian Jewish News* article about his grandfather was published in 1999 not, as the novel states, 2005). While emails between Presser and the archives he contacted, for example, were included in his novel 'verbatim' as essays, letters exchanged between Daša and Františka are fictional (294). Of this, Presser writes, 'I hope that I've been true to their voices' (294).

As *The Book of Dirt*'s structure makes clear, history is incomplete, doctored and fallible. In an early essay, Presser writes that he must 'find peace in not knowing [...] What's left to fill the silence is no longer theirs. This is my story, woven from the threads of rumour and legend, post-memory' (188). In the *Sydney Review of Books*, Jerath Head connects Presser's use of 'post-memory' to Marianne Hirsch's influential 2012 scholarly work, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Hirsch uses the term to discuss how what is 'at stake is precisely the "guardianship"' of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a "living connection", and that past's passing into history or myth.' Hirsch, like Presser, is discussing the 'intergenerational acts of transfer' with trauma and memory as well as the responsibility associated with this guardianship. Post-memory, particularly in relation to archives and the ethics of writing speculative biography, will be discussed in greater depth the next chapter.

Similar ideas of belonging and guardianship of traumatic past have been discussed in depth by writers in both fiction and nonfiction. In his Nobel Lecture, the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro discusses writing about the Second World War, though he did not live through this experience:

I'd considered the Second World War, its horrors and its triumphs, as belonging to my parents' generation. But now it occurred to me that before too long, many who had witnessed those huge events at first hand would not be alive [...] Did I, now, as a public teller of stories, have a duty I'd hitherto been unaware of? A duty to pass on, as best I could, these memories and lessons from our parents' generation to the one after our own? (23-24)

A similar idea of 'duty' permeates *The Book of Dirt*. The duty is not so much to write but to remember – even when these inherited memories are incomplete.

Comparing Presser and Lindsey's Approaches to Biography

Both Presser and Lindsey subvert form to portray a non-eminent subject, specifically a relative. Presser researches his grandfather and Lindsey her great-great-great aunt. Their works both begin with a historical source — a newspaper article — about a family member. For Lindsey, she critiques an article about her great-great-great aunt as dramatized while Presser finds what has been written about his grandfather is inaccurate.

Even with a familial connection, in trying to access details of their subject's life Presser and Lindsey encounter absences, gaps and myth. While in some ways the availability of information is equally uneven between these two writers, Presser and Lindsey take divergent approaches to how they tell these stories. Both use nonfiction and fictional elements but Lindsey insists her work should primarily be understood as a biography, and Presser insists on novel.

These divergences in approach are deeply influenced by the nature of each of their subjects. Presser negotiates with a history that has actively been obscured; therefore, it is important that *The*

Book of Dirt is a novel. Presser seeks records that have been destroyed by Nazis, noting that the regime ‘swallows names, lives, memories’ (186). Presser-as-writer is aware that he is constructing his own history through his novel. He looks at the *Theresienstadt Memorial Book* and sees names that ‘reach out from the page, begging to be remembered’ (163). He tries to ‘conjure their voices, their stories from a squall of dates and places’ but he goes on to ‘delete them again from history, negate their brief resurrection, strip them of the lives that might have found meaning in what I write’ (163). In an essay halfway through the book where Presser visits the Jewish Museum of Prague to search for his grandfather, he learns from the museum’s Director that ‘there was never a plan by the Nazis to make a Museum of the Extinct Race [...] The Nazis saw it as part of the confiscation program. It also served as a balm of sorts – if they allowed a Jewish museum to be run by the community, maybe their intentions weren’t quite so wicked’ (170). Presser writes further of his shifting perspective in the following pages, learning that a man who he believed worked with his grandfather, known as ‘Dr Eppstein’ did not exist. Instead, there was a Josef Eckstein: ‘Much like the museum itself: a name misheard, misconstrued’ (174). History is changed with its retelling. In his influential essay, ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, the postcolonial theorist Hayden White interrogates the place of narrative in the telling of history, and asks: ‘Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?’ (34). White argues that history always has a narrative element and that this is shaped by the writer’s use of imagination.

Presser imagines his family story through the documents that are left behind and so he creates a new version of this experience. It is important these imaginings are defined as fiction. As with the stories and myths surrounding the museum, Presser will not further obscure what has already been hidden and mythologised. His work teases out the damage when history is misrepresented; he will not contribute to this damage by being vague about what he has fictionalised. Presser details his imaginings and his use of source material in ‘A Note on Historical Sources,’ careful to communicate what is fiction to the reader.

Fiona Wright, in a review for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, describes Presser’s method as a ‘slipping between fiction and history, realism and fable, document and imagination’, in which these slippages allow ‘each to bring its own kind of truth, and to illuminate the gaps and absences in the others’ (n.p.). By identifying and naming the historical gaps and his own movement between nonfiction and fiction, Presser conveys to the reader the complications of writing a history full of absences and silences. It is the active negotiation with these complications that Wright says, ‘gives Presser room to experiment: the novel changes mode frequently, switching between naturalism and a kind of fabulism, a direct narrative mode and an elaborative re-writing of what has come before’

(n.p.). Rather than limit Presser's ability to tell his family story, the myths, confusion and historical gaps demand him to experiment with structure and form.

By contrast, where Presser works with a hybrid form and clearly separates fiction and nonfiction, speculation and exegesis, within the narrative, Lindsey's approach, as she articulates it, is to weave 'a thread of fiction into a book that is otherwise solidly grounded in historical research' (286). *The Convict's Daughter* is a blend of fiction and history, but Lindsey asserts her work is ultimately nonfiction and primarily a biography. Like Presser, Lindsey responds to historical gaps, fragments, and erasure. And while both writers consider the ethics of writing their stories, Lindsey concludes classifying her work as nonfiction is key in adding to historical scholarship. Working as a historian, Lindsey has come against the limits/discrimination of the archive. In defining her work as speculative biography, Lindsey realises her goal of exploring mid-nineteenth Century Australia, particularly focusing on colonial women's lives. Presser, on the other hand, disavows the genre of biography and maintains his work is fiction, with essays throughout. While sharing similar motivations and both encountering complexities with historical source material, Lindsey and Presser's approaches to form greatly diverge.

While Presser intersperses his first-person essays with reflections on ethics and method, interrupting the narrative structure of his 'novel', Lindsey separates the biographical story from her reflection. This structure, preceding and following the biography, presents a careful clarity about what has been speculation and imagination on Lindsey's part. This clarity is key in keeping Lindsey's claim that this is biography – and has been praised by critics. Historian Babette Smith writes that 'Lindsey's achievement is to bring her heroine – and her father – vividly to life by supplementing biographical facts with background research, insight and a significant, well-judged injection of imagination' (n.p.), and Vicars says that Lindsey shows 'how a writer can exercise a "responsible imagination"', as William Styron put it, because Lindsey is careful to explain her approach' (*The Convict's Daughter* [Book Review] 196).

Yet, interestingly, Lindsey's structure has been criticised too. Smith's 'one reservation' on Lindsey's style is that 'the book's impact on history will be limited by its emphasis on story at the expense of the wider context and implications, for example, of abduction in colonial Australia' (n.p.). From the disciplinary perspective of historical research, Smith argues that summarising sources for each chapter is 'inadequate for professional historians who want to build on Lindsey's work' (n.p.). Smith's argument is that due to the book's emphasis on the individual as well as Lindsey's imagining, it will not serve as an authoritative resource. In contrast to Smith's view that the book could be more precise in its historical scholarship, Vicars argues that 'the narrative is over-cautious in some ways [...] as with some other works in this style, it tends to be more dense and information-rich than might normally be the case with works of historical fiction, where the story-

telling is paramount' (197). Simply put, Smith argues for more historical context and scholarship while Vicar believes less is needed.

Lindsey clearly demonstrates what is speculation yet doesn't delve into why she has chosen this form in the first-person sections that open and conclude the biography. A possible reason could be Lindsey's professional training as a historian, where the methodology is to demonstrate the accuracy of one's work through reference to detailed sources. Where this is not possible, as in the case with Lindsey and her great-great-great-aunt, speculation can fill archival gaps. In speculating, Smith has claimed that Lindsey has sacrificed historical authority, yet I would argue that with this approach comes a different type of authority: one which, through storytelling techniques like speculation, engages a broader public audience.

Within Lindsey's novelistic prose, there are a series of changes in voice at the end of the book. In the last couple of chapters on Mary Ann, Lindsey shifts from a third person novelistic voice to a series of questions and equivocations ('perhaps', 'probably', 'most likely' (267)). A second person voice also emerges. For example, 'We might imagine this period of her life' (269) and 'we are unlikely to know their attitudes toward it' (271). Lindsey writes in the Notes section of the book of this tonal shift: 'The final chapters are written in a different style from the rest of the book and do not involve imaginative incursions' (305). This creative choice is most likely in response to archival restrictions. Lindsey notes that the records on Mary Ann are mostly in 1848 and 1849 (284). She writes that she has 'been presented with the task of recreating a life that is only partially documented' (284). And so, to recreate this partially documented life within the definition of biography, Lindsey has shifted and changed voice as she moves towards undocumented periods of Mary Ann's life. By using novelistic techniques like changing points of view, Lindsey communicates her methodological and ethical challenges to the reader.

In understanding *The Convict's Daughter* and its positioning as biography, it is important to mention that the primary records on Mary Ann are associated with her male family members (283). Lindsey has a feminist motivation in focussing on Mary Ann and not her male relatives. She addresses the problem of class and gender in relation to archival research:

the uneven nature of these primary sources points to the fact that it is often much easier to find sources relating to well-established historical characters than those from the 'middling' and 'lower orders.' Similarly, the project of 'retrieving' female historical subjects from anonymity is usually more challenging than with their male counterparts. (283)

The 'retrieval' of the stories of historical women's lives is a motive for Lindsey writing *The Convict's Daughter*. She wishes to bring to light the life of her great-great-great aunt and by doing so, convey what the lives of working-class women in 1840s Australia looked like. This is an era Lindsey says is 'often dismissed as little more than a drought and depression-afflicted lull' but one

that holds meaning for her as a ‘thrilling threshold period’ (xiii). As Jenny Coleman observes, ‘As feminist biographers we often see ourselves engaged in an act of rescue’ (18). Through writing, Lindsey is ‘rescuing’; it is in this motivation that Lindsey’s role as biographer and historian meet.

Due to the nature of Lindsey and Presser’s chosen subjects – people who have been marginalised from historical record or actively erased – the authors use form to negotiate and navigate writing a biographical narrative. For Lindsey, this negotiation occurs in relation to her work as a historian but in turning to a family story, she must also manage new ethical challenges. While for Presser, fiction remains the best form to convey the persistence (generational, postmemory) but simultaneous irretrievability (from factual record; inaccurate sources) of his family’s historical trauma.

Further Examples: On *Tracker*

While Lindsey finds the archives have omitted too much, and Presser finds falsified histories that seek to obliterate or obscure Jewish experience, in *Tracker* Alexis Wright writes against the suffocating overdocumentation of Aboriginal people in colonial archives.

In ‘The Poetics of (Re)Mapping Archives: Memory in Blood’, Natalie Harkin observes that ‘It is widely cited that Indigenous Australians are the most researched of Indigenous peoples globally (Banks 11; Martin 203) and the volume of records based on observations and surveillance reports I’ve had partial access to, attests to such claims’ (9). Harkin documents the process of seeking records created by the Aboriginal Protection Board and the State Children’s Welfare Department of her Nanna’s life from 1938 to 1947 (1). She writes of seeing the ‘two-inch-thick’ file; ‘the level of surveillance was overwhelming. Claustrophobic’ (1). In her work, Harkin reflects on the racism and institutional abuse within the colonial archive. She positions the archive as a kind of haunting – ‘we are presently haunted by what has been excluded in the colonial record’ (7) – yet subverts this concept, too, by her own act of haunting through remembrance. Harkin is compelled to write: ‘We write to create, to survive, and to revolutionise; we write to haunt and we ache because we refuse to leave the past alone’ (10).

Harkin turns to poetry to explore and express personal and collective trauma but Alexis Wright, who also questions the effects of the hyper scrutiny on Aboriginal people and their stories, uses biography. She writes, ‘The truth is, we have simply become other people’s subject matter in the stories they tell, and pay the high price of their foolishly playing around with the Aboriginal sense of self, aimed at dismantling our knowledge and belief in our rights, to have us question our truths and our times’ (60). Wright argues that stories have been *about* Aboriginal people rather than *by* since colonisation and that it has not just resulted in ‘physical control’ but ‘psychological invasion’ (61). While ‘Aboriginal people have not been in charge of the stories other people tell

about us', Wright asks, 'how should I be an Aboriginal writer when the stories that were being told nationally about us would shape and impact on what I can do as a writer?' (58).

Wright seeks to answer this question in *Tracker*. Categorised as a 'collective memoir' of Tracker Tilmouth, Wright tells the story of the 'Aboriginal leader, political thinker, and entrepreneur'. She writes Tracker's life through synthesising multiple first-person accounts from friends, family and colleagues as well as from interviews with the man himself. Wright cites the many legacies Tracker left behind, the different ways he was and will be remembered. But his archive exists in 'the minds of other people' (42). And so, in talking to Tracker, she decides to write the book in a way that reflects the subject: 'He was simply saying what our mob say time and again... *Let people speak for themselves*. This is a reasonable response to a lifetime of confronting the legacy of our stories being told and misrepresented by others' (44). In doing so, Wright is not replicating what she calls 'A Western-style biography' (34). In winning the 2018 Magarey Medal for Biography, judge Gillian Whitlock writes that Wright provides 'a complex historical, social and personal account of a remarkable Australian, and innovat[es] the conventions of biography with Indigenous knowledges and perspectives (n.p.). Wright herself says that traditional biographical conventions 'would never do for Tracker. It would not have been a wise move for any biographer, or the correct way to attempt to remember somebody like Tracker, who tried with just about every breath he drew to manufacture enormous change' (34).

Wright reflects on the book's structure and the challenges of telling a story where the archive of Tracker's life exists in the memories of those who knew him. In *Tracker*'s opening pages, she writes: 'How do you tell an impossible story, one that is almost too big to contain in a single book?' (22). Wright structures the book as shifting first person perspectives, recounting Tracker's life through his voice and those of his friends, family and colleagues – a total of fifty contributors. For his brothers, Patrick and William Tilmouth, the sections are structured as a transcript. These add to the greater sense of the collective understanding of who Tracker was: viewing Tracker through many lenses creates nuance of who he was to different people and, thus, places the narrative within the hands of Tracker and his community.

Wright details her thoughts behind her methodology in an interview with *The Stella Prize*, where she calls her approach 'an Aboriginal methodology of storytelling consensus.' In *Tracker* itself, she explains:

The author or the biographer interprets and selects, decides what will be told to the best of his or her ability, and writes on behalf of the subject. But the biography can only offer a fraction, the fractional stories, snapshots, flavour or sense of the whole, and relies more on what is unsaid sometimes, than said. *Tracker* attempts to follow an Aboriginal tradition of storytelling practice for crossing landscapes and boundaries, giving many voices a part in the story. (45)

Wright considered both the person she was writing about and her community in developing the structure and voice of the book: ‘this is what Aboriginal people understand, that it takes the voices of many to tell the stories of country, the story lines’ (48). Terry Anne Whitebeach calls Wright’s structure a ‘linguistic cartography’ which reflects ‘the rhythms and cross-currents of a time, a movement, sets of events and viewpoints that track through, are centred in and around, Tracker Tilmouth’s life’ (80). Wright’s choice of structure pointedly subverts the ‘Western’ (Wright) or ‘grand portrait’ biographical style (Whitlock) and instead reflects the subject and what was important to him during his life, namely his community, activism and relationships.

Further Examples: On *Hearing Maud*

Much as Wright does in challenging colonial archives, Jessica White writes against nondisabled archives in *Hearing Maud* while also writing her own story. White charts her early life to adulthood as a deaf woman,¹ blending a discovery of writing as a balm with encounters of ableism and, as a result, isolation (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). The memoir/biography pivots on a research trip that White takes to the UK: she searches for details of the life of Maud Praed – the daughter of Australian novelist Rosa Praed – who lived as a deaf woman in the nineteenth century (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). White writes about her own lack of access to sign language in rural Australia, while Maud is denied access by her family who prioritise the ‘oral’ method (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.) – a method which ‘taught deaf children to speak’ (White 68). These two narratives intertwine, with White reflecting on communication and how it is affected when community and sign language are taken away from deaf people (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.).

The central thread of searching for Maud connects to White’s search for historical documentation of the deaf community; there is a tension between the dissatisfaction of limited records and the joy at finding any detail (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). In ‘Crippling the Archives: Negotiating Notions of Disability in Appraisal and Arrangement and Description,’ archivist Sara White also discusses sparse archival records of disabled people. She aligns the theory of complex embodiment in disability studies – that is, specific knowledge derived from particular disabilities – with archival practice. Because understandings of disability have ‘evolved’ over the past century, ‘only recently have people with disabilities been recognised as an underrepresented group (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). As a result, archivists have just embarked upon documenting them’ (White 110). White goes on to refer to Catherine J. Kudlick, a researcher of the archives of blind and low vision people, who feels that ‘the vast majority of people in the modern

¹ White uses ‘deaf’ as opposed to ‘Deaf’ throughout *Hearing Maud* and this is replicated here. She notes that ‘rather than identifying as Deaf (at least as this point in time), I consider myself as having a disability’ (183).

world think that history is useless and irrelevant. And fewer still give one iota about the blind. So the history of blind people seems like a Venn diagram that pinpoints the epitome of insignificance' (110).

In *Hearing Maud*, White counters this frustration of few archival details through imagination. She writes:

I imagine Maud walking to the museum, then a fairly new building that had opened its doors five years before. Her companion would have held her hand as they crossed the road so Maud wouldn't be hit by a horse and carriage she couldn't hear. Perhaps, at the entrance to the stately terracotta building, Maud's companion would face her so that Maud could read her lips as she explained what they would be seeing and how long it would take. Inside, Maud might have felt the cool air of the large Hintze Hall on her cheeks, or looked up to admire the panels painted with images of plants from across the globe. (84-85)

Here, White shows she is speculating through language. She uses 'would have,' 'perhaps' and 'might have.' White uses imagination throughout *Hearing Maud* to counter the absences in Maud's historical record as well as to facilitate her understanding Maud as a fellow deaf woman. At the end of *Hearing Maud*, White writes an imagining of Maud's life if she had been born later (Bryant, "Historical Figures" n.p.). White composes a kind of eulogy for what might have been; the words are paired with an image of Maud in her twenties (Bryant, "Historical Figures" n.p.). The reader sees a photograph of her profile in which Maud looks poised and strong, with her hair pulled back and wearing a frilled dress; there is a hint of a smile (Bryant, "Historical Figures" n.p.).

What would Maud have been like had she been born a century later, when the deaf community was so much stronger? Perhaps she would have grown into a winsome woman who liked collecting trinkets, who told a joke and made a person laugh, who could ride a bicycle upon the footpaths without fear. She might have learned sign language, her hands making poems in the air. She might have taught sign to her family and stayed with them, stayed 'darling Maudie', as her grandfather Thomas Murray-Prior called her. She might have sold some drawings, enough to buy a ring with a sparkling stone. She might have remained 'Birdie', her mother's pet name for her after the Bird of Paradise. She might have spread her large, lavish wings and flown. (223)

The question 'what might have been?' threads through this paragraph and White's book as a whole (Bryant, "Historical Figures" n.p.). White ponders what Maud's life could have looked like if she had access to sign language, to the deaf community and to thoughtful care instead of being institutionalised for years (Bryant, "Historical Figures" n.p.). Yet this pondering is equally for

herself (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). What might have happened if, when White was a child, she’d had access to the deaf community and sign language? (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.)

Hearing Maud constructs a narrative not only from White’s lived experience, but also through the use of archival records of nineteenth-century woman Maud Praed, to depict a lasting narrative of deaf women’s lived experience (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.). White sees herself through Maud’s life. The two women are placed side by side and, as a result, the reader can see the strength and ancestry of disabled women (Bryant, “Historical Figures” n.p.).

Conclusion

In *The Convict’s Daughter*, *The Book of Dirt*, *Tracker* and *Hearing Maud*, contemporary Australian life narratives depart from traditional modes of chronological biography and represent their subjects carefully through form. Hybrid modes and/or speculation more adequately reflects the complexity of writing biography: their subject’s personality, lived experience, the nature of the period they lived in, the volume and kind of documentation and stories that are available. These works show how the structure of biography might be more intimately crafted to the individual whose story it then shapes. So, not just the subjects themselves considered, but also available historical documentation, thus forming biography that directly engages with the problem of archival limits.

Because of form pushing works like *The Convict’s Daughter*, *The Book of Dirt*, *Tracker* and *Hearing Maud*, what might have been seen as possible in biography is shifting. Instead of ‘grand portrait’ style biographies, people are writing about historically marginalised lives that only have archival traces and have previously been ignored. And as with *Tracker*, some biographies actively push against archives and their history of oppression.

The turn to ‘ordinary’ lives as legitimate subjects of biography has demanded a shift in what is acceptable within biography; there are increasing examples of hybrid and speculative forms. Texts like those written by Lindsey, Presser, Wright and White demand to be read as biography because they tell rigorous accounts of a life, all while creating a more honest contract with the reader about the limitations, frustrations and discrepancies that emerge in this genre. These works ask us to reconsider our perception of biography, and to understand that what was once seen as a traditional form is limited in representing historically othered lives. As the above examination of form makes clear, there is no one way to write a biographical narrative.

Chapter 2: Ethics, Forgotten History and Post-Memory

Sociologist Ken Plummer asks: ‘by what right can an academic enter the subjective worlds of other human beings and report back to the wider world on them?’ (208). The question, ‘what right do I have to tell this story?’ and how do I do so ethically, permeates life writing research and in turn, this has had consequences on commercial biography. Thomas G. Couser notes that unlike the professions of medicine or psychology, where practitioners are required to protect their patient’s identity, ‘no such regulations constrain lay life writing, and there is no standard procedure for regulating it’ (xi). While not advocating for such, Couser asks: ‘to what extent should ethical principles – or other ethical guidelines – be observed?’ (xi). In this chapter, I extend this line of questioning, exploring how a writer can manage the complexity of ethics when using techniques that ‘trouble’ the limits of conventional biographical writing/tradition. In writing speculative biography ethically, I believe that archival collation, the intimate relationship between subject and biographer, post-memory and the biography’s subjectivity should be considered.

In *The Silent Woman* Janet Malcolm famously condemns the biographer and the messy ethical implications of their work:

The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away. The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike blandness and solidity. (9)

Gendered pronouns aside, Malcolm equates biography with an unethical invasion of privacy that she tracks through various biographical accounts of the lives of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. But as Malcolm herself notes, biography is a *legal* invasion of privacy. Even if it is also seen as a somewhat everyday occurrence in documenting the lives of the deceased:

After we are dead, the pretense that we may somehow be protected against the world’s careless malice is abandoned. The branch of the law that putatively protects our good name against libel and slander withdraws from us indifferently. The dead cannot be libelled or slandered. They are without legal recourse. (8)

Malcolm interprets biography as a breach of privacy yet acknowledges the fallibility of the idea of privacy itself. Biography may be tasteless in Malcolm’s eyes, but it is not only legal, it is a popular literary genre. For the *Sydney Review of Books*, Felicity Plunkett explores the many biographies of Sylvia Plath, including Malcolm’s. She argues that: ‘Biography may set about to repair and remember, but it does so with a blade, and is never without casualties’ (n.p.). Plunkett is clear in her assertion that biography has potential to heal as well as harm.

If the act of writing conventional biography is as ethically fraught as Malcolm and Plunkett posit, how are these ethics complicated when speculation is included? While examining colonial and convict biographies, Donna Lee Brien describes speculative biography as:

writing which openly includes a level of conjecture and speculation that goes beyond this core authorial technique [of informed speculation in ‘traditional’ biography]. This results in a work that is still recognisably non-fiction...telling the ‘truth’ according to the best of the writer’s ability – rather than works that can be more correctly described as biographically based fiction or historical fiction. (14)

In Brien’s definition, ‘truth’ is also linked to the ability of the writer to express and know what really happened. Brien notes that speculative biography might be a strategy for a writer encountering difficulties in finding documented information about who they are writing about. Such subjects can ‘invite a speculative approach due to the lack of biographical evidence available on their lives, as well as unresolvable gaps and silences in what can be found’ (Brien 15). These ‘gaps and silences’ exist, as Jessica L. Wilkinson notes, particularly among women’s histories (110). Then perhaps, it is when writing women’s histories that ethical complications have particular significance.

This chapter will establish a theoretical context for working with archival gaps when writing a speculative biography. This chapter thus lays out a discussion of ethics in relation to archives and frames this idea through a discussion of post-memory. Post-memory is first articulated in the work of Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch uses the term to discuss the way trauma impacts collective and individual memory. In my discussion, I use this term to think about cultural forgetting and how writers of history can contribute to this by writing ‘desired’ stories of the past (Blenkinsop 127), instead of pursuing the idea or ideology of a ‘true’ story.

I also explore instances where a biographer discovers deceptions told by or about their subject. While for some, speculation in biography might seem like an unethical practice, almost like lying. So, when the biographer encounters deceptions by their subject, this is particularly complex. I question whether a lie might provide an opportunity for greater insight than ‘truth’ alone. Yet, as a lie is an added complication for a biographer, how does a writer ethically and organically convey the lies they encounter?

This chapter argues how that in writing a life ethically, a writer’s own subjectivity takes on an important role. The intimacy that arises between a writer and subject, as well as the writer’s identity, inevitably influences the work. I argue that reflexivity throughout the writing process is a way for a writer to engage with their subjectivity – for themselves and the reader – and in doing so, is a technique to write an ethical speculative biography.

Archival Ethics

Andrew Flinn, an archivist who works with independent community-led archives, notes that archival materials have previously been used to comply with dominant historical narratives, arguing that when an archivist is presented with ‘gaps’ or a lack of information, the act of selection becomes key:

Finding the balance between recovery and celebration in the face of dominant narratives which otherwise ignore and misrepresent on one hand, and an approach which offers a more reflective and complex version of a community’s multi-faceted identities on the other is no easy task and one that can result in tensions within an organization or a variety of approaches at different times and in different contexts. (9)

For Flinn, an ethical approach to working with archives is balancing the selection of materials, with the clear aim of better representing diversity in a community. For biographers who also work with archives, Flinn’s arguments are helpful. As John Batchelor says: biographers ‘must perform a balancing act...between objectivity and personal engagement, between reliance on documentary evidence (letters, journals and memoirs) and intuitive re-recreation’ (4-5; Wilkinson 114). Like archivists, biographers’ decisions about what to include or to leave out is an important ethical consideration; what is included impacts the version of the subject’s life that is publicly known.

I have written in ‘Speculative Biography and Countering Archival Absences of Women Clowns in the Circus’ on my grappling with ethical considerations while writing the speculative biography of Loretta La Pearl:

The speculative biographer faces ethical concerns about what facts to include, what facts to leave out, and what facts to ‘speculate’. Particularly in partial histories, the material sits between recovery and celebration. (39)

I go on to note that this ethical decision-making is equally about political storytelling: ‘Loretta lived at a time in US history when women’s lives were subject to both social and legal restrictions and these lives (lived in the domestic sphere) were not as often written about or represented’ (39-40). Representing lived experiences that are not often shown – in my research, this is women working in male-dominated parts of the circus, like clowning – comes with added ethical pressure and responsibility. When the writing of circus women are scarce, each representation holds a greater weight in the public sphere.

Simply put, the work of a biographer is not writing alone but collecting and shaping research. This work has ongoing political ramifications and thus, ethical collation of archival research and decision-making in what to include when writing a biography is vital.

The Ethics of Intimacy

Writing on her experience of researching author Priscilla Wakefield, Janine McVeagh questions the ethics of her connection to a subject who lived in a different time and place. In arranging her biography using materials such as Wakefield's informal diary entries as well as her published work, McVeagh writes: 'It is impossible to know how to balance them, and my selection might be very different from that of someone else who did not feel the kinship with her that I do' (140). McVeagh emphasises the personal aspect to her relationship with Wakefield – although 'separated by time, geography and cultural background, we had much in common as both women and as writers' (136) – and refers to Wakefield as a 'friend' (143). Similarly, Caroline Steedman writes about her subject in *On Not Writing Biography*, 'I like this woman. I do not know if what I am doing is identifying, or projecting onto her; but I like her' (16). Steedman goes on to call this 'a spurious kind of intimacy' (23) and notes that this connection is one that 'I have worked hard for' by having 'driven long roads to distant archives, read interminable discussion of the Test and Corporations Acts (and a very silly novel, and so much more ...), deciphered her handwriting' (23). This intimacy, brought on by the time spent researching, imagining and writing about a biographical subject, adds further ethical challenges to the act of writing. Alan Shelston, in considering Leon Edel's biographical work, writes that this relationship is one of 'unparalleled intimacy' that 'amounts to a marriage' (8). If a biographer 'likes' someone, is it possible to write about them without bias?

Karen Lamb explores the unique pressure of life writing when there is an emotional connection to her biographical subject. For her, this is writer Thea Astley.

Perhaps one might lean a bit too much towards being 'accepting of other people's flaws', to use Tomalin's wording. I know that when I came to appreciate that Astley was a passionately devoted mother of a single child, much as I was, to the point where the intensity of her attachment concerned others, I tended to frame any judgement in quoted remarks from other people, slightly shifting the onus of interpretation away from me. (29)

Lamb notes that because of her relationship with Astley, she finds it difficult to exert judgement on her actions. With my own connection to Loretta, I have spent years researching her life and being fascinated with her. Through writing, I now have a relationship with Loretta. I judge her actions, but I am sympathetic to the reasons behind them. I am certain this affects how I write her story.

While I have formed an intimate connection with Loretta, I am aware I cannot know her. Like McVeagh, who strongly conveys the intimacy of her bond with Wakefield, I question whether it is 'possible to really get an understanding of a distant era and place, let alone of a single person who existed then' (141). McVeagh cannot know what her subject thought and felt entirely; no biographer can. Yet it is important to note that McVeagh had access to Wakefield's own writing, whereas Loretta was only written *about*. McVeagh's questioning the *knowing* of a biographical

subject is an often-repeated thought in life narrative studies. Around 100AD, Plutarch writes: ‘I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them’ (252). Similarly, Plummer argues that ‘we can never get at a simple, real truth about a life through a life story’ (238). How then can a biographer write a person’s life as accurately and ethically as possible? And given this, what might including speculation in this already delicate balance do?

For McVeagh, her responsibility is ‘to allow [Wakefield] to speak through me, to recapture her voice for another generation’ (143-144). However, I question whether this is possible. Wakefield can no longer speak, whether through a biographer or in her own words. Wakefield does not care if she is written about or forgotten; it is only the living who are affected, whether that is biographer or friends or family of the subject.

On the rights of the dead, Sue Wise uses critical humanist ethics to discuss the online distribution of postmortem photographs taken in the Victorian era. Wise argues that critical humanism prescribes agency to biographical subjects in a way that ‘assumes living people [are] in dialogue with a researcher in a context in which the subject gives or denies consent and can ‘bite back’. But how does research on the historical past shape up?’ (161). This idea connects, too, with Malcolm’s view of biography as being transgressive (9) since the dead having no rights or ‘legal recourse’ in being written about (8).

While McVeagh can write Wakefield’s life as I do Loretta’s, this action cannot be for *them* since they are no longer in the world of the living. Biographies are not for the subjects but for writers and readers. This is an important aspect to consider when examining the ethical components of writing a biography; if we are using their story for us and not them – whether we are compelled due to interest in their lives or a sense of justice in publishing women’s history – how can we do so ethically? While biographers may experience a sense of intimacy while researching and writing about their subjects, if their subjects are dead, this intimacy is one-sided and ‘formed in imagination’ (Lamb 27). Biographers are in the unique position of likely feeling attached to their subject, yet not being held accountable in any tangible way as, if deceased, their subjects cannot speak back. In these circumstances and without outside intervention, a biographer must balance the propensity to like their subject and accept their flaws with the goal of accurately portraying the past. As discussed later in this chapter, self-reflexivity can be a way forward for biographers navigating this complexity.

Post-Memory

In *Family Frames: Photographs, Narrative and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch explores personal and cultural memory in reference to the generations after the Holocaust. Hirsch defines post-

memory² as ‘the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events’ (22). While writing about the concentration camps of the South African war, Liz Stanley further defines post-memory as ‘history after the fact’ which involves the acts of both forgetting and remembering (4).

Unlike Hirsch and Stanley, Heather Blenkinsop discusses post-memory without reference to traumatic events. Instead, Blenkinsop investigates the reason why a summer carnival in Northumberland ended in 1954. She uses a critical humanist perspective to understand the documents of life available to her, specifically oral narrative and fieldnotes. In the context of her fieldwork, Blenkinsop calls post-memory ‘a constructed memory wherein later meanings are imposed back in time to interpret, now in the present, assemblies or versions of what had happened, or more often what is claimed to have happened, in the past’ (122). While trying to understand how no one knows – or will say – why the carnival ended, Blenkinsop observes that ‘what is not said, what is missing, the gaps and silences, can also be stories’ but she is careful not to assume that ‘a silence is being deliberately constructed and a hidden story is being concealed’ (125). Rather: ‘There may simply be nothing to say’ (125). Blenkinsop notes the complexity of writing the past: ‘history is being renegotiated and rewritten to convey a desired story about the past, a story written very much in the present’ (127). A desired story is a rewritten one, and thus adds complications for a biographer attempting to understand a historical period as it was rather than how it is remembered.

In contrast to these ‘renegotiated’ memories, Blenkinsop references Plummer’s concept of ‘true memories,’ those that are ‘frozen by being written down or constantly retold within certain social frameworks’ (Blenkinsop 120). ‘Freezing’ a story happens when it is written; it becomes a ‘true’ memory’ (Blenkinsop 129). So in leaving a story unwritten – or if it is not told and retold – Blenkinsop theorises that the history of the carnival ‘simply melted away and disappeared from memory’ (129). The absence of archival documents, as well as forgotten memories, meant that Blenkinsop was not able to understand why the carnival stopped. Instead of finding ‘true memories’, she encountered a collective forgetting.

Similarly, Margaret Atwood comments on communal memory and its connection to forgetting while discussing her novel, *Alias Grace*.

We live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of larger memory we call history, is being called into question. For history, as for the individual, forgetting can be just as convenient as remembering, and remembering what was once forgotten can be distinctly

² I have encountered both the term ‘Post-memory’ and ‘Post/memory’. For ease of reading, this thesis uses ‘Post-memory’ throughout, even when writers refer to it as ‘Post/memory’ in their work.

uncomfortable. As a rule, we tend to remember the awful things done to us and to forget the awful things we did. (1505)

While not specifically using the term ‘post-memory’, Atwood is referencing an idea of ‘larger memory’ and how memory is not just about the remembering, but what is forgotten, by who, and why. It is worth noting that for Atwood, who is writing fiction, the contract with the reader to communicate the fallibility of memory is less strict than in nonfiction.

In writing the narrative of the first woman clown in twentieth Century America, I am hyper aware of the idea of post-memory throughout the creative process. Particularly, I am wary of repeating dominant cultural memories and forgetting within the creative work. By writing the story of a woman clown, I am pushing against the dominant narrative that only men were successful circus clowns in twentieth Century America. Yet, I am aware that it is not possible to entirely avoid perpetuating cultural post-memory over the ‘truth’ when these memories exist within historical writing about the past. While seeking a broad range of materials written by people living within a specific history is crucial, acknowledging dominant modes of cultural forgetting and remembering within the biography can communicate to the reader the precarity of history and ‘truth’.

On Lies

Richard Holmes comments that biographers ‘base their work on sources which are inherently unreliable’ as they ‘construct or orchestrate a factual pattern out of materials that already have a fictional or reinvented element’ (17; Wilkinson 114). For example, a newspaper interview where there is an aspect of personal performance and posturing would sit between ‘truth’ and fiction. Jessica L. Wilkinson comments on this, writing that the ‘picture lives only within the frame we have invented for it’ (19). Yet how does the biographer work through lies that go beyond Holmes’ idea of materials with fictional elements? Where does deception fit in?

Writer Gabrielle Selz found herself working through these ideas when writing the biography of American artist Sam Francis. Upon learning of Francis’ inclination for ‘self-mythology’, particularly that he lied about his spinal injuries – he claimed they originated from a plane crash when it was spinal tuberculosis – Selz writes: ‘I had uncovered the truth, and though I was thrilled with my discovery, I was infuriated with my unreliable subject’.

I also understood what it was like to read accounts that were ‘vague’ and ‘contradictory’ (Selz). After researching Loretta for three years, I discovered that something I considered a fact was not true. For many of their years travelling together, Loretta’s husband was married to someone else, a woman named Frances Maginley. A potentially startling discovery, but one that Loretta already knew. Yet unlike Selz, I was not infuriated with my subject but felt sadness for her. It would not have been possible to travel, as she did with Harry, without claiming they were married.

To live the life she wanted, she had to lie about her marital status. It would take until 1918 for Harry to procure a divorce – something that was much publicised at the time and led me to realise that in the years before 1918, Loretta and Harry were not married as they'd claimed in newspaper articles covering their performances. While these untruths had initially resulted in confusion as I combed through contradictory accounts, like Selz, I found that the lie 'might be as telling as the truth'.

Selz argues that it is her 'job as his biographer' to 'untangle the web of myths and detail the facts' yet it was these lies that 'inspired the most unexpected revelations in [Francis's] biography.' For my work, discovering Loretta's deception was profound. Not only did it allow me to better understand her and her circumstances, but it made me question the information I had already absorbed as 'fact'. Although I had known that due to archival gaps, I was not getting the 'full' story of Loretta's life, I needed to navigate the reality that individuals also inevitably construct their own public lives to a certain degree. As well as learning about Frances, I considered Loretta's need to promote a certain version of womanhood in the media; on clowning, Loretta is quoted as saying: 'I like it. Of course, I rebelled at first. No woman likes to hide her face under grease paint. But it's a great life and it keeps me close to my husband' (New York American). I explore this self-construction in the essay 'Looking, Home and Body' where I write that 'gender cracks between the lines like a fire eating wood' and wonder if 'her performance as a clown be separated from her performance of her gender?'

Clair Morrow investigates the social meaning of lies, referencing her own experience of putting on a 'posher' voice during an interview. Morrow writes that while dishonesty is 'usually seen as a deviant and disruptive act in social life...lying is about power and power is relational and dynamic' (19). Morrow explores how lies can be identity-making, particularly 'the potential of lies to (re)make a life as people endeavour to re-narrate themselves into worlds they were previously, morally or structurally, written out of' (19). After all, a lie is a 'self-story', and that story can be as rich as a 'truth' (Morrow, 20). Morrow's connection of deception to power, or lack of power, interested me since Loretta's lie was about identity and power. By constructing a lie that she was married, she was able to stay in hotels with Harry while they travelled with the circus. As her 'husband', he could speak to newspapers about her talent as a clown. As a biographer, I wonder if the circuses Loretta and Harry worked for knew of their dishonesty. I cannot know but I imagine they did, as Harry's first wedding was attended largely by circus performers. I wonder can a lie be 'deviant and disruptive' (Morrow 19) if everyone knows what it is?

In writing about the creative practice and thought underpinning her poetic biographies of American actor Marion Davies and Australian musician and composer, Percy Grainger, Wilkinson asks: 'How do I tell a story when the factual evidence is riddled with lies, rumour, gaps and errors? How do I write a biography when the physical, material documents are failing?' (109). Her solution

is not to hide these practical difficulties for the biographer, but to use them within her work: ‘as disintegration, damage and erasure were so significant to my research experience, they would also be incorporated into the biography, both literally and metaphorically, as sites of contested fact’ (110). Wilkinson uses her biography’s structure to mimic Davies’ life, sectioning the narrative into nine parts with ‘the pages, strung out, like single frames in a film strip’ (109). Here, Wilkinson’s creative response to encountering gaps and lies in her research allows her work to not only reflect the reality of writing biography but also to write Davies’ life and post-life. Simply, to convey how, in death, Davies’ life is in some ways always obscured and inaccessible.

On this type of biography – one that engages directly with the narrative the gaps and roadblocks encountered by the biographer – Wilkinson writes:

While some biographers might consider such obvious ‘intrusions’ into the biographical space to be inappropriate – or worse, egocentric – as a practitioner, I enjoy the fact that the frameworks I impose on my subjects are not disguised, but presented as a singularity – that is, these works convey *my* Marion Davies and *my* Percy Grainger, and present no claims to be definitive or comprehensive. That is, these ‘biographies’ are not intended to conclude at a point of authority or empirical knowing, but instead suggest that the ‘life’ can never be known. (117)

I am drawn to this view of biography. Wilkinson is acknowledging two parts of biography that can often be unspoken: that a biography can never be definitive nor ‘true’ since a person’s life can never be fully known or represented on the page. Secondly, Wilkinson is clear that she is as much a character in her work on Marion Davies as Davies herself; she is not representing Davies fully but the parts of Davies that she, as biographer, finds most compelling. This approach draws Davies’ lies into Wilkinson’s biographical work, allowing her to understand and emphasise the context of the lies without obscuring them. If anything, Wilkinson leans into this obfuscation by integrating it into the form of her work.

For my own creative practice, in discovering Loretta’s dishonesty, I had to resolve how to integrate this into the biographical narrative in a way I deemed empathetic to Loretta’s reasoning while also maintaining an honest dialogue with the reader of her biography. Maria Tumarkin comments on the ethics of communicating lies to readers in reference to her book, *Axiomatic*. On finding new and contradictory information ‘late in the piece’ that she knew would discredit a character in the reader’s eyes, she says:

I wanted the reader to know but also not know this information at the start, so that something like what you [the interviewer] describe might be possible: the widening of the lens, rather than the new information canceling or corrupting what came before. It was important to me that what I had to say about her should unfold in time. I didn’t want to write backwards. To

me, compression, the sleek and tight synthesis (a version of life in one hundred words or less), is among the most violent modes of writing about others. When you take time out of the equation, you end up misrepresenting people (yourself included) in dangerous and corrosive ways. (Serpell and Tumarkin n.p.)

Tumarkin is clear about how she wants to represent events, including lies, to her readers. She doesn't want them to 'to experience people and situations [she] write[s] about in the same way as [she] did or do' but she is careful to 'make sure that time is always made visible in [her] work because [...] there is such a profound connection between ethics and time' (Serpell and Tumarkin n.p.).

Like Tumarkin, I chose to make temporality visible within my work. I did not immediately disclose Loretta's self-protective untruth but replicated my own discovery of it after-the-fact in an essay. In this way, I could 'widen the lens' for the reader and by doing so, replicate my own acts of archival research and discovery for them.

A Way Forward: Reflexivity and Responsibility

For a biographer, ethics are not purely intellectual. They are also about craft. In 'Strange Hybrids,' Camilla Nelson analyses works with both dimensions of fiction and nonfiction. Writing about Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*, Mandy Sayer's *Dreamtime Alice* and Georgia Blain's *Births Deaths Marriages*, Nelson specifically explores the concept of reflexivity. She writes that 'if ethical dilemmas are inherent in every aesthetic or craft-based decision that a writer makes, then reflexivity is one possible solution. Reflexivity, in this sense, refers to the traces of ethical decisions that are left on the page' (50).

Like Nelson, Plummer cites reflexivity as a key aspect of ethically researching and writing life stories, defining the term as a:

social and self-awareness/consciousness of the whole intellectual/research process: of (a) the subject of the research along with (b) the social spaces in which the research knowledge is produced, as well as (c) a much fuller sense of the spaces/locations – personal, cultural, academic, intellectual, historical – of the researcher in actually building the research knowledge. There has to be an attentiveness to time – what people take into research situations and take out of them; as well as feeling, identity, body. (209)

For a biographer, this could be interpreted as self-awareness for who the subject is – the social spaces where the subject existed for example. Self-reflexivity also includes an acknowledgement of who the biographer is and how their identity influences the research or ability to understand the social or other context of those they write about.

For my own biographical research, I wanted to understand Loretta's experience of identity as a white woman in early twentieth century America. The circus is multi-faceted and while being a woman clown would have been difficult, she would have also benefitted from the white supremacy movements that were dominant in this era (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). Writing Loretta raises the issue that while feminists have felt the need to recuperate women's stories, there is an ethical obligation to avoid writing stories that decontextualise critical aspects of their lived experience (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). For Judith Zinsser, the 'recovery of forgotten women's lives' through feminist biography, is also about the importance of contextualising a woman oscillating between power and powerlessness (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41):

These women are all portrayed as active agents, not passive victims, however constraining or limiting their circumstances. These are not simple stories of 'power' and 'powerlessness', but rather complex examples of how these supposed poles of experience can co-exist in the same moment of a life. (Zinsser 45)

Loretta's gender and poverty likely excluded her from many archival records but being white and being married to a man allowed her certain freedoms that, for example, other kinds of circus performers might have been denied (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). Perhaps her whiteness and marriage to Harry La Pearl are what led to her being in the archive at all (however sparingly) (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). Schwartz and Cook write that:

Power over the documentary record, and by extension over the collective memory of marginalized members of society – whether women, non-whites, gays and lesbians, children, the under-classes, prisoners, and the non-literate – and indeed over their representation and integration into the metanarratives of history, resides in the decisions that archivists and manuscript curators make in soliciting and appraising collections, the ways in which institutional resources are allotted for procurement and processing of collections, and the priority given to their diffusion through source guides, publication, exhibitions, and web sites. (17)

There's a tension in Loretta's 'integration into the metanarratives of history' (Schwartz and Cook 17) that I believe requires an intersectional viewpoint (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). This perspective goes beyond considering Loretta's place in the archives but permeates my perspective of writing her biography (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41). How much does white privilege play into Loretta's story, even though she was marginalised due to her gender? (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41) Can I speculate, having no information on her political perspective, that she participated in the dominant white supremacy narratives that were popular during that era in the circus? (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 41) The speculative biographer must constantly negotiate with what needs to be imagined, and that this is not only about empathy – imagining how

a subject feels – but about politics and history: conjuring events that characterise the time/culture/context in order to speculate on how the subject might have responded (Bryant, “Speculative Biography” 41).

In understanding who Loretta was and the spaces she existed in twentieth Century America, I was careful not to transplant my own understanding – gained through media that perpetuates fictions or ‘larger memories’ about the past – onto Loretta’s life. I am also attentive to transferring my own values and ideas, ones that are very much positioned by the time and place in which I live, onto Loretta. How can I write history as it was (as much as it is possible to do so) without writing, as Blenkinsop says, only ‘a desired story about the past’ (127)? Writing without consideration of history may create a redemptive view of the time and place Loretta lived. And while a writer cannot definitively know they haven’t written a ‘desired’ or redemptive view of the past, they can avoid this to the best of their ability by writing with awareness and sincerity. In writing Loretta’s story, I aimed not to overlook or obscure the profound and ongoing effects of colonialism, slavery, and racism. And with specific reference to the circus as a workplace, I also want to acknowledge the context of misogyny, racism, ‘othering’ of disabled bodies and classism, particularly the high risk of injury and death in working at a circus. These ideas were mostly addressed within the essays. In ‘People Don’t End Up in West Virginia: On Discomfort and Home,’ I discuss viewing historical documents that contained ‘the vilest depictions of racism and misogyny.’ And in, ‘To Be The First/The Only’, Charles Sherwood Stratton’s life is explored with reference to his experience of being exploited because of his identity as a little person.

I found exploring the politics of Loretta’s era best accomplished within essays as this allowed me to engage with injustice while not imposing my own ethics and modern politics onto Loretta. I felt doing so would be a disservice to those whose rights were actively suppressed during Loretta’s lifetime. My aim was to convey Loretta as both powerful and powerless, acknowledging the complexity of her identity as a white working class married woman in America.

Subjectivity

A part of being reflexive is the awareness and interrogation of the writer/researcher’s lens and place in reference to who they are writing about. Plummer argues that ‘If we wish to understand a life story, then, we need also to know where both the researcher and the teller of that life are coming from, what kind of relationship they are having together, and how this fits into the wider social order’ (210). Carl Pletsch calls this subjectivity:

Biographers have posed as the objective arbiters of the facts of the lives in question, as writers who could stand out of the way and let the psychological forces of identification, admiration, anger, and so on move between the readers and the subjects of their biographies. This has

been so because, for cultural reasons, biographers have felt obligated to subscribe to the ideal of objectivity. But biography is the perfect enterprise in which to transcend that ideal and show the value of assimilating subjectivity in a larger conception of knowledge. (360)

Pletsch highlights the importance of a biographer acknowledging their place within and influence over the narrative. Within his criticism of the ideal of objectivity, Pletsch notes how biography has been gendered, with the concept of being ‘objective arbiters of the facts’ aligning with maleness. Pletsch argues that the way to move past this false cultural expectation of objectivity involves ‘a biographer who is willing to appear as an actor in the biography he or she is writing’ (360). Specific examples of this include Kiera Lindsey’s *The Convict’s Daughter* where, at the beginning and end of the book, Lindsey as biographer forms part of the biographical narrative. It is in these sections where Lindsey addresses the limits and gendered nature of the existing historical record and thus, explains to the reader the use of her own imagination. This example, alongside others, are explored in detail in ‘Chapter One: Hybrid Approaches to Contemporary Australian Biography.’

In my own work, I have been attuned to my subjectivity as the writer of Loretta’s biography. I often considered how my lens of living in a different time and place to her would affect my retelling of her story. In the manuscript, as biographer, I ask ‘what if I could see beneath what was written and understand what was true?’ (59) and ‘is my gaze carrying on her memory or obscuring it? (61). These questions are what drives the book. My view of who Loretta was – and the relationship I have with her as biographer – is key and thus, my subjectivity is inherently a part of the story.

Including details of a biographer’s subjectivity is especially vital a consideration within the genre of speculative biography where the writer’s informed imagination shapes the telling of their subject’s story. Here, subjectivity becomes even more influential as imagination plays a role in the forming of the narrative, as well as choosing and ordering facts as in a ‘traditional biography’.

In ‘Saying Goodbye’, I acknowledge this by discussing the writing of Loretta’s story. Portraying Loretta at the end of her life, as ageing and unwell, I find that this ‘Loretta is the one I understand most. The version of her who is closest to me’ (131) due to my lived experience of chronic illness. I continue: ‘Loretta’s ageing self is the one that’s closest to mine, yet this is not who she was for most of her life’ (131). In explaining this to the reader, I convey my own subjectivity and how my lived experience informs how I have written Loretta’s story. This is one example where the reader is reminded that my lens as biographer will affect what is told of Loretta’s story, and how. In being upfront about my subjectivity to the reader, I can avoid inaccurately portraying myself as a purely ‘objective’ biographer in telling Loretta’s (and my own) story.

The Limits of Reflexivity and Conclusions

Michael Holroyd, in conversation with Jane McVeigh, says that ‘Biographies create, or re-create, a world that the reader may enter, where his or her imagination may be stimulated, and some of the emotions, thoughts and laughter experienced in reading – as well as the information – may remain with the reader after the book is finished’ (203). Holroyd’s idea of biography centres on (re)creation, where biographers focus on eliciting emotions from the reader alongside (re)creating the world of their subject. It is interesting that Holroyd’s definition does not focus on ‘truth’ or obligations of a biographer but what the biographer can provide for the reader. Holroyd’s is one of the many definitions Ruth Scurr considers in *The Times Literary Supplement* before coming to the conclusion that the ongoing changes to how biography is viewed ‘comes down to the fact that each new life is a fresh start – one that might need a new form of writing to describe it’ (11).

While reflexivity is a fundamental consideration in ethically writing biography – especially speculative biography – as Scurr writes above, each biography will encounter and work through its challenges and ethics differently as each life circumstance is different. For example, for me, reflexively writing the narrative of the first woman clown in twentieth Century America has been key, yet it is important to acknowledge the limits of this idea. While I could be reflexive about imposing unrealistic gender norms for that era, I can never truly know what it was like for women then, let alone Loretta. I believe writing perfectly ‘true’ historical knowledge cannot be the goal as it is simply not possible. Instead, I will write the ‘truest’ and most ethically sound biography within my ability.

In reference to fictional biography, literary scholar Ina Schabert argues that a writer should possess a ‘responsible imagination’ that ‘as a rule respects the known facts, yet is free to interpret them, enlarge upon them and supplement them according to the certainties of the empathic act’ (147). I would extend this argument to being reflexive within speculative biography. Having a ‘responsible imagination’ where the biographer reflexively considers who their subject was and the culture and time in which they lived *as well as* the biographer’s own self-reflexive subjectivity is paramount. Communicating these ideas to the reader within the biography makes for a richer, ethically sound work and this has been my goal with *The Art of Falling*.

Chapter Three: Writing Loretta: Method, Form and Doubts

At the National Library of Australia

In the Reading Room, I unfurl a poster. As it unwinds onto a lacquered wooden desk, I see the shock of neon yellow. I smile and move carefully; this is a performance. The room is watching me, scholars leaning over photos and letters, while I am handling a two-metre-long poster.

I spread it out on the glossy wooden desk and take in the yellow and red. The clown with a hat a dozen sizes too small. The elephant on its back legs. In large block letters: *Perrys' Circus and Zoo*. On the bottom edge of the poster, a large brown water stain. I am staring hard at all this detail when a man comes up to me.

‘What year is this?’

I try to switch from looking to conversation, but his question is so abrupt that my brain goes quiet. He points.

‘The poster. What year is it from?’

I hadn't looked at the label yet, too excited to see what was in the poster tube. I had ordered it days ago and couldn't remember. I try to explain but the man cuts me short with a wave of his hand.

‘Roughly?’

‘1920s,’ I blurt. He nods, and leaves.

I feel the heat in my face as I go to check the label. I keep my movements slow despite the rush of nerves in my body.

1982.

I feel the sting of my error and once again, despite years of research, I feel like a fraud.

Introduction

Professor Donna Lee Brien argues that, to some degree, all biography is speculation:

All biographers locate and assimilate their biographic material, speculate and make assumptions, and then search for more evidence to support their suppositions, but overtly and openly ‘speculative’ biographies go further... [they] unabashedly proclaim the central role of authorial interpretation—including conjecture, intuition and even guesswork—in the process of creating their biographical narratives (22).

Yet, as she writes, overt speculation goes further. Speculative biographers push beyond what is recorded and use supplementary sources and informed imagination. In doing so, they create a full – or even tantalizingly partial – narrative of their subject.

In writing the biography of the first woman clown in America, Loretta La Pearl, I found my creative and intellectual self grappling with how to speculate in an ethical, historically correct way

while also creating a compelling narrative for the reader. Through my writing practice, I was able to sit with this tension and by doing so, it informed how I wrote on both a structural and sentence level.

Jessica L. Wilkinson uses poetry as creative method to write biography In *Choreographing George Balanchine: The Life as Ballet Program*, Wilkinson says that for each poetic biography she has written, the form has changed: 'I have been focused on finding unique vehicles (the 'form' or 'container') to convey each individual subject's 'life' to a reader, aided by poetry's many morphological and technical properties' (132). Like Wilkinson, I found my own 'container' was unique to Loretta's life. It was formed through the act of writing and by considering the distinct aspects of her life and archival remains.

In this chapter, I explore speculation in biography (particularly direct speculation), my method in finding Loretta's narrative voice, the use of supplementary research on circus women from the archives and I discuss my rationale for including personal essays in my biography. It was in researching, writing and sitting with the different elements of Loretta's story that I was able to approach writing *The Art of Falling* in a way that felt true to me as a writer and researcher of Loretta's life. To incorporate the act of sitting with research, I integrated memories where I think about Loretta and experience the anxiety and doubt that I believe is part of the speculative process. In this way, I hope this chapter not only discusses the act of research but replicates it.

Method

My approach to working with Loretta's partial history was to begin by writing the scenes that were most supported by archival research. The first chapter I wrote was 'Chapter Three', the early years of Loretta and Harry's marriage where she decides to join the Joeys as the General and begins her training as a clown. This chapter was inspired by the source I stumbled upon first, a *Popular Mechanics* article written by Earl Chapin May in 1927. This happened to be the most detailed of all the sources I encountered. It was particularly useful as it was one of the rare interviews with Loretta herself and not her and her husband. This was a key in allowing me to understand and home in on her voice, as well as for understanding the circus era she lived within.

In this interview, Loretta talks of learning to fall: 'When I began to study to be a clown and Harry told me to fall, full length, upon the floor, I nearly broke my back, or thought I did. But by and by I learned the trick of making my rounded shoulders take most of the blow. Now I can fall or sprawl almost any way without suffering the least bruise' (May 597). This description not only became the central idea of 'Chapter Three,' but the manuscript itself with each chapter playing with the idea of Loretta and falling.

Beginning with Loretta's introduction to Harry's circus was not only helpful for me writer in terms of having the most historical detail to work with, but it meant that Loretta's journey of discovery mirrored my own. As I researched and wrote, I felt an absorption and fascination with the circus. I learnt about circus cookhouses and how clown props were made and stored. My own exploration and excitement allowed me to tap into what I imagined Loretta might be feeling.

From 'Chapter Three,' I worked through each event in Loretta's life from which I had the most detail to the least. This allowed me to practice writing Loretta's voice where there was the most archival detail. As I felt more comfortable with my representation of her, I was able to speculate more in the years where the archive did not provide details of her life (specifically, before she met Harry La Pearl and after his death).

'Chapter Five' was written second as there was a substantial number of archival resources to portray Loretta's life in 1946, Hollywood. Here, Loretta sees Harry's ashes placed in the Columbarium at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery and she travels to Studio W6XAO to perform on a television test transmission. While I could not find footage of Loretta performing on the test transmission, I knew she would have had to have "Television Make-up" applied by Max Factor. I was able to speculate on this process, imagining what a woman clown who was used to painting her face in black and white would feel at being painted purple. This chapter also allowed me to speculate on the physicality and emotion of Loretta's grief at the loss of her life partner, in work and marriage.

In 'Chapter Four,' at John Robinson's Lot in 1923, I showed Loretta experiencing a fire. This chapter involved speculation in that I could not find records of Loretta living through a circus fire, however fires were such a common occurrence in the circus that it was unlikely through her lifetime of performing that she wouldn't have experienced one. In writing this chapter, I was inspired by a scene in Lucia Zora's 1928 memoir *Sawdust and Solitude*. So while, here, I speculated about how Loretta would have acted in a fire, the circumstances of the fire and how a circus might react in such emergencies were a result of my broader research.

'Chapter Six,' placed sometime during the 1960s, Ohio, was written next and was based on little archival information. I only knew from a descendant I spoke with that Loretta died alone with little money and experiencing low vision. I was told her 'carer' was her dog and that they lived in Loretta's caravan on a plot of land in Ohio. This information was the baseline from which I speculated. Out of all of the chapters, speculating here allowed me to tap into my own lived experience of illness and therefore, the speculation while based in information I had on Loretta, felt personal. In 'Chapter Six,' I also incorporated archival information I was not able to elsewhere: Doodles and Fred, another clowning couple who performed with Harry and Loretta. I found

newspaper coverage of their relationship, so speculated that Doodles and Loretta may have stayed in touch via letters.

Because of my method of writing from the most archival information to the least, despite being at the beginning of Loretta's life, I wrote 'Chapter One' and 'Chapter Two' last. The reasons for this were twofold: Loretta's life before Harry, specifically how she came to be at the circus, was hard to pinpoint. Secondly, it was towards the end of my research that I discovered the 'lie' that Loretta and Harry were not married for several years that they claimed to be. Further, during this time Harry was still married to Frances Maginley. The combination of both conflicting and limited records meant that these chapters were based on less detailed accounts than other chapters.

Here, speculation was key. 'Chapter One' was based on the records I found that placed Loretta at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, where she played piano. I learnt about her family from Census records and knew that she ran away with the circus, beginning her work as a living statue. I could also place Harry La Pearl at the same circus, the John Robinson in Ohio, 1915. From these details, I speculated as to what a young woman like Loretta would be feeling to make her escape to the circus. I imagined what Harry was like, speculating that he would not reveal his current marriage to Loretta. In this chapter, I wanted to portray the nervousness, the excitement and the leap Loretta would take. It introduces her relationship to Harry, but I wanted it to be firmly about her and what I imagined she was feeling.

'Chapter Two' had more archival information available to work with. While I could not find detailed sources on Loretta's experience of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus train crash, Harry had mentioned his experience of being presumed dead in 1918 in a couple of interviews and there was newspaper coverage of the crash itself. I was also able to build my speculation off the previous chapter, imagining how Loretta and Harry's relationship would develop once she learnt he was married, and they decided to 'lie' about being married themselves. Working with these two chapters, I was also able to thread gendered dynamics into Loretta's experiences. Here, I speculated how being a young woman working alone, and then with Harry, in the circus would have impacted how she was treated.

The method of drawing on the most archival information to the least allowed me to tighten my speculation as I wrote, creating a voice for Loretta that was as consistent with her archival traces as possible. This also meant that as I wrote Loretta's discovering the circus, I too was on a journey of uncovering what it meant to be a woman clown in the twentieth Century. My excitement was able to mirror hers, and in the final chapter, my lived experience of illness was able to inspire the writing of Loretta's. In this way, this method also allowed me to write Loretta's life while being in tune with the emotions I imagined she was feeling.

Circus Women in the Archives

To support my speculation, I looked beyond Loretta's life towards the lives of other circus women during her era to understand more about her. Kiera Lindsey writes about researching the artist and medium Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside and 'also drew upon the archives, autobiographies and biographies of other well-known political, literary and artistic figures with whom she acquainted, supplementing these with those of contemporaries whom she did not know but whose lives might, nonetheless, yield insight' (97). Like Lindsey, Antoinette Burton considers the absence of women in the archives and ways in which to recover their stories. She writes:

the histories that have resulted from "researching around" these discrepant subjects remain fragmentary, allusive, and unsatisfactory in the best possible sense ... the stories that can be gleaned from their archival traces are inevitably partial, albeit tantalizingly so. But as this forum also shows, those traces are more than mere documents, more than simply the foundations of historical narrative. In the hands of critical feminist historians, inquisition testimony, personal letters, street strolling, and travel narratives of the kind we have before us are always already histories in the making. (150)

By using the concept of 'researching around' and following the path of speculative biographers like Lindsey, I was able to move beyond archival sources that addressed Loretta alone and find women whose lives resembled hers.

I drew on sources like Lucia Zora's 1928 memoir, *Sawdust and Solitude*. While Zora was not a clown like Loretta, she was a circus animal trainer and one of the very few women to do so. She worked at American circuses in the same era as Loretta. One of the many details I was able to use in my speculation was Zora's explanation of circus folks using diamonds to transport their life savings with them. At that time in America, banks were not nationalized so, for travelling performers, banks were impractical.

In my research, I also drew heavily on the archives at the National Library of Australia. This was part necessity as frequent trips to view American archives were not possible (especially during the pandemic), but also the abundance of circus archives held at the NLA allowed me to understand circus life through a woman's perspective. Yet, of course, I recognised early on that, here, the focus would be on Australia more than America; as I sorted through these materials, this was at the forefront of my mind.

The NLA's Agnes Greenwood and May Wirth scrapbooks were particularly useful in supplementing my knowledge of Loretta. Like with Lucia Zora's memoir, the Greenwood and Wirth scrapbooks were self-created. Through these sources, I was able to view something that was not possible with Loretta: circus women's writing and collection of images from their own perspective. For Loretta, her words have only been preserved through interviews reported in the

newspaper. Simply put, her voice has always been framed by someone else's; in her era, that was always a male reporter and, often, her husband.

Agnes Greenwood (1885–1977) was a circus performer from her childhood into adulthood. Because she worked in her family-run circus alongside her sisters for many years, she had a broad range of roles including working with animals and costume creation. Greenwood was particularly adept at acrobatics and later went on to establish 'Greenwood's Royal Acrobatic Academy' in Melbourne. While reading Greenwood's letters, I saw glimpses into Loretta's life. Greenwood corresponded with theatres and dancing schools, aiding students in stretching methods and procuring them work. She was interviewed in newspapers and on radio. I recognised her determination and grit as also what Loretta would have had to do to survive on her own as a circus performer, especially after Harry's death.

I also found May Wirth's scrapbooks as key aids in understanding Loretta, but in a different way to Greenwood. An Australian woman, Wirth was a bareback rider and acrobat who moved from her family circus, Wirth's Circus (1880–1963), on to performing in America. Wirth worked with Barnum and Bailey and the Ringling Circus, travelling in the same time and with similar circuses as Loretta. Wirth's photographs of her time in America – pictures of herself alongside other circus women – were a rich resource for me. Even though, unlike Greenwood and Loretta, Wirth encountered fame in her lifetime.

Greenwood and Wirth scrapbooked for decades: Greenwood from 1907 to 1976, Wirth from 1900 to 1930. Their archives include newspaper articles, circus posters, photos of themselves performing and the circuses they performed in, letters and postcards signed by fellow performers. While Greenwood and Wirth's archives provide different transnational contexts to Loretta, the detail available to me in their records allowed me to speculate on Loretta's experiences. For example, I used Wirth's scrapbook images alongside other images of circus lots I had come across to write descriptions of the Lots where Loretta's circuses travelled. I was able to see what the canvas tents looked like; the broad expanse of dust they were erected on.

Media scholar Katie Day Good considers how scrapbooks act as personal media assemblages, calling them 'messy, fragmentary and highly individualised' (558). Good particularly explores how scrapbooks work in technological contexts, but I am most interested in how she labels scrapbooks as individualized. Scrapbooks are a self-documentation tool that are particularly important for women, allowing creators to record their life and to exert control over this as a representation (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 36). Yet the issue in relying on scrapbooks as a source is that, as Helfand argues, this self-record means that creators can 'bury the truth or doctor the evidence' of their own lives (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 36; Good 571; Helfand 9). While the subjectivity of autobiographical primary sources like scrapbooks might sometimes pose an issue

for some historians, creative writers tend to be less worried, especially when considering it is impossible for any autobiographical ephemera to not be curated in some way (Bryant, “Speculative Biography” 36). Vivian Gornick argues that life writing ‘shape[s] a piece of experience out of the raw materials of one’s own life so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one that has meaning for the disinterested reader’ (8). Curation is in the shaping of the material, whether memories or a collection of ephemera (Bryant, “Speculative Biography” 36).

I wrote about working with Greenwood and Wirth’s scrapbooks for *Life Writing*, where I discussed how archival material is gendered:

I notice that unlike most archived circus material I have seen, which is usually comprised of newspaper clippings and flyers, the images collected here place women at the forefront. Their presence is much more palpable; I am able to see, for example, women being photographed together after a performance. I am able see...the physical visibility of women... These personal archives/assemblages give me – the biographer – a peek into not only these women’s interior lives but the politics of the space they inhabited in relation the circus as a public institution. (36-37)

The lives I encountered of Lucia Zora, Agnes Greenwood and May Wirth through memoir and archives allowed me to be informed in my speculation of Loretta’s world as a woman in a male-dominated industry. While my research took me to archives throughout America, looking at images of the places Loretta lived, circus props and visiting Harry’s cemetery, it was these three women’s lives that allowed me to find Loretta’s voice within the manuscript.

At a Reading

I present my work to a room full of people. My hand flicks through slides of archives: black and white images of clowns smiling, contorted bodies and circus Lots. I hold my paper against the podium and almost feel the warmth of it, though printed half an hour before. Five years earlier, I couldn’t have done this. Spoken in front of people. Let my voice fill a room. Now, I can, but I find myself bored by the sound of my own voice; speaking words I’ve already long decided on. I often want to skip ahead, missing paragraphs of detail and just get to the end. But I make myself move forward. I talk about what is left behind by circus women. How we imagine them. I look at the faces in the crowd; one woman at the back nods her head. The rest are blank. I cannot intuit what they are thinking.

I end with a reading, something I always do. I like to show how the research can come alive with words. I want to leave the audience with an image of Loretta captivating the stage. It makes her feel more alive. My presentation ends and I sit down, back amongst the audience, and listen to the other speeches. I try to nod at the words, show I am listening, and they are understood. After the

event is over, I linger. On the outside of conversations around me, I fold my notes in half.

Straighten my shoulders. A scholar I've shared an office with comes up to me. We chat and he tells me that was 'a lovely bit of literature' at the end. I thank him but he is not done.

'I didn't know if you could write. It would have been awkward if it wasn't any good!'

My face doesn't move. At least I don't perceive it to. I might blink at him, stunned by what he feels comfortable saying to me. That afternoon, I'll catch up with a friend and tell her what happened. Together, we'll cackle as her black rescue dog sits at our feet.

A Challenge: On Recovery and Women

While I was able to research Lucia Zora, Agnes Greenwood and May Wirth, it was a challenge to find records of women created by women. In most surviving records of the travelling circus, with animals and performers like the one Loretta performed in during the early Twentieth Century, women performers are sexualised (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 32). For example, an eight-hundred-page archived dossier of Australian and New Zealand newspaper clippings contained hundreds of images of women, nearly all in suggestive costumes and poses (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 32). This is one of the most dominant ways in which women in the circus are still perceived (Bryant 32; Tait). Stories like Loretta's – where a woman performer occupies a traditionally cis male role – are rare or entirely absent in the archives and so, the popular imagination (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 32; Barrutia-Wood 107-116).

Difficulty searching for diverse representations of women is not unique (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 33). Schwartz and Cook convincingly show how modern memory is constructed through the archives and by doing so, argue that women have been erased from this mode of imagination (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 33). They write of Gerda Lerner who, 'has convincingly traced, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, the systemic exclusion of women from society's memory tools and institutions, including archives' (7). Women, despite being a key part of the circus, in performance and through family-based labour, as the circus is often a family enterprise, remain at its borders, out of the spotlight (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 33). It is also well established that the archives are shaped by ideological forces (Bryant, "Speculative Biography" 33). Findlay suggests:

We need to shake off the vision of the impartial archivist safe in her fortress (and her cardigan) and look to the coder/recordkeeper making truly alternative systems of memory available to the marginalised, the vulnerable, and to the journalist/archivist releasing records with the power to shift the course of global affairs, and making sure they remain available and usable forever. (158)

Here, Findlay addresses the convergence of archives and journalism (referencing the likes of WikiLeaks and the National Security Archive) to dismantle dominant power structures. For Findlay, it is the duality of the ‘journalist/archivist’ that allows access to alternative archival memory. The ‘journalist/archivist’ is a maker and keeper (Bryant 33). This duality of preserving aspects of the past and also creating for the future is a role much like my own: a biographer/archivist (Bryant, “Speculative Biography” 33).

So, in my own context – researching and writing a biographical account that hopes to position circus women more visibly within institutional and cultural memory – Findlay’s argument is appealing (Bryant, “Speculative Biography” 33). In turning to fragments that have survived from other circus women (Zora, Wirth and Greenwood), I am able to redeploy them and make these into something new. My aim has been to create an alternative record of memory.

Direct Speculation

In *Speculative Biography: Experiments, Opportunities and Provocations*, Brien and Lindsey show that speculation is a spectrum, highlighting the difference between direct and indirect speculation: direct includes qualifiers like ‘perhaps’ whereas indirect is ‘less explicitly signalled’ (8). Early on in my research, I knew I did not want to use direct speculation. While this is an effective way of letting the reader know when a biographer is speculating, I wanted the reader to be absorbed in Loretta’s story and felt that including words that signaled speculation would take them out of the narrative. Lindsey comments on the impact of direct speculation on narrative, stating, ‘such direct signals are not always necessary or even suitable, particularly when writing for general readers who may not want the many pleasures of a lucid narrative and an absorbing ‘life world’ interrupted with caveats and explanations’ (48).

At my Desk

When I can’t write, I look out my window. Honey eaters duck in and out of the red wattle tree. I watch a neighbour polish their car in the driveway, rubbing circles with a small cloth. I wonder why they do it. Rain and dust will come again. A car cannot stay polished.

I laugh at myself. I’ve spent the past month looking out this window. The past three years looking out a window of some sort, willing the words to come. Writing up checklists to monitor my word count. Pushing and pushing. Feeling triumphant when something sticks. Some days, it feels as meaningless as rubbing a rag against metal. Hours spent waiting for something to shine.

The Act of Speculating

Lindsey writes on ‘the speculative method’ and argues that ‘narrative functions as a laboratory... in which the biographer constantly tests and refines their speculation about the evidence as they inform their imagination and construct a convincing “life world”’ (41). Like Lindsey, I found myself testing my own speculation throughout the writing of the manuscript. For example, when I discovered Loretta’s ‘lie’ (as written about in ‘Ethics, Forgotten History and Post-Memory’) that she was married to Harry when she was not, this altered how I viewed their relationship. Loretta’s ‘lie’ inspired me to speculate in ‘Chapter One’ that she was not always cognizant of Harry’s marriage to Frances Maginley. I considered Loretta’s youth and close-knit family upbringing, as well as the era, and speculated that Harry would not be forthcoming about his marriage to Frances.

While it was the archival gaps I encountered that initially encouraged me to write Loretta’s story as a speculative biography, as I wrote I felt that speculation was important not because of necessity but for my creative practice. William G. Pooley writes about his research on witchcraft experienced by the Schwartz family in France in 1925. To emphasize the speculative element in his creative work, Pooley shows the silences literally, using absence on the page. He was inspired by Saidiya Hartman who wrote about not just building on sources but also ‘honouring silences’ in her biography *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (76). Pooley also draws on Carolyn Steedman’s thoughts on archive fever, with the archive giving:

rise to a particular form of writing, whose practitioners believe it to be about what is *not* as much as what has been found; a form of writing which celebrates the constraints on it, constraints which—so it is said—are made by the documents themselves: what they forbid you to write, the permissions they offer. (88)

In the writing of *The Art of Falling*, silences that were initially a hurdle to overcome morphed in my understanding. They became points of history to be honoured. Loretta’s life was not historically preserved, or noted, and this is a key aspect in considering her life. The silence that I encountered in researching about her also manifested in her life as, for example, financial hardship -- after Harry died, Loretta spent her last years alone and in poverty. Speculation became not just an antidote to writing Loretta’s partial story but emboldened me to embrace the gaps. The structure of the manuscript was formed by the method of writing each chapter about what was most known about Loretta. But in moving from one period of her life to many years later, I was able to replicate the gaps to the reader. In this way, the reader can choose to speculate, too. They can also wonder: what did Loretta’s life look like?

At a Dinner Party

I am invited to a dinner party while visiting a city I do not live in. It’s a new friendship and she tells me an old friend of hers will be there. A history professor: we will have much to talk about.

At her house and after the hellos, the professor asks me about my thesis. I reply in words that have become rote: *I am writing a speculative biography of the first woman clown in America.*

He replies: *Hilary Clinton?* and laughs before turning to speak to someone else.

I notice his wife slowly turning her back to me and I eye the front door I had walked through minutes before, wishing I had not been driven by someone else.

Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice and Essays

My own method of starting with the most available information and writing outwards replicates Pope Brock's description where 'the facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination' (Brien 31). Brien argues that 'It is the distance between those buoys, and how that distance is traversed, that seems the lightning rod for anxiety around speculation in biography' (31). Being aware of this anxiety, and wanting to communicate to the reader that speculation was present in the manuscript without the use of direct speculation, I decided to integrate essays.

I approached the writing of the essays – settling on their content and the form of blending biography and essay – through practice-led research. As Lelia Green explains, 'the supposition is that it is through the practice of creative writing that new knowledge about the art of creative writing is developed, and knowledge about the contribution of creative writing to contemporary society' (177). Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean write about the place of practice-led research in academe and further explore the idea that research can beget creative practice in what they call research-led practice (2). They 'do not see practice-led research and research-led practice as separate processes, but as interwoven in an iterative cyclic web' (2). This idea is relevant to my own practice as while I was led to knowledge through the act of creative writing, my archival research also led to its own creative inspiration. It is the combination of these two practices that led to my use of both essays and biography.

By thinking through how I would write Loretta's story in the speculative portions of the manuscript, I was led to essays. So much of my process was placing who Loretta was in context to myself and questioning why I should have the task of writing her story. Essays became a natural way for me as a writer to work through my own thinking and questioning. While practice-led research was key, as mentioned above, my method of writing what was known and then moving outwards meant that I was continually being inspired and informed by archives. In this way, both practice-led research and research-led practice worked together in forming the creative artefact.

Smith and Dean go on to argue that 'the unique combination of creative practice and research can sometimes result in distinctive methodological approaches, as well as exhilarating findings and artworks' (5). Simply put, if Loretta's archives were more robust, I do not think my creative practice would have led me to the integration of essays. Yet by adopting this form, I feel

that a combination of the two – personal essays of the biographer and speculative biography of the subject – allows greater transparency of the biographical process for the reader.

In trying to define this combination of genre, I came to Anneliese MacAdams' work. In her thesis exploring the form of hybrid memoir, MacAdams defined the term as:

any memoir in which its author purposefully disrupts standard memoiristic convention in the telling of his or her own life, by using significant transgressions in content, style, or structure. As a result, the author will likely push generic boundaries, creating a text that may ultimately be difficult to categorise (16).

While I would not classify *The Art of Falling* as memoir, MacAdams' concept of 'push[ing] generic boundaries' that results in a difficult to categorise creative work ring true. The use of essays speaks to my experience as biographer and writer trying to understand Loretta. This results in a creative work that is hard to categorise in a traditional genre and, ultimately, points to the inadequacy of understandings of biography that exclude or fail to account for the subjectivity of the biographer.

Thematically, I included essays on my research of Loretta's life, incorporating why I followed Loretta's story ('Why Loretta//Why Me/Why Now'); physicality and performance, especially of gender ('Looking, Home and Body'); travel ('People Don't End Up in West Virginia: On Discomfort and Home'), unpacking the history and understanding of clowns ('Clowns, Horror and Monstrous Women'); the compelling label of being the 'first' woman clown ('To Be The First/They Only'); and the attachment formed between biographer and subject ('Saying Goodbye'). In these essays, as well as through the combination of essays and biography, I could show to the reader what was unknown to me about Loretta's life and reflect on the ways that this allowed me to feel both connected and distanced from her. Lindsey writes that 'There are many ways to signal speculation which invite the reader to employ not only "appropriate suspicion" but even a degree of conspiratorial play' (51). By writing that Loretta was an unfamiliar figure throughout the manuscript, I show the reader that while I represent Loretta's feelings and thoughts, these are speculation.

The form punctuates the reader's experience. They are immersed within Loretta's story, then are drawn out to my perspective as biographer. This continuous surfacing – in and out of Loretta's biography – reminds the reader that Loretta's narrative is speculative. The form itself encourages 'appropriate suspicion'. The manuscript's form became circular; I chose essays to explore my questions around who Loretta was, and these essays signify to the reader the complexity of telling Loretta's story. In this way, form aligned with content and signified the challenges of writing an underrepresented life.

Chapter Four: On COVID, Archives and Looking Forward

While my research has allowed me to dive into Loretta's history, I would like to now use this space to look to how speculative biography and the use of archives could evolve in the coming years. In researching my thesis, I spent January of 2020 at the National Library of Australia (NLA) on a Summer Scholar fellowship. Here, I researched the lives of Australian circus performers May Wirth and Agnes Greenwood and through this, I reached what I felt was a fuller understanding of Loretta's life in the circus. But, after returning from the NLA, soon to depart on another trip to America to try to find more of Loretta's archival traces, the pandemic happened. My intention had been to travel to small archives in America, specifically community-run: Circus World in Baraboo, Wisconsin; circus-themed like the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida. I was going to spend time in Normal, Illinois at a Circus and I had been awarded an Allied Arts Fellowship at Illinois State University to explore their circus collection. I knew Milner Library at Illinois State University had images of Loretta with Vernon Colbert, her boyfriend after Harry's death. These were the only archival traces of her from that period. Because of the pandemic, a ban on travel from my university meant the research trip had to be cancelled; the archives felt newly, even more painfully distant.

I was lucky that I had already spent time at the NLA, that January in 2020 before everything locked down. In retrospect, I found that the power of archives crystallised. They are not only politically powerful, but personally. As a researcher, there's an intimacy to the archives. While looking at pieces of history, I'm often in a historical setting. I sit in reading rooms with heavy wooden chairs. I feel the immense quiet of the room, except for the rustle of ephemera. The rules of the archive add to the sense of the otherworldly: the feel of white cotton gloves; no food or drinks; writing with pencil instead of pen. Being in an archive transports you into a different world.

Arlette Farge describes the effect of finding an object in the archive. She writes that:

Each time, the person who reads, touches, or discovers them is at first struck by a feeling of certainty. The spoken word, the found object, the trace left behind become faces of the real.

As if the proof of what the past was like finally lay there before you, definitive and close. As if, in unfolding the document, you gained the privilege of "touching the real." (11)

Farge hints at the sensory experience of being in the archives; the act of touching fosters a connection to the past. All of this is to say: I wonder if the magic in history is when it is tactile? In my own writing, it has been engaging with the archive that has acted as a moment of electricity. It is exciting to sift for hours and then find a document laden with meaning. The energy sprung from the archive feeds directly into my creative work. So, in the wake of the pandemic, where my research trip was cancelled two weeks before I was to set foot on the plane, I had to reconceptualize what it meant to touch history.

‘Pivoting’

A year into my thesis, I found myself working with the complication of navigating archives without touching them. Instead, I worked distantly with archivists to find items I needed and have them scanned so I could access the contents. There was no accidental (literal) stumbling upon fortuitous research material, but I was able to get material that was vital to my research. For example, I contacted an archivist at Circus World. Because of them, I was able to consult correspondence between Sverre O. Braathen and Jack La Pearl (Harry La Pearl’s relative), which allowed me to both understand Jack’s experiences as well as his personality. I also looked at route sheets of the JH La Pearl circus from 1891 to 1897 which guided my understanding of the movements of Harry and his family circus throughout his childhood. And most excitingly, in working with Milner Library at Illinois State University, I found images of Loretta’s clowning career post Harry’s death. Having these images as well as an unexpected correspondence by Vernon Colbert that was in the image collection, was a key breakthrough in understanding her later life.

While I was not physically present, digitally I was able to communicate with the archives to continue my research. But in communicating with archivists online, I realised that it eliminated a key aspect of the archival process: combing through materials. What I used to think of as a pleasant by-product of archival research – sorting and looking – I realised was key in building a knowledge surrounding my subject. For example, while looking at historical images of Huntington, West Virginia, where Loretta lived for a time, I tried to find images of houses by the river. In sorting through these images, I was able to build up a knowledge of what it looked like throughout Huntington, and this helped in placing her in West Virginia when I began to work on the manuscript.

Without this supplementary ephemera, I found there was less material to influence my writing. I had to creatively interpret what an archive is, and thus find more research material. An unexpected alternative source of archival research was Facebook. Media scholar Katie Day Good explores how practices of personal record-keeping persist in new technological contexts like Facebook. She writes about scrapbooks, calling these sources ‘messy, fragmentary and highly individualised’ (558) as well as them being a ‘personal media archive’ that ‘house personal media assemblages within a bounded setting, with options for both private viewing and public display’ (559). Facebook has allowed me to access community groups with historical interests. I am a member of a historical Facebook group whose members are circus workers, family members of circus workers, or enthusiasts. Personal collections of images alongside memories are posted, granting me access to see material that are not in ‘traditional’ archives. The nature of Facebook has also allowed me to engage with people with lived experience of the circus. I am not passively

viewing circus materials but talking to the people who created them. And by doing so, I can access resources on overlooked lives. This subverts issues I have encountered throughout researching Loretta: that archives are selected and shaped according to their own ideology.

Evolving Archives

While the pandemic changed my access to archival research, and thus my research methodology, COVID has also changed the archives themselves. Archivist Nkholezeni Sidney Netshakhuma writes in response to the pandemic that: ‘archivists need to ensure authenticity, reliability and long-term accessibility of permanent electronic records for current and subsequent users’ (39). This mission is explored in the article, ‘When the World Shuts Down: Collections Access and Interpretation in a Time of COVID,’ where archivists Sheridan Sayles and Lauren Cahill Burroughs look at how two university libraries, Seton Hall University Library and Georgetown University Law Library, responded to COVID. They write that the pandemic has resulted in archivists taking ‘a razor sharp look at their methodology’ whereby ‘many have created additional documentation, expanded description practices, and even built new capacities entirely’ (228). This has meant archivists have employed ‘imaginative use of different tools and collections’ allowing ‘repositories to expand their reach and give second life to certain collections’ (228). Sayles and Cahill Burroughs use the example of Seton Hall University Library where during lockdowns, the archivists sought to create resources like ‘online tours, connect historic and contemporary imagery of local sites, use online mapping tools to make both physical and virtual engagement possible, and additionally give students a way to build on this system’ (228). It’s this resourcefulness that encourages Sayles and Cahill Burroughs to call the pandemic ‘a moment of opportunity’ (232) that will transform collections ‘through a reinterpretation of information delivery’ (233).

As noted by Sayles and Cahill Burroughs, throughout the pandemic there has been an increased digitisation of materials as well archives opening for digital public access. Laila Hussein Moustafa writes about the practical effect of this in Europe:

The British National Archives has allowed users to digitally borrow up to 50 items for 30 days until their site at Kew reopens. Individual registration is required, but nothing else. The Paris Art Museums have allowed access to 100k images of works held at 14 museums in Paris. The Francophone Press in Egypt digitized their collection of twentieth-century materials. This is the most comprehensively digitized collection of historical publishing on and in Egypt between 1844 and 1985 – now completely available online. (n.p.)

The effect of this is significant in broadening the reach and access of archives. Somebody across the world with an internet connection now can have very similar access to someone living in that very city. To return to Sayles and Cahill Burroughs, they hint that this has an impact on who can access

archives in the pandemic and beyond: ‘Gatekeeping has no place in this mission and that is abundantly true in the current environment’ (233).

Emily Lapworth and Su Kim Chung explore the effects of archival large-scale digitization in the *Journal of Archival Organization*. While they did not touch on how COVID has driven increased digitization, Lapworth and Kim Chung examined the overall effects on researchers, writing:

Having access to entire archival collections online greatly expands the amount and depth of research that users are able to accomplish virtually. Interviewees appreciated the advantages that online research has over in-person research, and they trust the digital representation of archival materials... (24)

Interestingly, Lapworth and Kim Chung go on to note that researchers who are used to working in archival spaces ‘did express an attachment to the physical experience, and in some cases, a concrete need to see an item in person when certain qualities could not be reproduced in the digital surrogate’ (24). Like in my own research process, the presence of being in the archives has a material effect on the researcher and thus, the work.

This ‘attachment’ is not experienced by researchers alone, but also archivists. Alex H. Poole and Jane Zhang discuss this alongside the pandemic’s impact on Library and Information Science pedagogy. In the interviews they conducted, archivists in the university sector discussed the difficulties of ‘the transition to online education, the loss of hands-on experiential work opportunities... student stress’ and ‘financial issue(s)’ (316). One interviewee missed ‘the materiality of being there and being with people and watching professionals work’ while another found online media insufficient for their archival work, saying ‘our bench conservation, our bench media archiving, our bench printing classes, we can’t run any of them’ (319).

Greg Bak has also written on how increased archival digitisation throughout the pandemic has a tangible effect on the workload of archivists:

Archives do not destroy the records they digitize. For every digitized record the burden of preservation is doubled: the original must be maintained and the digital copy, to be useful, must be preserved against obsolescence and data loss. (n.p.)

Bak argues that large scale digitization is not a simple solution, writing that without specific funding ‘digitization is a zero-sum game: it uses up resources that are not available for other tasks.’ He uses the example of Library and Archives Canada whose ‘hundreds of kilometres of records, millions of photographic images’ means that ‘digitizing this quantity of material far exceeds the institution’s resources.’ While resources and time factor into large-scale digitization, Bak also raises ethical implications of digitizing some material:

Indigenous communities, for example, have been under government surveillance for longer than Canada has been a nation. The records of this surveillance are government records. Digitizing them and placing them online would deprive Indigenous people of their privacy and undermine Indigenous sovereignty. (n.p.)

Director of the Canadian National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Ry Moran has written about this, saying that concerning their archives, ‘Indigenous peoples have had little to no say regarding the use, disclosure or access to that information’ (1). Instead of large-scale digitization of archives as a future solution, Bak argues that resources should be allocated not to digitize current collections but making sure archives of born-digital records are maintained. Bak specifically references records created during, and of, COVID.

While archives have become increasingly accessible digitally through the pandemic, COVID itself has been a time of intense collection for archivists working to document the impact as it happens. Throughout the pandemic, curators have been collecting artefacts of COVID, like used ventilators and failed prototype COVID-19 tests (Spinney). Personal artefacts like vlogs, images and recordings of locked-down cities have also been recorded (Spinney). As science writer Laura Spinney found: ‘For the first time, a pandemic has triggered institutional plans for rapid response collecting.’ Memory scholar Astrid Erll has said that we are experiencing ‘the first worldwide digitally witnessed pandemic. It is a test case for the making of global memory in the new media ecology’ (Spinney). In my own city, I have witnessed collection efforts by the State Library of South Australia. Using both Facebook and their digital collections platform as collection mediums, the State Library focussed on personal responses to the pandemic with ‘Remember my story - COVID-19’ (State Library of South Australia). The library’s Director Geoff Stempel that ‘as a memory institution’ the library wanted to show how the state experienced the pandemic ‘as it will be our legacy for future generations to learn from’ (State Library of South Australia).

Yet, documenting the pandemic is not a simple task. The Royal Society of Canada created a task force to specifically discuss COVID-19 and its effect on the archives. Authored by Esyllt Jones et al., the subsequent report outlines the importance of thoughtful archival collection throughout the pandemic:

The lived experiences of most of the population have to be intentionally preserved for the future. If we are not careful, the very same social inequities that are now hampering our ability to fight COVID-19 will determine whose lives will be remembered – the memories of the wealthy, the white, the powerful, will be privileged over those of the racialized, working people, and those living ordinary lives in extraordinary times. Therefore, it is essential that a strategy be developed for archiving COVID-19 records that reflect a multitude of voices. Remembering is a form of honouring. (6)

This highlights how, without strategies in place, archives reflect dominant narratives. As Schwartz and Cook write that ‘archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance’ (13). This is true for recording a global pandemic, also.

Like the pandemic itself, there are no easy solutions. Creating collections that reflect the diversity of the people living and dying throughout the pandemic, while maintaining these records are accessible to those who seek them out is vital. Funding is key to making this happen. As the pandemic progresses, it will be an interesting to watch how digital archives and pandemic collecting develops. This will directly influence how future biographers will choose to write about lives lived during the pandemic.

Looking to the Future

Sayles and Cahill Burroughs write that:

Archives have become a place of second chances. Diaries, correspondence, photographs, and more are donated to archives, and from there build a link in a family tree, share details about life in a different time, or connect some other point, perhaps unrelated at its face, of research (227).

Archives are a chance to look at the past, but also to imagine the future. They allow biographers to reflect on past lives. And even in their incompleteness, they are rich. They tell us whose lives were obscured: who was deemed important. Through archives, biographers can touch the past in all its messiness. For me, the past felt real. Archives transformed Loretta’s life from something I could learn from to something tangible. By looking at her records, she became so human that I often had to remind myself that I did not know her.

The issue of access to archives is not limited to COVID-19. As other pandemics arise, or climate crises — not to mention financial constraints, or health or carer responsibilities — physically travelling to archives may not be possible. Archives should not be limited to those who can afford to seek them out. So, in researching Loretta during the pandemic, I realised that speculative biography and altered ways of viewing archives may not just be for people working with partial histories; it is also highly effective for those who cannot access histories due to global circumstances out of their control. As the pandemic continues, or future constraints present themselves, digital ways of accessing archives – as well as fluid understandings of what archives and biography can be – have the potential to aid biographers. Perhaps the future will show that biographies can be illuminating works of nonfiction, even when it is not possible for the biographer to uncover every historical trace of their subject.

Conclusion

Once upon a time, biography was inarguably the preserve of heroic men' but 'since then ... a proliferation of imaginative approaches have transformed biography from a weapon that maintains the status quo to something that is both factually and imaginatively informed and, while grounded in documentable reality, is also sufficiently flexible and capacious to explore both the diversities and deeper mysteries of life. (Brien and Lindsey 14)

In writing the life of the first woman clown, Loretta La Pearl, speculative biography opened new pathways for storytelling. Like so many others before her, Loretta's life resisted archival collection; her story required speculation to be told. Choosing biography was crucial to me. Depicting Loretta's story in nonfiction meant I could counter the belief that it was only men who performed as clowns in twentieth Century America. Working with biography meant that I could foreground the fact that Loretta was as a *real* figure whose work impacted the lived landscape of American clowning. Though biography, my account of Loretta's life is also speculative. While I stand by the belief that one does not negate the other, there are ethical considerations that must be taken into account. And while speculating on aspects of Loretta's lived experience required attention and care to be ethically written, it was worth the effort to preserve past lives and stories.

My work addresses the fact that biography is a powerful genre that confers visibility and recognition. In choosing a hybrid form of biography, my work pushes against some of the genre's limits and demands that more flexible and creative methods are used to combat historical erasure. Simply put, just because Loretta was deemed unimportant by past archives, that does not mean her story should not be told. Just because a biography entails speculation, does not mean it is therefore fiction.

Through my research, I discovered the different ways writers speculate when working with lives that are unknown, or whose recordings are limited, or shaped, by dominant narratives of their times. In mapping how writers like Kiera Lindsey, Bram Presser, Alexis Wright, and Jessica White have told these stories, I have shown that this genre is growing, as are the varied approaches to writing under-documented lives. I wanted to understand the different forms speculation in biography can take, and why speculation in nonfiction has gained popularity. Looking at these writers' works, I discovered that thoughtful consideration of form allowed them to ethically shape their narratives in response to who their subject was. This meant that not only were biased and fragmented records countered, but their readers also understood the complexities of working with incomplete archives.

At the heart of the manuscript and my journey writing Loretta is the question: ‘What if I could see beneath what was written and understand what was true?’ (quoted from ‘Looking, Home and Body’). Researching Loretta, I had found that she was exclusively written about by male journalists. How deeply had ideas of gender shaped their portrayal of her? It was clear that the narrative representation of her was biased. Yet, as a biographer separated by time and place from Loretta, could I better portray who she really was? This line of thinking inspired the second chapter, ‘Ethics, Forgotten History and Post-Memory,’ which discussed the theoretical aspects to undertaking speculative biography.

In reclaiming Loretta’s story, I was compelled to explore the ethics of writing a ‘forgotten’ history. How should a writer use imagination to write a story that could also still be considered nonfiction life writing? Research into the ethics of imagination led me to examine a biographer’s subjectivity and its inevitable influence on their writing. In considering this, and because of my choice to use indirect speculation, I chose the methodological approach of combining essays and biography to communicate my own relationship as biographer with Loretta.

Writer Drusilla Modjeska has written about the challenge of writing, and reclaiming, overlooked lives, for *Meanjin*. Modjeska discusses *Poppy*, a fictive biography of her mother, and *Stravinsky’s Lunch*, a highly self-reflexive biography of Australian artists Grace Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen. She writes that:

It was by bringing the imagining self to the gaps in the record that the writing self could reclaim the overlooked and under-recorded lives and work of women. Imagination—both imaginative embellishment and fictive methods—could thereby meld, as it were, with biographical and autobiographical writing to give shape to lives for whom the record was fractured and uncertain. (n.p.)

Like Modjeska, I found myself using imagination in this way to form and embellish Loretta’s fractured story. My methodology and view of using imagination is explored in detail in ‘Writing Loretta: Method, Form and Doubts.’ Particularly, I argue for the use of parallel resources for example from other circus women – for me, this was Australian circus performers from the National Library of Australia (NLA) archives – to supplement my knowledge of Loretta’s experiences. I also discuss the manuscript’s structure and what led to the decision to combine essays and biography. This form allowed me to immerse the reader in Loretta’s story, but also to punctuate this with my own perspective. Thus, making the search for Loretta visible.

As Modjeska describes, I am reclaiming Loretta’s history. I was reticent to describe this as bringing history to light or as a discovery of Loretta’s story; Loretta’s life was lived whether or not I wrote about it. Therefore, I am using Loretta’s narrative as a way for myself and readers to understand the past. It is not for Loretta, but for me that I recreate her impact.

In the fourth chapter, 'On COVID, Archives and Looking Forward,' I move away from how and why the creative work was written and discuss the context it was written within. Namely, the pandemic which meant I could not physically be in archives for two years of my candidature or take up a fellowship in America. Being forced to 'pivot' meant I considered how the pandemic was changing my work, and more broadly archives themselves. This also developed into the argument that speculative biography can be a tool for those working with archives that are for a variety of reasons inaccessible (whether due to travel restrictions or other reasons), not simply or only partial.

In exploring speculative biography, I have discovered the diversity and richness of this form for writers. I am excited by the future research possibilities of how writers can utilise speculation and hybrid forms to create meaningful dialogue with their readers about the challenges and joys of biography. To 'speculate' on how the genre will develop, I see it becoming more slippery and hybrid as writers increasingly encounter archival access issues due to global circumstances, like a pandemic. My research suggests that writers will become more confident to use indirect, rather than direct, speculation; encouraging more readers to be open to this form and what it seeks to offer. I, too, look forward to reading speculative biographies that are shaped in ways I had not previously imagined.

In my own future research, I will continue to explore speculation and hybridity. I am planning a hybrid memoir/biography that follows my journey to train and qualify for the chess title of Woman Candidate Master. The book will merge memoir and historical research in looking at how chess has affected women's lives, and most profoundly, my own. A key thread of the book will follow my archival research into the First South Australian Woman Chess Champion, Evelyn Koshnitsky, and her role in developing a chess community for Australian women and girls. In looking at Evelyn's relationship with chess, I will explore her archival erasure in comparison to her husband Garry Koshnitsky. With Evelyn, unlike with Loretta, I have a more intimate knowledge. I met her when I was a child playing chess and am now part of the chess community she spent her life shaping. Like Loretta, Evelyn was revolutionary for her time. Her thoughts on the systemic barriers faced by women in chess, (namely that it was not inherent weakness, or lack of aggression, but lack of *opportunity* given to girls) are now somewhat commonplace. My hope is that in writing Loretta – through working through the biased and incomplete archives, playing with speculation and overcoming doubt – I have built a foundation to continue to explore women's lives in ways that harness and challenge the limits and power of biographical speculation.

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