

Finding a Way in the Dark: The Both/And of Feminist Revisionism

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SUMMARY

This thesis examines the role of La Llorona lore in deconstructing cultural myths about the maternal body through the production of a creative output, *Dogs in the Dark*, and an accompanying exegesis. This project explores how the figure of La Llorona functions as a site of female monstrosity in her own social, cultural, and textual environments, and engages with the ways in which these representations have been challenged and rewritten, specifically in the work of Mexican-American authors Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros. At the same time, this thesis also examines Angela Carter's self-proclaimed 'anti-mythic' novel, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), as an example of a radically different approach to feminist revisionism. While Anzaldúa and Cisneros celebrate the process of recovering mythical women as symbols of resilience and strength, Carter's *New Eve* contests the power of reclaiming such figures. I position my response to these two opposing views as one that considers a third approach, a both/and response in literature that embraces the dichotomy of La Llorona herself: a figure that is neither explicitly evil nor explicitly good, but that holds both aspects in parity simultaneously.

My novel, *Dogs in the Dark*, attempts to embody this both/and in the character of Nika, an Australian art historian travelling through Mexico in search of a painting missing for several decades. Through depictions of Nika's changing pregnant body, her ambivalence towards motherhood, and her own familial past, this novel interrogates Julia Kristeva's notions of the maternal body as a site of abjection, while also considering the female/male gendered binary of nature versus culture, as outlined by Sherry B. Ortner, in the external and environmental surrounds Nika experiences. Moreover, the novel offers a new imagining of a La Llorona tale in a contemporary and cross-cultural context.

The exegetical portion of this thesis provides an analysis of my novel alongside the work of Anzaldúa, Cisneros, and Carter. I first outline the long history of La Llorona folklore, and discuss her function in relation to concepts of maternal monstrosity and feminine abjection. Secondly, I analyse Anzaldúa's 'She Ate Horses' (1990) and Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek' (1991) in relation to these ideas, and consider how their approaches celebrate the symbolic potency of La Llorona as a figure of feminine resistance in a culturally specific context. I then turn my attention to Carter's *New Eve*, and to a broader conception of a 'universal naturalness' associated with the feminine that Carter sets out to debunk and satirise, rather than embrace. Because Carter writes from a vastly different position of privilege to that of Anzaldúa and Cisneros, she also provides a lens through which I am able to scrutinise my own creative practice and, consequently, my final discussion focuses on the limits of such an endeavor, as well as the potential for further research into a both/and reading of feminist revisionism.

DECLARATION

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

Signed,

Date.....10/7/2018.....

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Dogs in the Dark

A novel

In order to talk with the dead
you have to choose words
that they recognize as easily
as their hands
recognized the fur of their dogs in the dark.

Jorge Teillier

PART ONE

‘A woman squats on a rocky shore. Cavernous cliffs frame her from behind, as monstrous children seem to tumble, one after the other, from between her legs. Her long hair covers her right breast but she suckles a winged demon at her left, propped up on her thigh. She weeps and weeps, her eyes half closed. Her chin is covered in blood and her hands take a headless child to her lips. It's only once the eye catches this detail that we begin to process the scene in its entirety: the waterline is littered with bones, skulls, the half consumed carcasses of children – monsters and humans alike. Some with cloven feet, some with wings, some with chubby baby toes. We see now that the woman is scooping the children as she births them; scooping them up to suckle and devour, caught in an endless cycle of begetting and consuming: Carver's horrific image of the mother of monsters.’

Description of Leia Carver's *Lilith* (1942), oil on canvas

excerpt from J. Harrow, ‘Carver at the Chadwick’,

The New York Times, 26 January 1943, p.10

PROLOGUE

Nika was thirteen when her mother confessed: on the day of her only child's birth she'd been consumed with the idea that one life enters the world as another leaves it. So consumed, in fact, that as she was pushing Nika's over-sized head out onto the frayed chaise-lounge she'd also been wondering about who might be dying at that exact moment, and whether or not they were good or bad. Was there a villain breathing out their last as Nika took her first? Was their soul prowling about, homeless, looking for a screaming baby to enter? Had she, in thinking such a thing, cursed it to be so?

Nika's father was a steadfast man, dignified and quiet, and throughout her childhood she could only tell when he was unsettled by the way his left leg jittered unconsciously, like he was giving horsey rides to other invisible children. But on this day, so her mother's story went, Nika's father, anxiously waiting in the kitchen, jittered so hard and fast that the sideboard rattled and shook, the good crystal pinging with his vibrations.

Homebirths had gone out of fashion decades before, but Nika's family were sticklers for tradition, and her mother, having married into custom, was expected to follow suit. What she really wanted, she later told Nika, was a hospital bed and an epidural. Instead she received the disapproving eye of her mother-in-law and the assistance of a woman from church who acted as the community midwife. Along with these two women, she also received the benevolent stare of the Virgin Mary, whose

picture hung above the tattered chaise – an heirloom from her father’s side, steeped in the secretions of four generations of homebirths, to which her mother was now adding a fifth. All of Nika’s adolescence, whenever she looked to that picture, she was reminded of the trouble it took her mother to bring her into the world.

Labour lasted all night, her mother desperately praying that only a good soul would find her newborn when she emerged. Later in life, though, Nika suspected this wasn’t the case, and that some dark soul rammed itself into her squalling maw at birth and settled down in a corner. Every now and then Nika thought she could feel it nudging up against the parts of herself that she knew were her own, influencing her actions with sly remarks and whispered dares. She always suspected that her mother *had* cursed her with the thought, and that, when it came to her turn for it, Nika would end up thinking the exact same thing.

ONE

Before she came to Mexico Nika read all the warnings about muggings, kidnappings, murders, carjackings. If her mother had been around to reprimand her, Nika knew she would have been in trouble. Her mother had always fretted about the worst in people, but Nika liked to try and see the good in everyone, a practice she couldn't have learnt from her father either because he was equally suspicious of the world. It was a habit she'd acquired almost in rebellion against her parents, as though a positive attitude were equivalent to revolt.

But it had taken a lot more than an inclination toward rebellion for her to come all this way. The fact that she'd actually bought a ticket, packed her bags, and boarded an international flight, was the sort of thing it took weeks for her to orchestrate, and even longer for her to actually *do*. It was the sort of thing that took courage. In the flush of this new bravery she'd even gotten rid of her phone, though now that she was in Mexico she regretted that decision. How long had she sat staring at it in the transit lounge in L.A., waiting for it to ring? Its silence had been unbearable; she couldn't endure its constant, quiet rebuke. So she left it on a bench, walked away and boarded her next flight. She was already through security with no hope of turning back when the weight of her mistake hit her. She cursed her stupidity, her ridiculous impulses.

She'd made it to Mexico anyway, such a long way from home, and standing on the balconette of her cramped hotel room, she fanned herself with a tattered brochure and watched a convoy of children swarm by below. They were dressed up

like vampires and witches, werewolves and zombies, and their parades passed by, one after the other, heading in different directions, the ragged lines intermingling as they reached the square, doubling back and around, before disappearing up the warren of cobbled streets. She watched brass bands break away from the crowd, leading clusters of small monsters away, slipstreams of Hamelin boys and girls multiplying with each rupture like Hydra heads.

It was Lydia who'd first introduced Nika to the Hydra, showing her a picture of the many-headed beast in a contraband copy of *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*. The book, of course, wasn't banned in Lydia's house; *her* father didn't discourage these things. So Lydia read aloud from the thick volume, its cover embossed with a golden Medusa in profile. Nika was glad the monster woman's terrible eyes were turned away; she wouldn't have been able to listen properly, hidden under the blanket fort on Lydia's bedroom floor, if those eyes had looked on her. Nika was sure Medusa would've turned her to stone, she was positive, so convinced was she that every mythological terror in the world was real. But, of course, she knew better than that now.

On the street below a man in a black *charro* suit studded with silver looked up to where she stood, flapping her useless brochure against the evening heat. He called to her, beckoning her down, and his friends looked up too, joining him in calling her down to the dancing and the crashing music of the street. She told herself she would. Any minute now. Why shouldn't she? She'd come all this way, after all; it was high time she lived a little.

But once she was downstairs she doubted herself again. There were too many people, too much noise. As soon as she stepped into the crowd there was no turning back; she was swept up in the marching and it was out of her hands, swallowed into a

crush of people with painted faces, sightseers taking photographs, children asking for pesos. Nika doled out loose change until she barely had any left and when she refused the next child who came towards her with his palm upturned, he insulted her, called her *puta*, and the word was so adult, so fierce and brutal out of a child's mouth, that she burst out laughing.

Nearby a blonde woman had witnessed the transaction and Nika looked up to see her laughing uproariously at the boy's brazenness. The woman approached, dragging another friend behind her. They were American, and as they introduced themselves they passed her a water bottle full of tequila. Their faces were painted white and black in skeletal *catrinas*, their hair crowned with golden marigolds, crimson lion's paws, and they were staggering drunk, caught up in it all. Gawkers and gapers. Tourists.

Nika followed along with the women while the band ahead played a song that looped again and again in a simple never-ending phrase. She stayed close to her new companions, comforted by their camaraderie, and the safety in feeling like she wasn't just another solo female traveller.

The parade came abruptly to a halt and a space cleared, the crowd moving back along the buildings that lined the street, their walls rendered in blues and reds. Someone set a firework blazing into the sky, all spark and sizzle, and it exploded above them with a sound so belting and loud that those who hadn't seen it go up shrieked and ducked. As a group of men prepared another charge, Nika scrambled to the edge of the crowd and pushed herself hard against a wall, feeling the dust of plaster come away on her sweaty palms as she kept her eyes trained on the meteor of light. What if it should slip sideways rather than upwards? Shooting through the crowd to find her and send her splaying in a shower of ignited gore?

But when it too had exploded, breaking open the sky with its peal and clatter, the other American girl, tall and slender with long brown hair, grabbed Nika's arm and hauled her back into the throng. Nika flushed with embarrassment, but the women pulled her back into the cavalcade, stamping out the beat, until they found themselves on the shore of the lake, climbing aboard waiting boats while the oarsmen hollered at them for their business.

Everything was happening so fast that Nika couldn't make it stop. She was caught up in the momentum of the night and she tried to let herself go to it. Here she was, a thousand miles from home, and the night was warm and full of adventure. Wasn't this what she had wanted? And the trip across the water was exhilarating, like flying. Over and across the little skiff of a boat dipped and bounced, while a choir of voices rose all around her like a soundtrack. They were coming from the other boats, joining in a choral exaltation that infected her with the sense that nothing, not now, not ever, not even when this had ended, could shake her sense of swelling promise, filling her sparking belly with otherworldly electricity. The wall of sound struck her own boat and the song was taken up, falling from the mouths of those beside her as though it had always hung there, only waiting for the simplicity of the boat's momentum to set it going.

In the middle of the lake there was a cemetery that sat high above the water line, perched on top of a hill that rose from the water. It took them ninety-nine steps to reach the graveyard gates, the path upward thick with shuffling bodies, quiet and sombre: a stark contrast to the festivities she'd only just left behind on the opposite shore. But as the stars came out Nika made her way among the shining headstones, candles marking out the trails between crypts. Across and over cracked marble and stone Nika and the two women went, and there was hardly a tomb anywhere

untouched by light. All around people had set up beside plots with candles arranged like crucifixes. They ate, drank, laughed, as though they would soon toast marshmallows or sing campfire songs.

Two mariachis with guitars stood near a family, strumming out a song soft and low, as though it was a secret. The Americans stumbled up close, dragging her with them and intruding on the family vigil. Nika was mortified, self-conscious, but the family simply smiled, acknowledging their presence politely. The musicians' song was unfamiliar, but she understood snippets of the Spanish, something about kisses and souls and mothers.

Dos besos llevo en el alma, Llorona,

Que no se apartan de mi

El ultimo de mi madre, Llorona,

Y el primero que te di

How Nika loathed being a tourist! How all tourists must loathe it, that horrible, inescapable feeling of not belonging. It was something Nika hadn't yet grown accustomed to, having rarely been a tourist. Her family had never travelled when she was young, so it wasn't until she moved to the city to study that she'd felt it for the first time, that sense of being adrift, unanchored. When she'd arrived in the busy streets of Sydney she'd gone wide-eyed to every art gallery and museum she could find, coyly trying to look like she'd lived there all her life, even while she waited for someone to expose her as the country girl she really was. But that hardly compared to how she felt here. Here she was struggling to understand anything, even after all those years of Spanish lessons.

She was half appalled by the way the American women she'd buddied up with threw themselves into it, their touring. She was repelled by their painted *catrina*

faces, like caricatures of culture, even though she knew there were other markers of her own foreignness just as bright and boldly painted on her body as their sugar skull faces were painted on theirs. Her fair skin, her traveller's clothes, hiking boots, backpack. The St. Christopher pendant, a gift from her father, that hung close to her throat. All of these things gave her away as a traveller, and there was no escaping it, no blending in. Here she was clearly strange, a stranger.

When the song was done they applauded, but as the singers lifted their guitars to start another, the mousey-brown American whispered in Nika's ear.

'Let's get out of here before they ask us for money!'

Nika followed as they darted away through the tombstones, passing other families and other singers, weaving around candles and *ofrendas* until they reached a low stone wall at the island's tall tip. From here they looked back at the town clinging to the opposite edge of the lake, back at the bright and glaring electricity of the carnival. A lone firework whizzed skywards, the boom of its explosion carrying on the wind and reaching them, like an afterthought, a moment too late.

'This place is boring,' the brunette sighed, flicking pebbles over the wall and watching them disappear below. 'Let's go back to town.'

The trip back across the lake was empty of magic. As they neared the shore the swell of pop music rose from tinny speakers, announcing their arrival back in the real world, where everything was too loud and bright. Stepping off the boat, Nika followed the women anyway, sipping on the tequila bottle as they made their way towards the music.

Rows of food vendors encircled rides and games, and Nika stopped to watch a woman spin fluoro pink fairy-floss on a stick, a Norn spinning thread. The stick grew heavy with its gummy bloom until the woman sliced her hand violently through the

web of sugar, separating it from the mixture left in the vat. She held it out to Nika and she took it without really wanting it, while the blonde American handed over some centavos. Together they plucked out chunks of the sticky mess, Nika pushing a clump into her mouth. It dissolved on her tongue and she watched the stringy remnants turn dark red on her wet fingers.

Corn, crepes, pastries, sugared skulls, everywhere sweets and dustings of icing. Alleys of show-rides, spinning cars, spinning teacups, glitz and glare, vivid colours sparkled around them, music blared, all high-pitched treble. Disembodied clown heads turned to watch them, spruikers tried to tempt them to knock down weighted bottles or throw rings at targets, to win this prize or that. Nika stuffed more candy in her mouth, swigged more tequila.

Children still in costumes rode the teacups and cartoonish cars with bulging eyes and smiling mouths. Adults with painted faces joined them. Rides full of skeletons and ghouls went round and round. Sightseers with bum-bags and heavy cameras, baseball caps, shorts, milled about in the shock of people bumping into Nika. The Americans stuffed their faces with crepes they'd bought from somewhere, passing her a cup of mescal that burned in her throat while her hand became tacky with fairy-floss. Pushing and shoving through the dense streams of people, she spilled a little mezcal on her shirt and knocked the fairy-floss against a passing shoulder. It came away on the man's shirt, sticking there lurid and pink. Sick from the sugar, she threw the rest on the ground and lurched into a side street, emptying her gut in the dirt.

When she'd composed herself again she stumbled from the alley, looking about for the American girls. She was still buoyed by the alcohol and she didn't even care what unseen damage it might be doing to her insides. She searched about for the

Americans until she'd managed to double back on herself to the carnival entrance.

The rides were still spinning and the crowd was still bustling, but the girls, and the fairy-floss Norn, were nowhere to be seen.

Without them the walk back to her hotel was frightening. Alone her bravado faltered, and even her drunkenness didn't numb her growing sense of unease. Figures moved in the alleys, bodies writhing together in dark shapes. She heard cries and yelps in the distance, sighs and moans closer to hand. When she finally found her way back to her hotel she ran the last few steps, happy to be greeted by the artificial cheerfulness of the lobby, even the girl at the reception desk who eyed her knowingly, aware that Nika had, in the style of all tourists, indulged more than she should have. Nika tried to stand a little taller, to act a little more sober as she climbed the short flight of steps to her room. Once inside, she flopped onto the bed, relieved, asleep within minutes, still clothed, her shoes still on.

TWO

It was among Lydia's books that Nika first saw Lilith: gold-blond hair falling below her waist, naked except for the serpent wrapped around her body. It knotted itself up from her ankle to her knee and then around that most womanly part of her, a part that Nika, at twelve, had been struggling to ignore. Lilith held the creature up, nuzzling it under her chin, letting its head come to rest on her shoulder. The picture fascinated Nika to the point of obsession, though she wasn't allowed such pictures at home, even ones with such Biblical themes.

When she told Lydia her she was going to Mexico to find Carver's version, Lydia didn't even remember that first painting. That was the way with Lydia; their memories of childhood rarely matched up. Lydia didn't recollect the book or Lilith, and Nika had to admit that she'd never told anyone about her infatuation with that image, not even her. Lydia laughed, like she often did when Nika admitted to some peculiarity, but she was much more interested in Nika's impending trip. She was on the verge of inviting herself along, excited to think they could have an adventure together, but Nika had known she'd do that, so she waited until the very last minute before she told her, and explained that it would be all research and no fun. Lydia was incredulous, shocked that Nika should leave her so abruptly, and go so boldly out in the world without her. Nika wondered if she should send her a postcard, proof that she was actually here, even though she knew none of it really mattered to Lydia. She'd go on blithe and oblivious without her. Art, myth, Lilith: none of it meant anything to

Lydia, while that first encounter with the woman and the snake was stamped into Nika like a thumbprint.

But that wasn't the Lilith Nika had come to Mexico to find. She was looking for a different kind of painting altogether. It was Carver's *Lilith* she'd come for, and in just a few days she'd be sifting through the archives in Mexico City trying to pick up its trail. Until then her time was her own and she'd decided to do as much travelling as she could fit in, seeing as she was the furthest from home she'd ever been, with the whole Pacific Ocean between her and everyone she'd ever known.

It was towards the ocean she was headed now, congratulating herself on mastering driving on the other side of the road when it had seemed, at first, like the hardest thing in the world to do. Battling last night's hangover and a queasy stomach, she'd still managed to stick to her itinerary, heading for the coast in a rented car. The landscape she passed through was flat and sparse, the vastness of valleys revealed to her. Distant hills were her constant horizon, gold-white earth studded with clusters of green cacti and low grasses. When she passed through towns she didn't have the courage to get out of the car in any of them, even though her whole body was tired and she was hungry in ravenous bursts. All she had in the car was a packet of crackers that she nibbled at sparingly, nauseous and starving both at once.

Towards sunset, as the sky began to take on a purple glow, she caught herself in a pattern of nodding off and snapping to attention. Every now and then a car passed coming from the other direction. Headlights two yellow dots at first, then nearing, growing, then passing, receding. She tried to keep vigilant, her drooping eyes on the road and in the rear-view mirror, watching for hazards, staying close to the edge when another car came up behind hers, whooshing past at outrageous speed before

disappearing into the night. She fiddled with the radio for some music to keep her awake, but only found static.

The dog appeared out of nowhere, darting so fast in front of her that there was no time to swerve or slow down, no time for the horn. The car hit it with a thud as the brakes screeched, her foot slamming down hard.

The car finally slid to a stop and she shut it off. Her ears began to buzz in the new silence, the hum of the motor extinguished. She looked over her shoulder, trying to see out the back window, but the glare from her brake lights revealed nothing. She undid her seatbelt and opened the door.

The highway was deserted in both directions. The black hillocks of earth either side of the freeway disappeared into total darkness, her vehicle providing the only light for miles. Tentatively, she walked to the back of the car. Just beyond the glow of the taillights a shadow lay on the road. As she neared she could see the soft, sand-coloured coat, the long hind legs sprawled. It wasn't dead. It was panting hard, with a quick rise and fall of its barrelled chest.

Nika turned away, unable to face it. She looked back and turned away again, caught in the to and fro of her indecision. She didn't want to be here if another car should come. Didn't want to be caught in her guilt. Whatever she did she had to do it quickly. It wasn't safe to stay perched like this on the side of the highway.

The car engine ticked as it cooled. The breeze shushed through unseen trees. It was the same breeze on which she imagined she could smell the tang of blood, the iron gusts lifting her hair across her face.

She urged herself forward to the edge of the pool of light, keeping her eyes on the dog's hind legs. The pads of its feet were pinkish in the car's red glare.

Involuntarily her eyes darted upwards and, without meaning to, fell on the form of the

rest of the dog. Its front legs were smashed and its head covered in blood. She turned her own head away. It was panting still, in hurried, desperate bursts.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.’

And she went on, repeating her useless apology, impotent to do anything else. After a moment, the dog’s chest heaved, a fitful exhalation, and then it went still.

Now that it was over she moved closer and knelt, thankful that she hadn’t had to find some way to put it out of its misery. A sweep of a car’s beam passed over her, going in the opposite direction. She hadn’t even heard its approach, too lost in staring at the carnage of the dog. In the brief illumination, the dog’s face was thrown into shadows and highlights. Its deep black eyes mirrored the flare, held it for an instant, and in that moment she saw all the horror of its body. The smashed back femurs, bone pushed through skin and pelt, the twisted front legs, the bloodied muzzle. Everything was red and white and pink and black against the sand-soft fur and the still day-warm bitumen.

The passing car brought her to herself: a woman stalled precariously on the side of a highway. She needed to get back on the road before another car came, before, God forbid, someone stopped for her and caught her in her shame and guilt.

She couldn’t leave the dog where it lay. In an effort of will she reached out for its back feet. She tugged at the rear legs, but the rest wouldn’t move. For a moment, she worried the body would tear apart, that she’d only manage to drag the hind part off the road, leaving the top behind. But the dog’s body gave, and she listened to the soft scrape of it sliding across the ground. Dragging it to the edge of the road, she slipped it over the border where asphalt met earth. Behind her was a trail of blood painted across the road like a wayward tyre-mark.

Two pinpricks of headlights brought her to herself, and she scurried back into the car. She started the engine, pulled back into the right lane, and fled.

THREE

The new day's warmth permeated everything and she was baking beneath the bedclothes, having slept the morning away after her long drive. She sat up too fast and a wave of nausea attacked her. She scuttled to the bathroom just in time.

The room was clammy, hot with the smell of her own sweaty body, so she drew aside the curtain to slide open the window. Sunlight made her squint, the morning already half gone, but she didn't mind so much because the sound of the ocean rushed into the room like the tide and a breeze lifted the curtain, ocean smells of salt and seaweed heavy on the air. It was what she wanted.

She'd grown up inland, far away from the beaches, and the water fascinated her now, how she could have survived without it for so long. When she moved to Sydney she hoped to live near the ocean, but it was, of course, far too expensive. Everyone else wanted to live there too. So instead she found a tiny one-room apartment in the southern suburbs overlooking an aqueduct. It wasn't the sea, but at least it was something. And when she wanted to, it was just a short bus ride to the see the waves and water. She went, every now and then, with Lydia in tow.

She wanted to see the ocean before she went to Mexico City. Ever since she moved to Sydney she'd wanted to know what the ocean looked like on the other side, what it smelled like all the way across the Pacific. Now she was finally staring back out the other way, back across to where she'd come from, and the sea didn't seem any different. It was calmer here perhaps, lapping at the sand in gentle caresses, sucking in

and out in a soft, rasping murmur that had filled her dreams all night. Outside her window the hotel deck stepped down to the sand and she could see the beach was strewn with towels and umbrellas and deckchairs, while bathers splashed about in their scanty swimwear. Looking down at her own belly she tugged her singlet smooth across the swelling lump of it. She couldn't possibly expose it the way those swimmers exposed themselves. All the same, she'd finally crossed the ocean, and she wanted to enjoy it.

But she was woozy, still nauseous and hungry both at once. In her bag were a few dry biscuits and as she went to find them there was a knock on the door.

'Housekeeping!'

She was only in her underwear and a singlet and, panicked, she rushed to the door just as keys began to jangle in the lock.

'*No, gracias!*' she called out, grabbing the knob to prevent the woman from turning it. She was too late.

'*Lo siento,*' Nika said, holding the door firm as the woman tried to push it open. Peeking out around the jamb she saw a cart full of cleaning products and linen.

'*No hoy. Quizas mañana,*' Nika said.

'*Si, si,*' the woman replied, waving her hand in apology and backing the cart out from the doorway. '*Lo siento, chica.*'

'No, no, it's okay, I should have put the sign out,' but the woman had already shuffled on. Nika waited a few moments, until the housekeeper had definitely gone inside the next room, and then guiltily hooked the 'do not disturb' sign on her own. Now she was up she should make the most of the day, she thought, so she showered and dressed and was soon in the lobby, flicking through a rack of tour brochures.

‘What are you interested in?’ A woman at the reception desk leant over the counter, startling her. ‘Do you want some recommendations?’

Nika nodded. She was adrift. Why not let someone else make decisions for her?

‘Do you surf?’ the woman asked, but Nika shook her head. She’d watched the surfers on the beaches back in Sydney, but it had all seemed so violent and frightening. The ocean a mad thing that couldn’t be predicted, controlled, understood. She’d watched those surfers bounce and bob, tumbling over and over, sucked down by waves. She couldn’t imagine how anyone could find that enjoyable. She’d always stayed safe on the hot sand, watching.

‘We hire out umbrellas and sunbeds if you’d rather just sit on the beach?’ This sounded more her thing, so she rented one of each.

‘There are also some tours nearby,’ the woman continued. ‘You can go bird watching. Or it’s a good time of year to go to the lagoon.’

As if on cue a man entered from a room behind the counter, swinging a staff door wide and charging in just at the end of the receptionist’s spiel. He stopped and turned to Nika, taking over.

‘You want to go to the lagoon?’

Nika wasn’t sure. In truth she wasn’t sure exactly what a lagoon was. Wasn’t that just a fancy word for a lake?

‘I don’t know. What’s there?’ she asked.

‘It’s beautiful this time of year.’ The man’s eyes went wide, putting on his best show of excitement, trying to infect her with it. But still, Nika thought, he wasn’t merely selling it to her. He seemed genuinely enthusiastic.

‘It’s filled with phosphorescent algae and it lights up at night. Muy bonito. You shouldn’t miss it.’ His short hair was grey, cropped close to his skull, while the rest of his face was almost entirely consumed in an explosion of silver-white moustache. When he smiled his face creased in the leather of long years in the sun, and his moustache bristled and shook like a live thing on his lip.

Nika was intrigued, as much by the image of the fluorescent lagoon as by the man himself. ‘How do I get there?’

‘I can take you,’ he said, holding out his hand for her to shake over the counter. ‘Call me Pepe. I’d be more than happy to take you tonight if you like. I have a boat and I can take you out to the best spot on the lake.’

‘How much?’

‘Seven hundred pesos.’

Nika did the maths in her head, converting it back to Australian dollars. It wasn’t all that much.

‘You meet me here at five,’ Pepe went on. ‘It’s not far to drive.’

Without waiting for her to confirm, he waved and went on his way, stomping out from behind the counter and disappearing into another door down the hall. She could hear him clomp out an unseen exit, the crack of a screen door coming back to rest. When she turned back to the reception desk the woman had materialised a deck chair and a sun umbrella out of nowhere and was waiting for Nika to take them from her.

‘That Pepe’s a lot of fun,’ she reassured as she handed them around the desk. ‘You’ll love the lagoon.’

Nika thanked her, and lumbered away awkwardly with her chair and umbrella.

#

What would they think, back home, if they could see her now? In the passenger seat of a complete stranger's beaten up old car, going who knew where? She was giving herself over to adventure, finally, *real* adventure. Nothing familiar. No family, no friends. She was taking risks and she liked it.

Moving to Sydney from the country had felt like an adventure too, a risk. But now she knew it had only been the pretence of one. Lydia and her father had already moved there months before, when Lydia started university, and so when it was Nika's turn to leave the nest for the big smoke, they were already waiting for her. She'd left behind one small town family for another. Traded one safety net for the next. When she ran out of money in her flat by the aqueduct she simply moved in with them, her own parents pleased she was back under the watchful eye of a family friend and father figure. She'd been so swaddled, so sheltered. But this, this was really living. No safety nets here.

They drove beyond the tourist city limits, whizzing along a coast road that hugged the ocean. There was no air-con in Pepe's rusty station wagon, where buckets and junk clanged in the back as they sped over bumps in the road. They wound the windows all the way down and the blasting air thrashed Nika's hair about her face. There was something so alive in the feeling of movement and speed, but the magic was broken when they passed a stray dog trotting along by the road. Nika instinctively pushed her foot down on an imaginary brake, the instant of impact coming back to her. She willed Pepe to slow down, but he was oblivious, telling her, in a booming voice over the whipping wind, a story about a Mixtec woman kidnapped by pirates, who escaped by jumping overboard and swimming to shore nearby. To distract

herself from the speed Pepe was driving, Nika asked him more. The pirates had returned again and again to find her, Pepe said, but she'd hidden herself away in the mangroves.

'I love those old stories,' Nika said. 'Actually, old stories are kind of why I'm here.'

Pepe looked at her for a moment, encouraging her to go on.

'I'm here looking for a painting.'

'A painting? You don't have any of those where you come from?'

She smiled at his teasing.

'A specific painting, by a woman who lived in Mexico most of her life. Leia Carver.'

He shrugged. He'd never heard of her.

'What kind of painting is it?'

'It's of a mythical woman called Lilith. She was supposed to be the first wife of Adam, as in Adam and Eve. The Garden of Eden. All that stuff.'

Pepe nodded, interested, so Nika went on.

'The story goes she was thrown out of the Garden for refusing to lie underneath Adam. So she found her own way out in the world, until she found a cave to live in along the shores of the Red Sea. Then she mated with monsters and gave birth to demons.'

Pepe looked impressed by these details.

'And so this painter I'm researching painted a version of that.'

'And where is this painting?'

'Well, that's the thing. I have no idea. I haven't found a trail for it yet. It was painted some time in the early forties because it was exhibited in New York in

nineteen forty-three. That's how I first heard about it. Carver left Europe in thirty-nine, escaping the war, so I don't think she painted it before then. She wouldn't have had the opportunity to leave Europe with much in the way of belongings, especially not paintings. I've never even seen what it looks like. I've only read a description. Apparently it's a painting of Lilith...' She paused for a moment and he looked at her sidelong. 'Well... eating her children.'

She had expected him to react with horror, but instead he smiled broadly, laughing.

'Ah, we have a story like that, too. A woman who eats children.'

'Really?' Nika sat up. 'What story is that?'

'Oh, it's a story you get told as a kid. To scare you, you know? Keep you from wandering on your own. You be good, or the weeping woman will get you. That's what my mother always said.'

'Everyone knows about her. La Llorona. You get told about her when you're very young. Her lover abandons her so she drowns their children. But then, she's so crazy with what she's done she drowns herself too. But she has to come back forever to steal other children away, and you can always hear her crying at night near the river. If she caught you she'd drown you too. I was terrified of her when I was young.' He smiled at this, happy to recall his childhood fear.

Nika thought about the stories her own mother told her sometimes, in quiet whispers at bedtime so her father couldn't hear. Ginger bread and breadcrumbs and women who lived in chicken-legged houses. Her mother teased Nika, saying she envied those women their independence, what it must feel like to live on your own, even if your house was made of chocolate and sweets or the bones of little babies. Nika would shriek with mock terror as her mother played the witch, threatening to

fatten her up and roast her in the oven. And then her father would come in at the noise, stern, demanding to know what rubbish she was filling Nika's head with, and Nika's mother would laugh, assuring him it was nothing. Nothing at all. But then, sometimes, when no one was listening, Nika relished the way her mother cooed: 'I love you so much, I just want to eat you up!'

Pepe pulled off the road onto a dirt track and came to a stop in a tangle of heavy green mangroves. As they stepped from the car they were swamped in a cloud of darting midges, the air so thick with them they became like oxygen. Nika breathed them in, filling her lungs with live, tiny black motes. She swatted at them, trying not to inhale until Pepe handed her a can of bug spray. She applied it liberally to her exposed limbs and in a halo around her head.

The lagoon was a short stroll through muddy sand that wound between the low trees. These bloomed with alien flowers and corpulent leaves like desert succulents. Snorkeled roots slurped at the air by Nika's feet as she passed, and she imagined thousands of bodies interred beneath the mud, sucking at the fleshy straws for life. But the roots, she knew, emerged again as the spindly legs of the mangroves, holding them aloft so that they looked like wary animals stalking above the film of scummy shoreline. Cloistered between the trees everything stank of wet decay.

They emerged on the lip of the lagoon and bird noise filled the air. Shrieks and song rose and fell, echoing across the water. The bonk of a frog kept rhythm with the chirrup of unseen insects and Nika wondered at the silence they had left behind in the trees. Pepe's boat sat wedged in the sand further up the shoreline. A few other boats waited nearby. Nika wondered now about the wisdom of heading out onto the murky water.

Pepe's boat was really only a small dingy with a motor but she supposed it looked sturdy enough. As he hauled it towards the water and she clambered in there was a shout from down the shoreline. Turning, she saw four figures coming towards them. The man in front called out to Pepe in Spanish, and Pepe waved and smiled, calling back. The other three were, Nika could see, tourists like her. Except, unlike her they had cameras around their necks, and were lugging backpacks, sun smart under their baseball caps. Pepe turned to her.

'It looks like we might have some company, okay?'

Nika looked at Pepe for a moment, confused. Her eyes darted back between their little boat and all the other boats that sat empty on the shore. She was about to suggest they go in another one when Pepe spoke first.

'It's okay,' Pepe reassured her. 'We'll all fit.'

Nika wasn't at all sure that was the truth. But before she could protest they had come up alongside and the three tourists were climbing aboard.

'*Hola,*' the group's leader smiled to her while taking Pepe's hand and shaking it.

'This is Carlos,' Pepe offered. 'He doesn't speak much English.'

Nika nodded and tried a friendly smile. The other tourists were two middle aged women and a man who introduced themselves to her in English, but with Spanish-heavy accents. They were from Barcelona.

'Australia,' she replied when they asked her where she was from.

They nod sagely, like they had all been expecting this.

Nika positioned herself on the middle bench of the boat, the Spanish man sitting next to her while the two women took the front seat. Carlos and Pepe sat close together at the stern by the engine, which Pepe tugged into life with a few sharp bursts

of strength Nika hadn't expected of him. After a moment's bobbing, they pulled out onto the open lagoon.

For a while the whine of the engine kept them quiet, but soon the women had spotted water birds tracking fish on the low mud banks, and they called back to Carlos and Pepe to name each one. Carlos answered in rapid-fire Spanish but, over the grumble of the engine, Nika only caught snippets of the words they exchanged. She was content not to talk, not to be expected to contribute. Pepe understood her unwillingness to interact with these people, complicit in helping her stay silent, directing conversation away from her. Perhaps, she wondered, he felt bad about letting them tag along. She almost hoped he did, but when he smiled and winked at her, like they shared some private secret, it put her at her ease.

Soon they were out in the middle of the water and Pepe cut the engine. They drifted then, listening to the flux of water on the boat's side, and to the drone of insects and the winging of birds. All around them was the gloaming pink of dusk. The man next to Nika fiddled with his camera, stabbing at buttons and peering through the viewfinder, adjusting the long, telescopic lens protruding from it, then stabbing at buttons again before returning it to his eye. The women swept their binoculars across the lake like army marshals scoping a target. Birds on long, fine legs waded through the darkening water not far from them on a sandbar. Further out, smaller birds were flitting above the water, peering into the depths and striking quickly at fish in fierce headlong dives. There were more birds among the mazes of mangrove roots along the lagoon's edge, and Nika tried to take it all in, hoping she would remember some part of the magic of that thrumming stillness. The teeming day to day business of life, with the night slowly sinking in.

All too soon the man next to her spoke, asking Carlos something. The two men began to converse and after a while they fell silent again. But it was too late, Nika thought. They'd broken the magic somehow. Nika turned to Pepe, who was resting his arm on the tiller and peering into the water.

'Do you come here a lot?' she asked.

'Only when I have people to bring with me. It's not good to come alone.'

'Why?' Nika shot him a look, suddenly worried. 'Is it dangerous here?'

'Because of Llorona,' he replied, teasingly. She settled again. Understood he was only baiting her with his stories, but Carlos had heard this and he spoke, saying something Nika couldn't understand. Pepe translated for her.

'He asks if we're talking about Llorona, and I told him we are.'

The man spoke again, his Spanish too quick for her to catch. Even the simple words that had grown familiar to her seemed strange on his tongue.

'He says,' Pepe started, 'that he knows about Llorona too. He says he's seen her.'

'Really?' Nika turned to Carlos. He nodded his head and spoke again. She looked to Pepe for explanation.

'He says she has a horse's head, but she doesn't. She doesn't really.'

The other man protested, understanding that Pepe was dismissing his description. Turning to Nika, Carlos tried to speak directly to her in broken English.

'Senorita, is true. La cabeza of a horse.' He bulged his eyes and gestured with his hands how big her head was, how long her snout, trying to show it in comparison to his own head. 'Is true,' he repeated. 'I've seen it.'

Pepe scoffed, and shook his head.

‘Where have you seen her?’ Nika asked in English, turning back to Carlos. She didn’t entirely doubt him. The cynic in her wanted to laugh, to mock the notion that such a phantom could exist, but another part of her, the part that thought she could hear voices on the breeze, the part that felt a prickle of fear on her skin, thought he might be telling the truth.

‘Here?’ she asked, casting a glance across the waters, feeling a slight tremor that her eye might fall upon a spectre. A lone figure on the bank. But Carlos shook his head.

‘No, not here, *chica. En mi barrio.* When I was a boy.’

Nika waited for him to say more, but he was done with the story, retreating into silence.

Birds skimmed the water, the silence studded with splashes as they ducked below the surface and the sun fell rapidly from the sky. The air smelt like rot and salt, but Nika liked it in the warm evening, even with the ghost of Carlos’s horse-headed woman lurking somewhere in the mangroves. It heightened the sense that her being here, in Mexico, was illicit and wonderfully forbidden.

And then, prompted by the descending darkness, as though waiting for a conductor’s cue, the water began to glow. An underwater city came alive, its lights twinkling into being, a submerged civilisation waking from its daytime slumber. All those buried bodies, Nika thought, that had breathed through the marrow of roots while the sun sat high were free from their graves, striking their torches against the night. The world below the surface was transformed into a dazzling turquoise, the luminescence chasing the night back, beaming out its own blue twilight.

Nika gasped. The tourists gasped. Even Carlos and Pepe laughed in delight. Everywhere, patches of the lagoon were bursting into brilliance.

The Spaniards slipped off their shirts, their shorts. They'd come prepared with bathers under their clothes. One after the other they clambered over the boat's edge and into the water, the boat rocking wildly as they did. Carlos followed them in, but Pepe stayed in the boat.

'You can swim,' he said to her, gesturing to the water.

'Oh, no, I'm okay.'

'It's fine to swim,' he insisted.

'No, it's okay, I'm happy just to look.'

She didn't want to have to admit to him that a lifetime of inland living had left her with nothing but a meagre dogpaddle.

'There's nothing dangerous in there. It's safe.'

She didn't answer this time. She just left Pepe's words hanging in the air, casting him a weak smile. He seemed to take the point.

They sat in silence and Nika watched the water blaze bright blue. The others had swum out from the boat, far enough that the sound of their splashing felt like it was reaching her from a world away. But then the Spaniard started swimming back, and the crashing of his hands through water disrupted her world. He grabbed hold of the boat's edge.

'I have an underwater camera in my bag,' he said to her, pointing a dripping finger at some spot behind her. 'Could you pass it to me?'

He was tilting the boat precariously towards himself, and Nika was frightened they might tip over. She shifted around, trying to find his bag, struggling to locate it in the water's half-light.

‘No, over there,’ he pulled himself up even more onto the edge of the boat, and it dipped lower in the water. Pepe leant back in the other direction, and cautioned him in Spanish.

Nika was struggling to find the right bag. She’d picked up one of the women’s backpacks by mistake, and the man shook his head.

‘No, that one over there...’

Irritated, he went to reach for it himself, pulling his whole body up roughly, as though for a moment he’d forgotten that the boat was a teetering object on an unstable surface. Pepe yelled, but it was too late. The lip of the boat dipped under, everything was overturned, and Nika pitched into the water.

She flailed, thrashing her legs and arms as it engulfed her. The water was still day-warm but her flesh puckered in goose bumps, driven by terror rather than cold. She held her breath tight, eyes stinging against the shimmering blue. She spun around, kicking and kicking, until she was finally propelling her body upwards. Hair tangled across her face and suddenly, without meaning to, all the air in her lungs escaped and she was gulping for more, coughing in water, swallowing it down with strands of her hair as though she could drink her way to freedom. With a thunk her head collided with something hard, the overturned boat, and instantly her coughing and struggling stopped. She simply began to sink.

There was the flicker of consciousness in her bewilderment, the sound of a voice calling in Spanish. It called her to sing, so she opened her mouth. The things that flowed from between her lips were washed with the murky blue haze of the lagoon, leaving her in string of pearlescent beads, sweet notes encased in force fields of transparent air, and she sent them, singing, buoyant as balloons, up towards the sky. She closed her eyes, listened to her voice thrum and pop, bit by bit, as the

bubbles of song broke the surface, escaping. There the song became a sob, a cry, the sound of a woman weeping, and she opened her eyes again, the sting of water on the delicate iris. She blinked, hard. A million little blinks.

A school of tiny fish, swimming with one mind, surrounded her, and she feared they'd enter her, darting into her mouth, her ears, her secret places. But as they brushed against her she felt only the pressure of their proximity and a tightening in her belly, a tautness that spread and stretched, then the sharpness of pain. Something in her stomach was shifting, growing. Time lurched forward, the world turning a thousand times in the space of a moment while she floated, suspended and momentous.

Now hands were under her arms, slipping and gripping, pinching her skin and she exploded into the air in coughs and spits and great heaving breaths. Pepe held her tightly around her chest, pulling her up and over, her thighs scraping against wood. She was gasping and shaking, and there were shouts and cries around her. Her breathing began to slow, her gaping mouth closing.

'You're all right. You're all right,' Pepe repeated, trying to calm her.

Everything was soaking wet. Her, the boat, Pepe. They'd both tumbled into the water, only she was lost there for a minute, unable to find a way back. And something had changed. Her belly felt larger, rounder, as though it had grown weeks in mere minutes. When she ran a hand over it, smoothing her soaked t-shirt against her skin, she could feel that it wasn't an illusion. She grabbed at Pepe, startling him with her urgency.

The others had swum back and were diving for their bags, their shoes and shorts, everything that had tumbled into the water. They were subdued, and Nika could feel their anger directed towards her, even though it was the Spaniard's

stupidity that had tipped the boat in the first place. But he was blaming her, she could tell. It was her fault for not passing him his camera. He was solemn but smug. The humiliation of her having nearly drowned seemed to please him.

They tossed their scavenged belongings back into the boat, one of the women complaining of a ruined phone. She made a fuss of it, pointing it out to Nika as an exceptional item in the inventory of her destruction. It was clear she was waiting for Nika to offer to replace it, though she wouldn't say it outright, she merely insinuated, hoping to guilt her into it. Nika frowned in feigned consolation, and coughed dramatically so she might compare the woman's material toll to her own physical one. Everyone clambered aboard again, the boat rocking in the sapphire incandescence, strobing the faces that surrounded her in darkness and light, darkness and light, while Pepe tugged at the sputtering engine. The sound of its choked putter drowned out the woman's lament all the way back to the shore.

PART TWO

FOUR

Mexico City was ablaze. Sunshine filtered through the cloud and smog igniting the buildings as they advanced and receded in blinding, flaming orange. Nika could see the top of the Palacio de Deportes below, the details of its shell-backed roof swallowed in the light it reflected, burning like a supernova that might engulf the plane at any moment. The city stretched on and on forever, studded by mountains that rose, pristine in their greenery, from among the tangle of roads and houses.

The plane started its descent and Nika reached for the sick-bag in the seat pocket, clutching it close. She willed herself not to have to use it, while the man sitting next to her shuffled uncomfortably, clearly worried that she might. But when they landed without incident, Nika smoothed out the creases she'd pressed in the paper bag and jammed it back behind the complimentary magazine. As she did so, the cover caught her eye, the top of a feature headline: *El jardín surrealista de sueños*. It was nearly her turn to stand, the line of people in front of her having filtered away as they reached for overhead luggage and jostled each other to exit, so she slipped the magazine from the pocket and stuffed it into her backpack. It felt like she was committing a crime, stealing from the airline but, she reminded herself, it was a *complimentary* magazine. All the same, the man next to her eyed her disapprovingly before he stood, gathered his things and was gone.

Outside the light was failing, framing the buildings in golden auras as she exchanged a stilted conversation in Spanish with her taxi driver. He asked how old she was, how long she was staying for, if she liked Mexico, where she was from.

‘¿*No Americana?*’ the driver asked, disbelieving, when she answered this last question. ‘*Es muy leja a Australia.*’

She nodded. He was right. It was a long way. She asked him if he was from Mexico City, if he had family here, if he’d ever been to Australia. He laughed at her last question as though it was utterly absurd.

She’d rented a private apartment for her stay, a cheap bedsit in a converted villa that sat in the middle of the historical centre and was walking distance to the Art Gallery. The owner was already waiting for her when the taxi pulled up, reaching out and shaking her hand, smiling at her in a way that put her at ease. He carried her one bag for her through the heavy wooden doors that sealed the old courtyard off from the street. Across the cobbled yard they climbed three flights of wide stone steps to her door.

Inside he showed her where everything was then handed her the keys, leaving her alone to flip through her guidebook and the tourist notes left on the kitchen table. She was hungry, but far too scared to venture out into the evening in an unfamiliar city to find something to eat. Instead, she rummaged through the kitchenette cupboards, finding half a bag of pasta, some condiments and a box of teabags. It would have to do to settle her stomach. Every time she was attacked with hunger she simply had to do her best to ignore it, unable to satisfy her whims as they came in such unknown territory, even when it meant her stomach rumbled and she felt dizzy with it. She set a pot of water to boil on the stove and crossed the room to gaze out the balcony window.

Even with it closed, the traffic three storeys below was as loud as if she was standing on the street. There was the rhythmic blasting of car horns and the static voice of a police officer crackling over a megaphone, directing vehicles that seemed to be pulling up wherever they pleased. Nika unlatched the balcony door and stepped out into the night, letting the cacophony of noise swell into the apartment. Another policeman at a nearby intersection blew a whistle incessantly, a radio blared nearby, the clatter of food carts, the dinging of bicycle bells, the buzz of scooters below. In the apartment building opposite hers, lights in windows winked on and off, people came home, people went out. Some curtains were drawn, but others were wide open, rooms illuminated like moving dioramas. A couple on a couch watched television. Below them a woman sat at a desk, fingers flying across keys as she stared at a screen. Four dark windows to her left a man in a business shirt and trousers was eating a microwaved dinner, his tie loosened, shoes off, legs crossed under him on an armchair. As though sensing her, he looked up to her balcony, just as her eyes fell on him. She looked away quickly, down the street, where the policeman still blew his whistle and the bustle of cars and people went on and on. Letting a moment pass, she looked back to his window, momentarily confused by its absence, replaced now with a rectangle of black. He'd turned his light out, but it only took a minute for Nika's eyes to adjust and for her to see, dimly backlit by light seeping in from another room, that he was still there, standing by his window, curtains half drawn, hiding in the shadows and staring back at her. Unsettled, she went back inside, closing the blinds behind her.

#

Her appointment the next day wasn't until two so Nika spent the morning lying down. She was finding it harder and harder to get up, and every time she managed to get herself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed she would have to stay there, cradling her head, until the dizziness passed. Nausea sat heavy in her belly until midday but she managed to keep down a few crackers and a dry piece of toast. She set about making herself a coffee because she needed the kick, but once she'd made it she didn't want it. She sat at the small kitchen table watching the steam rise from the mug until it dissipated altogether. Then she tipped it down the sink and left for the gallery.

After some confusion at the ticket counter she accidentally bought herself a folded slip of paper that allowed her to take photographs, even though she didn't have her phone anymore to take photos with. The paper was stapled at one end to make a ring, and she slipped it on her index finger, as she saw the other tourists had, feeling silly, wondering if she was doing the right thing or making a faux-pas.

In the gallery's first room there were Modernists. Lam, Baz Viaud, Rivera. She had never been a big fan of the Muralists, but Rivera's *Young Man with a Fountain Pen* struck a chord with her. One of his earlier works, from his cubist period, it was irreverent, playful. But those were just the words she'd been taught to say, the things she'd been trained to think when she looked at paintings. The terms were clichéd and trite, as though she was describing a wine as full bodied or dry. But sometimes she couldn't think beyond these words, no matter how much she wanted to find new ways to express herself.

In a gallery upstairs she stood and marvelled at González Pineda's murder of Desdemona, Monroy's *Atala*, Fabrés *Flowers from Jericho*. She wandered through rooms full of biblical imagery: the Passion, the Saints, cherubs, angels. Christ on the Cross. The Madonna and Child. None of it was what she'd come for. She'd already

spent a lifetime looking at saints and virgins plastered on church walls, so at five to two she went back down to the main entrance and asked for Dr Torres.

As Nika fished about in her bag for a pencil and her notebook, the echo of clicking heels announced Dr Torres' arrival. Nika turned to greet her and was instantly sorry she hadn't thought to dress more professionally. Torres was effortlessly commanding, dressed in a crisp white blouse and tailored black pants. She was simple and chic, while Nika had barely managed to brush her hair. She smiled at the woman almost apologetically, but Torres didn't seem to notice Nika's appearance at all. Instead, she smiled warmly and shook her hand.

'Nika is it? It's nice to meet you.' She gestured for Nika to follow and they crossed the foyer, her heels clacking on the marble floor as they passed other gallery visitors and went through into a staff only corridor.

As they walked, Torres suggested that Nika should call her Cristina. But Nika was uncomfortable with the idea, so she tried to avoid calling her anything at all. She simply arranged her sentences so as not to have to use her name, and began to think of her like a painter, with her surname standing in for her first. Torres spoke flawless English that suggested she'd lived abroad, perhaps in America, perhaps in Europe, though her accent was still heavy and at times Nika didn't quite catch what she was saying. Nika was too shy to ask her to repeat herself.

'So, it's Carver you're after?' Torres asked as they walked.

'Yes. I'm researching not just her art but her life as well. But, of course, it's her paintings I'm most interested in, specifically *Lilith*.'

'You know we don't have any of her work here? We just have some photographs and a box of papers. There's one of her paintings in the Modern Art Gallery.'

‘Yes, I know, but I haven’t gotten there yet, I’ve really only just arrived. I’m excited to see whatever you have here though.’ Nika had to walk briskly to keep pace as Torres strode quickly through a warren of illuminated hallways, calling answers over her shoulder as Nika straggled along behind.

‘She was a remarkable woman. Very funny. Very beautiful.’

‘Did you know her personally?’

‘No, but I did meet her twice — she was a very old lady by then. Still beautiful in a certain way. I didn’t really get to speak to her much on either occasion. One was an unveiling of a statue. I’d only just really started working then so I had very little reason to recommend myself to her. The second time was at a function dinner for a gallery.’

She said something else after this but Nika couldn’t quite catch it and hoped Torres wasn’t waiting for her reply. After a moment she continued.

‘So you’ve just arrived in Mexico? Is this your first time here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘Not far from the zócalo.’

‘Very central spot. Are you here on your own?’

Nika managed a yes, almost panting.

‘I’ve got everything out ready for you,’ Torres announced as she came to an abrupt halt in front of a door, Nika only just managing to pull up in time before she careened into her. Torres turned the handle and they entered the archive room.

Packed floor to ceiling with yellow cardboard boxes, the room was full of an enormous set of compactor shelves. In the small space between the shelves and the door was a table, on which Torres had already placed a box for Nika. She felt a

sudden palpitation, a desperate hope that somewhere in this small cardboard container she had crossed the world to look in there might be hints and clues, a tiny suggestion, of where *Lilith* might be. Even more, she knew, she was hoping for an outright miracle: to open the box and find directions, a map, to be *told* straight out where it was and how to find it. To find that it was right here after all, right under her nose.

‘I’ll have to lock the door on my way out,’ Torres announced, and for a moment Nika panicked. What if she needed to pee? To be sick? But then Torres pointed to a phone on the desk.

‘Just dial extension 435 if you need me for anything. But if I don’t hear from you I’ll come back in an hour, okay?’

Nika was relieved, there was a way out if she needed it. Now she was ready to be alone, preparing herself to be elated or disappointed. As Torres left her she called a ‘thank you’ to the closing door, hearing the lock turn. She took a seat at the table and slid the box close. Lifting the lid, the smell of old paper swelled out, musty like a wet morning. She peered inside and her heart sank to see that it was only half full. She’d hoped for more. But even if it wasn’t quantity she could still hope for quality and, after all, here she was, in the moment she’d thought about for so long, hovering over the fantasy she’d been constructing for months now, of finding a picture that showed her, really showed her, *Lilith*.

In all her research she’d only found three references to it. Two of those had been listings in two separate catalogues for the same exhibition. The show had taken place in New York at the end of 1942, shortly after Carver had escaped Nazi-occupied Italy, but Nika had never found any photographs from the event itself, and not much in the way of reviews. A brief paragraph described the work of the newly arrived painter as a frustrating mix of mythology and sadism, focussed far too heavily on the

darker elements of the human condition: words of a culture newly enmeshed in the horrors of the war, troubled by the examination of more horrors when Carver's art could instead have offered escape.

The third reference to the painting gave her a tantalising glimpse into its subject matter and composition. Jason Harrow, a critic for *The New York Times*, had described it in full in his own review of the exhibition. Nika read about the images of monsters and carnage and flicked madly through the book in which she'd found the review, searching for the painting's picture. But she couldn't find it anywhere. The description haunted her, and so she began hunting for it in every resource she could find, though she never turned up any other listings or mentions. She could only assume that it had left the gallery and New York along with Carver and the rest of her paintings at the end of that year, moving to Mexico with her new husband. Nika knew there was a small possibility it could have remained in New York, purchased privately, but Carver had only sold three paintings at that same exhibition where she'd first displayed *Lilith*, and it was much more likely to have gone with her across the border. On the strength of this assumption, Nika had travelled half way around the world, determined to find it.

Now she took an envelope tentatively from the box, folded back the lip almost reverently, as if it was some holy relic she was touching, and slid a stack of papers free.

Clippings of reviews, catalogues, listings, and inventories. She skimmed through these, waiting for something to catch her eye. Some of what was here she'd seen before, but much was new to her. She set aside items to look back over and consider more closely, but only after she'd found what she was really looking for. All these envelopes felt like Christmas morning, anxiously tearing open the presents her

mother had painstakingly wrapped, glad to receive each, knowing she would come back to appreciate each one better in due course but moving on from them quickly, looking for that one, that precious, special one that held what she really wanted. A memory of her mother's forlorn expression made her falter, the way she'd watched all the care and love she'd put into wrapping those gifts torn and tossed away. Nika forced herself to slow down, to consider and appreciate what was right in front of her now.

For half an hour she pulled out folders and sifted through papers, until finally she opened an envelope full of photographs. She squealed with delight, no one around to hear her. Photographs of Carver tumbled out, shots of the most prominent and important artists of the twentieth-century smiling back at her. Carver had moved in impressive circles. But there were photographs as well of faces Nika didn't know, from Carver's more personal life. Private friends. Lovers? Some pictures aged in black and white, while others looked more recent, at least within the invention of colour photography. In one, an older Carver posed with a much younger man, arms around each other's waists, with a background of red brick and ivy. Carver was smiling, close-mouthed, her eyes bright. She wore a long, flowing dress of violet and blue that plunged at the neckline to reveal the gap between her breasts, the concave of her cleavage hollowing with age. Her black hair was tangled into a knot on her shoulder. The man was garish in an open collared shirt of yellow and green and a pair of Bermuda shorts. His face was familiar, though Nika couldn't place it. She turned the photo over, hoping to find something written on the back, but there was nothing, not even a year. When she picked up the next image it took a moment for her to comprehend what she was holding.

It was an older photograph than the last, black and white, and it showed a much younger Carver seated before her easel, dressed in a man's button up shirt and a pair of loose trousers, her hair piled high into a straggly bun. She'd turned towards the camera but her expression was not one of composed amicability. Rather, her look was closed, almost hostile, her lips drawn in a thin line that suggested she was merely tolerating the photographer's interruption. Her left hand hovered by the canvas, as though she couldn't wait until the moment she'd be free to return to her work. So much of what Nika had read about Carver noted her beguiling beauty, the way men fell so easily in love with her, the way she attracted awe and lust. But in this photo there was nothing of that Carver. It wasn't that she was unattractive, Nika knew that clearly enough, but here she seemed drawn, gaunt, almost wildly disoriented by the photographer's disturbance. She looked almost cruel, her eyes dark and hooded, her nose sharp and aquiline. Nika had seen other portraits of her looking much more beguiling, but she also knew there must have been something in her presence, in the way she spoke or cast a glance, that really held the essence of her beauty.

The painting on the easel looked complete; Carver must have been in the final stages. Although the photograph gave no suggestion to the colour palette Carver used in its creation, the shades of grey and black suggested her favoured use of vivid browns and reds. There was no reason to assume she'd have diverted from these hues at this stage of her career, Nika reasoned. Trailing her fingers over the image, Nika beamed, giddy with the proof of it. And she didn't need to flip this portrait over to know when it had been taken, she could pinpoint the date, give or take a year, because there on the easel, *there* at last she had finally seen it: the almost completed *Lilith*.

The photograph was small and it was hard to discern close detail, but she could see it all, Lilith on the beach, the demon children, the cliffs and caves. It was

just as Harrow described it: bitterly beautiful, horrendously grotesque. It was an image that captivated, demanding all eyes upon it, and it was no wonder Carver wished the photographer gone so she could return to the work itself.

Nika's eyes began to tear because the painting was true after all, and she felt closer already, that it was somewhere within her reach. She only needed to keep following the trail.

#

While Torres photocopied pictures and documents for her, Nika studied cast furtive glances at her, measuring her up. She was thick around the hips and thighs, skinnier up top. Curled brown hair in a low ponytail. Nika was trying to decide if Torres was beautiful, trying, for what it was worth, to decide what beauty even was. Deciphering what made a woman desirable, mythical. Paintable. Yes. *Paintable*. That was it. That was what had been bothering her about beauty all afternoon: who was painted and why. What did it take to be an artist's muse? To be an object of an artist's gaze? Nika had no artistic talent herself, she'd learnt that long ago, so what worth was *her* gaze? And if you couldn't be the one who gazes then why not be the one looked at? Why not let history capture you, look upon you, if you didn't have the resources to look upon it? She wished now she'd been brave enough to pose for life drawing classes. Brave enough to let other eyes assess her aesthetic worth and record it through their own individual filters. But she would've had to be brave enough, too, to defy her father. A sin, it would have been, though she couldn't help wondering what she would've looked like in abstract. In watercolour. In oil on canvas. With a growing, irrepressible narcissism, she realised that she wanted to know.

Torres handed her a folder with the photocopies inside, breaking Nika from her thoughts.

‘I hope you found some things of use?’

‘I did, thank you.’

‘Will you be going to the Modern Art Gallery tomorrow?’

‘I was planning on it, yes.’

‘Would you like some company?’ Torres asked. ‘I’m meeting someone there tomorrow afternoon. We could have lunch together earlier if you like, and I could show you some particular pieces you might find interesting.’

Nika was taken aback.

‘That would be wonderful, yes. I’d like that.’ She was bumbling. ‘Thank you.’

Torres took up a scrap of paper, and started searching for a pen.

‘Here, give me your number,’ she said, holding the paper out, still looking for something to write with.

‘Oh, I lost my phone.’

Torres stopped her search to look up at her.

‘Oh! Was it stolen?’

‘No, it wasn’t stolen. I think I left it behind in the airport. It was my own fault anyway.’

‘You can always get a cheap one while you’re here,’ Torres suggested.

‘No, really, it’s fine. I like not having it.’

‘But what about your family? Won’t they be worried if they can’t contact you?’

‘No, really, it’s fine.’

Torres gave her a doubtful look, raising an eyebrow. Nika went on.

‘I always think about my mother travelling the world when she was my age, younger even, in her twenties. All her mother could hope for was a letter every few weeks, a postcard. A phone call once in a blue moon if she was lucky. I’ll be fine. There’s a phone in the place I’m staying.’

‘I’ll give you *my* number, and you can always call me if you need help with anything.’ Torres finally located a pen under a pile of paper and scrawled the digits down, handing it to Nika.

‘As for tomorrow, there’s a café at the gallery. Meet there at twelve?’

Nika nodded her assent, flattered that this woman should want to spend more time with her.

It was only a ten-minute walk back to her apartment, and she bought some eggs and bread from the Oxxo downstairs on her way. She was too scared to go out at night to eat, too frightened by the city’s immensity, its crowds and unfamiliarity. Instead she showered, enjoying the luxury of taking as long as she wanted. With no one to intrude or hurry her she stayed under the stream until the water ran cold. She slipped on a fresh singlet, clean underwear and, revived, made two fried eggs on toast for dinner. Settling herself on the couch she spread the papers from the day out before her. Torres had made an enlargement of the picture of *Lilith*, and Nika placed it at the centre.

Glancing out the window she could see the tip of the Torre Latino skyscraper rising above the other buildings, its coronet of television antennas a tangle of neon mess. The building’s name made her think of Torres and her invitation to lunch, and again she felt a secret thrill. Then something else caught Nika’s attention, a movement in the building opposite, and she let her eyes come to rest on a shadow in a window. It

was the same man from last night, half hidden by a curtain but his silhouette was clear, his head turned up towards her.

Nika rose from couch and walked calmly to the window, trying to look as though the act of drawing her own blinds closed wasn't a direct response to having noticed him. Then she ran to turn the lights off and, in the dark, crept back to peek around the corner of the curtain, mirroring the man's own secrecy. He was still there, face still turned up. She drew back and switched on a lamp.

It was fine, she told herself, no great drama. She'd just remember to keep the curtains closed at night. She made a cup of tea and settled back down to her papers, soon forgetting the strange voyeur, lost again in the world of Lilith and the painting so tantalisingly close. She took up an enlargement Torres had made of the photo of Carver at her easel. She followed the line of Carver's poised hand to the place where she'd soon make contact with the canvas, and Nika knew the painting was so close to being finished but that Carver still had more to do. What else was there? What other small wonders might she discover if – when – she finally saw the finished work? The photo was too grainy to show fine detail, the face of Lilith herself obscured by the easel's angle, but the infant bodies were there, strewn about the cliffs, a roiling sky above them.

She pored over her hoard, sipping her tea so slowly it went cold. She made a fresh cup, but soon her eyes were drooping so she put the papers away. Just as she was about to get into bed, she remembered the man across the street. Switching off the lamp she pulled back the edge of the curtain and peered around it. His room was still in shadow, the curtain still wide, but his silhouette was gone. She waited for her eyes to adjust, searching the room for a hint of him, but the window was empty. He'd given up on her.

FIVE

Torres was already waiting for her at the bottom of the gallery steps, smiling so warmly it caught Nika off guard. Nika smiled back, trying her best to seem confident, but she couldn't shake the sense of the other woman's superiority.

'I hope I'm not taking up too much of your time?' Nika asked as she came up alongside her.

'Of course not!' Torres trilled dismissively, leading her up the stairs and into the gallery. 'To be honest with you, I love coming here. Some of my favourite paintings are here, ones I like even better than ours.' She flashed her a sly smile, as though this was some great confession that they'd keep secret between them.

They entered a circular entranceway of polished marble and stone, Torres leading her across the room and down a set of grand stairs that immediately brought them back outside and into a lush garden studded with wrought iron sculptures. Nika went to admire the closest one, a huge circular disk embossed with symbols, but Torres grabbed her arm and tugged her onwards.

'Let's eat first, then you can look around.'

Nika liked how Torres had touched her, taking her arm like an old friend and leading her across a courtyard to a small café. Torres had taken so quickly to Nika, treating her like a confidant. She'd missed that. The sense of womanly friendship, a closeness like conspiracy that she'd only ever really had with Lydia, but had longed for with other women too. At university she'd hoped to make friends, but she was too

shy and awkward, always keeping in Lydia's shadow, mumbling to the friends that Lydia collected with ease, exchanging painfully difficult conversations in which she always felt pathetically naïve. Eventually she'd simply clam up, stop talking altogether, and people would drift away. She was finding it so much easier here, in Mexico, free from the shadow of her childhood, to talk to people, to be around them. Her fledgling confidence was building, bit by bit.

They sat outside the café under the shade of a huge oak. As they pulled their chairs back to sit, scraping them on the cobbles, a squirrel dashed from under the table and scrambled up the tree. Looking across the lawn, Nika could see half a dozen more scampering about, the stalks of their grey tails stick thin, wisps of fur protruding like the bloom of wattle trees back home. As they took their seats a waitress arrived with their menus.

'Would you like one in English?' Torres asked.

Nika shook her head and, after a moment to study the menu, ordered her lunch perfectly in her best Spanish.

'You speak Spanish?' Torres asked after the waitress left them.

'*Un pocco... Un poccito,*' she corrected herself.

'Is that how you came to like Mexican art?'

'No. I tried to learn *because* I like Mexican art. To try and sound more legitimate when I talk about it I suppose,' she grinned, a little shocked at having admitted this so easily, but also happy to have finally said it aloud.

'Oh, please!' Torres laughed, waving her hand. 'Tell me about it! I spent years in London not taken seriously. Like a Mexican couldn't have an opinion on Rossetti?'

'Did you study there?'

‘Yes. The Pre-Raphaelites. I was obsessed with them really, when I think about it now. I was like a teenager in love with a pop star.’

It was Nika’s turn to laugh. She knew what that was like.

‘That’s exactly how I am about Carver sometimes. Actually, it was the Pre-Raphaelites that started my interest in art. Collier’s *Lilith* is what did it. I saw that painting when I was a girl and I became obsessed, not just with the painting but the story too. I grew up in a very religious house and the idea of Lilith fascinated me.’

She could feel the story gathering up inside her and she was wary of blurting it all out, but a part of her also relished the opportunity to talk to someone this freely. When she’d first discovered that painting she hadn’t been able to speak to anyone about it. Lydia wasn’t interested, and she was too young to know anything more about it than Nika did anyway. Nika definitely couldn’t have asked her father. She knew him well enough to understand he’d be appalled by its lewdness, its obvious sensuality. She’d thought about asking her mother, though in the end, that seemed too risky. Even Lydia’s father had crossed her mind as an ally, but he was too much of an unknown then. So she’d felt that Lilith was someone she wasn’t supposed to know about, a secret that was being kept from her for a reason. She had scoured through the big family Bible and then rechecked her own. She’d flicked through the pages of the little pocket-sized ones tucked in the pews at church, just in case they said something different. But in all the versions Nika read there was only ever Eve, treacherous and fooled. All the same, she held on to the idea of Lilith, whose defiance set her apart from that other woman, and she added her to the list of her mother’s witches and spinsters who lived all alone. She kept Lilith as a bright, wonderful secret, squirrelled away deep. But how could she explain all that to Torres? It wouldn’t make sense. Instead she decided on the abridged version, only telling her a little of her own world.

‘Those kind of stories weren’t really allowed, but I loved them so much. I loved every story I could find that was different to the ones I was told in Sunday school. That’s why I fell in love with Carver because of course she painted so many myths. I was so fascinated when I found out she’d painted a version of Lilith that I knew I just had to try and find it.’

Torres looked at her intently, and Nika faltered.

‘Anyway,’ she continued, conscious that she’d said too much, ‘that’s how I came to Carver. That’s why I’m researching her now.’

‘So, you’re interested in myth? There’s a painting I must show you here then,’ Torres said. After a moment, Nika pulled her bag onto her lap, wanting to ask Torres a question.

‘I wanted to ask you about something,’ she said, digging about in her notebook and taking out the copy of the photograph of Carver and the man. It was in black and white now, but the details were still clear, and the man’s face still familiar. She passed it to Torres.

‘Do you know who that is?’

Torres took the copy from her.

‘I noticed this when I was copying things for you yesterday. I assumed you already knew who he was. It’s Bruer Marcus.’

Nika realised with a flush of recognition.

‘That’s it! Of course! You’re right, it is.’ Nika smiled, pleased to have the mystery solved.

‘They have a few of his paintings here, if you’d like to see them? Though I’m not a great fan of his work.’

‘I wouldn’t mind having a quick look.’

‘Of course. They were supposedly lovers, though he was almost half her age. He still lives in Mexico, still paints, as far as I’m aware.’

Nika knew now why she’d found his face familiar because she too had encountered references to him as one of Carver’s lovers. She’d even seen his photo before, even briefly looked up his work. But none of it had appealed to her much either, and she never pursued the truth of their relationship.

‘I wonder if I could get in contact with him somehow, to interview him?’

‘I’m sure we could arrange it, though he’s a recluse these days. Lives out in the middle of nowhere. You’d probably have to travel to him, and that might not be easy.’

Nika shrugged. What was she here for if not to take every opportunity to find *Lilith*?

‘Leave it with me,’ Torres said.

They went first to the Carver. It was her *Rape of Medusa* and Nika knew this painting well. It showed the interior of a temple, dark walls hung with herbs and animal skins. On the altar steps a young woman recoiled from a figure with the head of a fish set upon the broad, muscular shoulders of a man. He was naked but the fish head made his nakedness seem less lurid, despite the enormous erection emerging from his groin, ending in a three-pronged trident. There was something both comical and horrific about this painting.

They stood studying it for a while in silence, until Nika noticed a trio of paintings by Remedios Varo, and shifted her gaze to these.

‘You like Varo?’ Torres asked.

‘I love Varo. Look at this,’ and Nika pointed to the corner of the nearest canvas. In it a bizarre woman, tall and thin, was seated in an armchair. Her hands

appeared to have calcified into the spiralling ends of the armrest. Her skin, chameleon-like, had taken on the same pattern and colour of the chair's upholstery. In the left-hand corner there was a gap in the room's floorboards and a grey cat looked up through it at the seated figure. In the background, another chair was covertly stealing a cloth from a drawer.

'I love this cat here. And I love the way there are things that aren't apparent on first glance. The more you look, the more you find.'

The other two paintings were equally as mystical, combining signs and strange bird-women.

'Come, let me show you one of my favourites,' Torres said after a while.

In a gallery further along Torres stopped in front of an impressively large, incredibly dark painting, hung so high that the top of the frame was almost at the ceiling, while the bottom sat at eye height. Nika craned her neck upward, stepping back to see it better.

It was a night scene, the canvas heavy with dark oils. Layers and layers built on each other, thick with the texture of blues and purples reflecting the gallery lights. A river of royal blue was flanked by black trees in silhouette, and standing on the river's bank was a woman covering her face with her hands, her white gown grey in the moonlight.

'La Llorona!' Nika said, recognising Pepe's story.

Torres turned to her.

'You know about her?'

'Yes! I mean, I only just learnt about her since coming here.'

'She's a bit like your myths.'

‘This is beautiful! Who’s it by?’ she asked, leaning toward the plaque below it.

‘Inez Riker.’

‘I don’t know her,’ Nika admitted, reading the description, given in both Spanish and English: *The Weeping Woman*, Inez Riker, 1952, oil on canvas.

‘She was only twenty years old when she painted this.’

‘Twenty? That’s amazing!’

‘This painting’s all the more sad because Riker herself died by drowning. Very tragic. And to think, she painted this almost twenty years before, so it seems a kind of horribly sad prophecy to me.’

They stood in silence, looking up at the enormous sorrowful woman towering above them. Then Torres seemed to shiver, as though shaking herself free of the painting’s spell.

‘It’s a beautiful painting,’ she said. ‘But also a very sad one. Come. I’ll show you Bruer’s work next if you like?’

Nika wanted to spend more time with this painting, to sit on one of the benches nearby and stare in order to really soak it in, to digest its details. But Torres was on a schedule and so Nika followed her without complaint.

They exited the room and went up a central stairwell. Like the spoke of a wheel, it led to a circular balcony from which different gallery halls branched out. In one of these rooms Torres stopped again and pointed out three paintings in a row.

‘These are Bruer’s,’ she announced. ‘As I say, I’m not really a fan.’

Nika went up to the first painting, dark and thick like Riker’s, but this darkness was difficult to decipher, muddied, less articulate than her deft strokes.

‘I think his palette is too dark, without ever really using that darkness to any effect,’ Torres observed. ‘His images are jumbled. Muddy.’

‘That’s just the word I was thinking!’ Nika replied. ‘Muddied. I can’t really tell what anything is.’

She moved closer to the painting. At a glance, it was impossible to see that there was indeed anything there worth seeing. After a moment, the clumps of clay-like paint began to form into an image. It was a portrait of a woman from behind, naked, looking over her shoulder at the viewer. No matter how Nika stared, she was hard to find, hidden in dark navy blues and blacks.

The next painting was easier to decipher, a clear row of figures in browns and reds. They wore serapes in these same colours, and each one held a pistol. Their faces glared darkly from under wide sombreros. In the background, peering between two men’s shoulders, was another figure, even darker, with a face half hidden under his sombrero’s wide brim. His features were different, skeletal, like the *catrinas* and *calaveras* Nika had seen everywhere when she first arrived. It was almost menacing, slipped in between the other figures as though he’d crept up behind them and they were still unaware of his presence.

‘This one is a bit creepy, actually,’ Nika admitted, pointing to the painting and reading its title: *Caballeros*. Torres came up beside her.

‘Why’s that?’ Torres asked.

‘That face there, behind the others. It’s unsettling hidden away like that.’

Torres squinted towards where Nika was pointing.

‘Which one do you mean?’ She was looking between the faces of the men.

‘The one that’s sort of hiding behind the others. There, between these two shoulders,’ Nika moved forward more, trying to point to the spot more precisely

without touching the canvas. A security guard loitered not far away, eyeing her, waiting to tell her off should she get much closer.

‘Can’t you see that figure, there, in the back? Between those two men?’

‘No, not really. Though there’s a faint outline there. Like something was there, maybe? But was painted over?’

Nika frowned, frustrated that Torres didn’t see it.

‘You really can’t see that?’

To her the figure was obvious. Perhaps Torres was standing in the wrong light, the figure obscured by a reflection. She pointed again, edging even closer, too close, and the security guard called out to them. Nika dropped her finger, stepping back like a scolded child, and mumbled an embarrassed ‘*Lo siento.*’ Torres grabbed her by the shoulders, giggling as she pulled her back a few more steps. It was an oddly intimate touch that caught Nika off guard, and Torres even pushed her face into Nika’s shoulder to stifle her laughter. Nika giggled too, delighted, the closeness of it a joy, Torres’ touch a secret sign of camaraderie between them. It reminded her of Lydia, all the times they got themselves in some trouble and had to face the wrath of Nika’s angry father. Not like Lydia’s father who never told them off. But now wasn’t the time to think about that.

‘Come and stand here, maybe you can see it better.’

Nika took Torres by the arm, revelling in their new intimacy and the pleasure of touching this woman and pulling her close like an old friend, like she and Lydia used to do. Torres moved with her to look from this new angle, but still she shook her head.

‘No. The line’s even fainter now.’

Nika didn't understand how Torres couldn't see it, but she was also conscious her own insistence was becoming tiresome. Baffled, she let it drop. Torres disentangled herself from Nika's grip and moved off to the last painting in the line, their moment of closeness over.

Nika hoped she wouldn't see another phantom but the last painting was just another nude. Dark skin on a dark background, a figure draped on a crimson bed. The shapes were impressionistic, the paint flurried against the canvas, but the woman's form was lurid in its nakedness, legs spread open to a slash of red and black. Nika didn't like it at all.

'It's a bit...' she wrinkled her nose, searching for a word.

'Visceral?' Torres offered.

It was the second time Torres had echoed her thoughts.

'That's exactly the word I was looking for.'

'Most of Bruer's work is like this. An obsession with the body. Mainly women's bodies, as you can see.'

Torres glanced at her watch.

'I really should be going.'

'Of course,' Nika said, conscious of taking up her time.

'Will you stay and look some more?'

'I think so.'

'Good. Do let me know if you need anything,' Torres began walking quickly away. 'And I'll try and find out about Bruer for you too.'

She called this back over her shoulder and Nika watched her go in powerful strides, her determined hips swinging. How she would have liked to have this woman's commanding authority, her powerful figure so sure and so confident. But

Nika was unwieldy, graceless, even more so now she could feel her body expanding. Soon she wouldn't be able to wear her jeans and it would be nothing but billowing t-shirts and dresses. Her breasts were already swollen and sore, her shirt pressed too tight against them, her body betraying her much too quickly.

She toured the other rooms but was soon drawn back to the enormous painting of *The Weeping Woman*. The figure's grief was palpable and Nika stood transfixed by it for a long time. Her mind wandered back to the ghostly figure in Bruer's painting and she couldn't help but go and inspect it again. This time when she looked, however, there was nothing there. Stunned, she searched for the skeletal face, not understanding how she could have been so sure of herself before, so convinced the figure was there. A hazy reflection danced in the place where he should be, and it did look, as Torres had said, like perhaps something had been painted there once and then erased, but it appeared so faintly now she couldn't be sure she wasn't making it up. Puzzled, she began to feel uneasy, so she went back to stand beneath La Llorona once again. The painting made Nika calmer and she stayed again for a long time under the weeping woman's sorrowful gaze. It was somehow beneficent, strangely comforting, as though at least someone, somewhere, understood how Nika felt.

SIX

The next morning Nika pushed through her nausea and exhaustion and rode the metro to the Terminal Central del Norte. At a counter she bought a ticket to the Piramides and then she joined a snaking queue waiting to board the bus. There was the common gaggle of English voices, American accents, even some Australians, but she kept her head low, not wanting to be drawn into talking to them or discussing where she was from, the land and life she'd left behind. She wanted to stay disconnected from all that.

As they pulled out of the terminal she watched the mess of Mexico City roll by. The broken buildings, the cracked concrete, a children's playground populated by sleeping men stretched out across the benches and the play equipment. A man in the gutter was pressing a rag to his bloodied head and he stared back as she turned to gawk, holding her gaze as the bus passed by. Nika wasn't sure what she'd lost in the transaction, but something was gone in that simple exchange. She was both terrified and in love with it: the city offered up dangers and terrors with such earnest honesty that it seemed almost innocent. There was ugliness and beauty everywhere and she wondered again about *Lilith*, about the beautiful, ugly painting, and the two things mixed together, one inside the other. One not possible without the other. Or maybe it was just beauty turned inside out. And wasn't she turning inside out too, in fits and starts? Wasn't that what her body was doing?

The bus shuddered through traffic, stopping every now and then to let more people on. A young man sat next to her, perching on the edge of his seat with his legs

half in the aisle, as though he was conscious that she needed space, and that he should give it to her. They were soon out on the highway, the city giving way to enclaves of houses huddled along the roadside, built up one on top of each other, strings of washing laced between them, laundry flapping, strung like prayer flags. Slowly the suburbs petered out, becoming smaller houses dotted along the roadside. But soon these too were gone in long stretches of nothingness: open plains and grasslands, brownness to the horizon, factories and buildings peppered into the landscape at intervals.

It was an hour before they reached the pyramids. Descending from the bus, she blindly followed the crowd to the ticket booth and then across a dusty car park to the entrance. The sun beat down and she pulled her hat further over her face, but the glare only intensified, reflecting off every dry surface and bouncing up into her squinting eyes. Now that she was off the bus, sweat had begun trickling from beneath her shorts, making the inside of her thighs clammy and damp. It gave her the disconcerting feeling she'd wet herself, and she was constantly adjusting her shorts, pulling them free of her crotch, uncomfortable before her sightseeing had even begun. As she passed with the crowd into the compound a boulevard of shops and vendor stalls rose up to meet them. Colours and fabrics and the gaudy brightness of souvenirs dazzled her already strained senses and she passed through as quickly as she could towards the pyramids ahead.

At the end of the row of shops she was spat out onto an avenue the width of a six-lane freeway, its red-brown soil trodden flat with the imprints of sneakers and trekking boots. On the opposite side of the vast thoroughfare sat the foot of an enormous pyramid. She could imagine now, free from the shouts of the bargaining stallholders and the clamouring tourists, faces turned to the sun all those hundreds of

years ago, waiting for its rays to fall upon them from behind the temple's tip. For a moment she felt like she was slipping in time again, coming loose from the present, her chafed thighs throbbing as her body threatened to shift and distend. But then she felt an elbow smacking into her spine, and she yelped just as a man began apologising to her in a language she didn't understand. He moved on quickly and she was fixed again in time. There she stood, gawping up at the wonder of the past along with every other tourist in Mexico. An outsider. An idiot with a backpack.

She climbed the steps, keeping as far to the left as possible in order to avoid a busload of Americans who'd just begun their own ascent. There were forty or fifty of them snapping with their cameras and following along behind a handsome guide brandishing a flag they followed obediently. He spoke to them in English, explaining the role the temple played in the rituals to the sun god, speaking effortlessly as he climbed while the group huffed and puffed their way up behind him. At any moment she feared one would have a heart attack and tumble back down like the sacrificial bodies were supposed to have centuries ago.

Climbing each tall step was like cresting a mountain, and she tried to stifle her own panting, not wanting to be mistaken for just another unfit tourist. But it was hopeless because that's what she was and it was written all over her struggling body, slick with perspiration. She hadn't even made it a quarter of the way up before she had to stop for a rest. Looking back down towards the avenue of shops and the dusty car park and the tourist buses she could see for miles out across hillsides the same colour as the buildings, gold-white sands studded with clusters of green. But looking down she was also filled with a vertiginous dread. How would she ever get back down without falling? The steps were so high and sheer. But she couldn't possibly keep going up. She was completely and utterly stuck. At an impasse. Would she be

forced to stay here, not even half way up, not close enough to down, until someone came to rescue her? Or until she just let herself fall? Sickness rose in her, the horror of impending panic.

She sat on the lip of one of the great stairs, breathing hard and trying to look like she was merely taking in the view. There were more people now, crowding her, moving too closely around her. She had to get away, so she began a careful shimmying downward, sliding over the first few steps on her backside like a cautious child. When she'd gained a some confidence this way she stood, lurching down the remaining steps sideways so the vertical descent appeared less immediate. Back at ground level she felt better even though she knew, undoubtedly, that she'd missed out on some amazing vista from the temple's top. She consoled herself: she could buy a postcard and this would tell her what she'd missed out on. In time, when she looked at it, she'd probably start to believe she'd climbed all the way to the top, that she'd seen the postcard's view with her own eyes. All she wanted now was to be inside, somewhere cool, where the terrifying expanse of endless sky was hidden from her, if only for a little while. She trudged back down the giant avenue towards the museum.

Inside the museum was dark and cool and much less crowded. She strolled around looking at the pottery, bits and pieces of jewellery, weapons and ancient instruments, while the sweat dried on her skin. She crossed a giant, undulating floor map of the site in order to reach the next gallery where there were exhibits about the dead, skulls and burial sites and huge statues of Aztec godheads. She stopped in front of a terrifying creature hewn in grey stone. It wore a crown of skulls from which loops and circles tumbled like hair. Its face had two deep holes for eyes and the same skeletal mouth as the toothy skulls on its crown. Around its throat was a necklace made from another skull and two severed hands, palms out and fingers pointing down,

as though caught in a gesture of questioning. The statue's own hands were raised upwards, the fingers mostly snapped away, and Nika wondered if this was done by time or by conquerors.

Cihuateteo, the plaque beneath it read, an English translation explaining that it was the spirit of a woman who had died in childbirth. It struck Nika that she too could die that way. It wasn't impossible; women had died for less. And if she were to die in Mexico would she become a *Cihuateteo* too? Would she wear the bones of her own dead child around her throat?

She turned her attention to a life-sized exhibit of a replica grave. The plaque explained that the bones belonged to a nobleman who was buried with items deemed necessary for travel to the next world. Tucked in beside his skeleton were the bones of something else, curled neatly up into a ball beside the dead man's thigh. The curve of the spine looked like a sleeping cat, the forelimbs drawn into its tiny ribcage, but the sign told her that dogs were often buried with the dead to help lead them into the afterlife. Nika looked at the pathetic bundle of animal bones and imagined the poor creature buried alive with its dead master. In that moment nothing in the world seemed more awful than the thought of the animal's suffocating death. Uninvited, the image of the dog on the roadside, its crumpled body and its trail of blood, shot into her mind and she was forced to turn away, fighting back tears as she tried to shake the image loose from her thoughts.

#

By the time she clambered aboard a bus back to the city it was nearly sunset — but she'd done it. She had stayed out all day like a tourist, weaving her way among the

temples and the people, listening to children playing with newly purchased whistles shaped like eagles and jaguars, their shrill screeching accompanying her almost everywhere she went. After the bus pulled away it made a circuit through the centre of the nearby town and by the time they hit the freeway a full moon had already risen. But to Nika's eyes it looked different. Slanted. She'd crossed the world and turned herself upside down and now the moon she'd relied on, such a constant in her life, had shifted in space. Tilting her head, she looked for its familiar markers but found only splotches of grey and black. She strained to find the face in it that she knew so well, but the straining only made her feel unsteady and seasick, close to falling off the edge, as though the world was flat and she might slip into nothingness. She closed her eyes and took long, slow breaths.

After a while the bus pulled over and a trio of mariachis came aboard, their jackets spangled with looped silver trimming, red cravats tied at their throats. There were two guitarists and a singer, and as the bus pulled back onto the highway they stood in the aisle and began to croon. They swayed gently, never losing their balance or rhythm. Lulled by their music, Nika leaned back into her headrest while the world outside was lost to her in darkness. Streetlamps flashed by now and then, but she only had to close her eyes and listen, focussing on the words, trying to ignore the growing queasiness in her belly while the men serenaded the sleepy travellers. She caught snatches of the lyrics, laments about hearts and love and sadness and tears. Then the guitars struck up a tune that sounded familiar, and she was alert again, listening intently.

El ultimo de mi madre, Llorona,

Y el primero que te di

Hay de me, llorona

Llorona,

Llevarme al rio

She knew this song. She'd heard it in the cemetery that night with the American girls, but hadn't realised what it was then. But now she knew about the woman from Pepe's story, how she'd taken her children down to the river, drowned them and herself. Nika tried to make sense of the words but the song was over too quickly, and the singers began another ballad.

When they reached the city's outskirts the band finished playing and stumbled up and down the aisle with their hats outstretched. Nika dropped in all the loose coins she had and, when the bus stopped to let them off, she watched them longingly as they disappeared into the night. She wanted to hear the song again, to piece together more of the tale she was only just learning. But by the time the bus pulled back into the main station she was consumed with other thoughts, overtaken by a nausea she could no longer ignore. As soon as she was off the bus she fled to the station's bathroom, making it just in time to vomit her empty stomach into the bowl. She hadn't eaten all day, unable to take more than a few bites of a sandwich before her stomach began churning, and now she could retch up nothing but bile. When she was done she slumped on the filthy bathroom floor, the tiles sticky but cool against her naked legs. She wanted to cry, but she was too tired. She didn't know if she missed home or if she was simply being childish. Hadn't she, after all, managed so far? Look how much she'd done! Would Lydia have even managed this long on her own? No, not Lydia. Lydia was the kind of person who needed to be around others. Lydia needed an audience, an entourage. She would've had to make friends with every stranger on the bus, would have forced them to spend the day socialising and talking. Lydia could never stand being on her own the way Nika could. Nika smiled at the

thought, at all the things Lydia wouldn't ever know, but it was a short-lived satisfaction before she was gagging through another bout of sickness. Afterwards she stayed on the floor until a woman knocked on the door, forcing her to leave, muttering apologies as she went.

Having emptied her stomach completely she was suddenly starving. After taking the metro back to the city centre, she bought herself a slice of pizza from a cart vendor. She gobbled it down and bought another, eating this one more slowly as she strolled through the throngs of people milling around Bellas Artes. Now, in the middle of things where there were people everywhere and music and the smell of food, she wasn't afraid anymore. She felt like just another person, out on a warm night, mixed up among the bustle of the crowd. But she was tired and dirty and so she began to weave her way back through the streets toward her apartment. As she approached she noticed a man standing by her door, smoking a cigarette. Taking out her keys, she was about to ask him to move aside when she looked up to see that he was smiling right at her, like he knew her. She smiled back awkwardly.

'Hello,' he said.

'Hi...'

'Where are you from?'

She couldn't answer straight away, too surprised by his forthrightness. He didn't wait for her reply, launching into another question.

'Are you American?'

'No, I...'

'English?' he cut her off.

'Yes,' she lied, offended by his presumptuousness.

‘Where have you been today?’ He smiled again, like they were having the easiest, friendliest chat in the world. She was confused, couldn’t place him. Did she know him?

‘I’ve been out sightseeing and now I’m pretty tired. You’re standing in front of my door. Could you move so I can get in, please?’

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’

Automatically she snapped back a yes, the safest answer, she knew, to be given in such situations.

‘And does he trust you?’

Taken aback by such a strange question she simply stared at him blankly, unable to find an answer.

‘Here, all by yourself in a big city.’

‘I’m not by myself,’ she lied again. She was about to tell him that her boyfriend was staying with her, waiting for her now, upstairs, but in the same moment she recognised who he was. He’d been watching her. He knew she was alone here.

‘I have a friend who lives here,’ she said instead. ‘I’m visiting her.’

He nodded and took a drag on his cigarette.

‘You’re from those apartments there, aren’t you?’ she asked, pointing across the street.

He took another drag on his cigarette, exhaled.

‘I saw you watching me,’ he grinned.

‘I wasn’t watching you!’

His grin grew even wider.

‘Yes you were, I saw you.’

‘I was standing on my balcony. My eyes happened to fall on your window. I wasn’t watching you.’

‘I saw you peeking out your window. You thought I couldn’t see you.’ By now he was practically a Cheshire cat, enjoying himself as though this was a game, a flirtation. Nika was startled by his audacity, scared he’d keep standing in her way forever. She didn’t know how to get around him and open the door without him coming in beside her.

‘I looked out my window because I saw *you* watching *me*! You were the one lurking in the window.’

‘Lurking?’ He didn’t recognise the word. She didn’t know how to get rid of him.

‘Listen, I’m sorry if you thought I was watching you. I really wasn’t, okay? Could you please move?’

‘Would you like to have a drink?’

‘I don’t think my boyfriend would approve.’

‘But your boyfriend isn’t here.’

Abruptly he reached out to take her hand. She snatched it away, panicked.

There were people on the street, she reassured herself. She wasn’t alone, he couldn’t hurt her here in public. But she couldn’t help feeling horribly trapped by him.

He reached out to take her hand again, pouting at her in mock offense.

‘Can’t I hold your hand?’

She knew she needed to make a decision, but if she tried to be polite he’d keep talking to her, take courteousness for encouragement, and assume he had a chance. But if she was rude he’d get angry, offended, as though there was no need for her to

be so brutal, though of course there was. They made it that way. They didn't leave you alone otherwise. But she hated being impolite: she was, after all, her mother's daughter. She wondered just how far she was willing to let herself be strung along simply to avoid offending anyone.

'No, no, sorry, you can't. I'm sorry. I have to go in now. I have to meet my friend soon. I need to...'

'Are you going out?' Again, her interrupted her.

'Yes. She's meeting me.'

'Where are you going?'

'Out. Listen, I'm sorry, can I please get by?'

She moved to the door, hating herself for saying sorry so much.

'Why don't I come up with you?'

'What?'

'I can come up. I'll come meet your friend with you.'

She was stumped. How difficult was it just to tell him to go away? Why couldn't she form the words, get up the courage? Tell him to leave.

'No, sorry.'

Again, apologies. That was all she could muster. Sick at herself, she wished she could say something else.

'Listen, I don't even know if I will go out. I'm not feeling the best. I threw up before.'

'Threw up?'

'Yes, I was sick at the bus stop. I haven't been well.'

She could see that he didn't believe her. He was getting that look, as though she should owe him better than a lie. But then, she *wasn't* well. It wasn't a lie. The sickness was starting again, low in her throat.

'Come on, you'll be fine. It's probably just something you ate. Always happens to tourists. I know what will make you feel better.'

'No, really, I need to go in.' She tried again for the door, and again he moved into her path.

'Here, give me the key. I'll help you upstairs.' He put his hand out, confident that she'd comply.

Maybe it was the sickness that engulfed her then, or maybe it was outrage but, abruptly, all thoughts of politeness left her. Instead, she wanted him to really understand her, to know, to really *know*, how she felt. To do this, she gave into her nausea and let herself vomit all down his legs.

Stunned, he froze, mouth agape, staring down at his soiled trousers, while in that moment of relief Nika felt elated. Better than she'd felt all day, now that the sickness was out. Not wanting to lose the opportunity she charged forward, making no fumbles with the key. Slipping around him she slammed the door shut with her whole body just as he turned to swear at her. She slumped against the door, listening to his furious shouts, his fists thumping the wood, but he was yelling at her in a Spanish too fast for her to understand. Suddenly, the rush of relief was over, and she was overcome with exhaustion. She had dragged herself through the day only for it to come to this. She wanted so much to laugh, to take pleasure in her grotesque victory, but she could only muster a weak smile, tucking the joy of it away, knowing it would please her better later anyway, when it was merely a memory.

PART THREE

SEVEN

The wheels spun and crunched on the gravel as Bruer turned the car up the drive. A small incline but steep, and he had to stop to open the gate at the top. As he got out and unlatched the chain, Nika looked closely at him for the first time. He was younger looking than she'd expected, though he had to be at least her own father's age, or possibly closer to Lydia's father. Bruer was tall, lanky, and she wondered if that had something to do with it. Maybe if he was plump, soft and loose, he would look more his age, but he was tightly wound and the muscles beneath his faded blue t-shirt were defined by his leanness.

He'd met her at the bus station, smiling broadly with his hand extended in welcome. When she reached out to take it, it was warm and clammy and as she disengaged from his touch she'd had to resist the urge to wipe her own hand on her skirt. But Bruer seemed genuinely pleased to see her, and in the hour-long drive from the bus stop to his property he'd repeated how happy he was to have her stay with him.

The morning after her run-in with the man from the other apartment, Nika packed her bags and rang Torres. She didn't tell her what had happened but she asked if she could contact Bruer as soon as possible, and Torres called her back within the hour with his details. When she spoke to Bruer on the phone about the possibility of coming to meet him she suggested she could stay in a hotel nearby. But Bruer laughed

and insisted she stay with him, and now she understood why. Bruer's property was in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't anywhere else for her to stay for miles.

She watched him make his way back to the car, ragged shirt tucked into a pair of beige pants. Even in this heat the men always seemed to wear jeans or trousers. Shorts, she was realising, were a sure sign of an outsider. But that was okay because she could barely do her shorts up anymore. She'd been reduced to choosing among her dresses and loose skirts. As her stomach swelled it obliged her into dressing like she had when she'd lived with her parents. As far as her father was concerned, pants on a girl were the devil's work. It had seemed like such a rebellion when she'd bought her first pair of jeans to wear to university, like she was defying all the laws of nature.

Bruer climbed back in the car, bringing a gust of hot air in with him, and as they drove through the gate an adobe came into view, obscured before from her sight by a cluster of scraggly guajillo trees.

The house was rendered in the same mud-earth as the surrounding hills, and its curved corners, rounded windows and door frames made it look almost as though it had grown there by itself. A wide, red-tiled awning sheltered a deck that wrapped its way all around the house, supported at intervals by limbless tree trunks. They'd been left un-sanded, rough knots and whorls clear in the wood. Two of them had fallen forward, no longer supporting their patch of roof, and here the tiles had slipped, a pile of them gathered on the dry soil, leaving the sagging frame of the awning exposed. Hunks of metal and debris were amassed against the walls and Nika guessed they were for use in Bruer's sculptures. An air of dilapidation surrounded the whole place, right down to the tangled shrubs that clung to the sparse shade cast by the guajillo trees.

Bruer stopped the car by the trees and walked back to close the gate while Nika got out. The air was still. Lazy insects chirruped in the trees and Bruer's footsteps crunched on the soil, but nothing else moved. It was as if the whole desert was holding its breath. Sweat trickled between Nika's breasts, and she longed for the relief of a breeze, something to stir against the perspiration that beaded on her skin. All around there was scrub and brush, cactus and succulents, everything still, torpid in a vacuum of shimmering heat. The house stood among all this on a plateau between the hills, and behind it she could see the incongruous silver gleam of a huge corrugated shed.

Bruer came up beside her.

'Well, come on through.'

His accent was strange, a New York twang with a Southern drawl. Torres had told her that his parents were Germans who moved to Mexico to escape the war. He was born in Guadalajara shortly after the war ended, but his mother left her husband, moving to New York with Bruer when he was only a few years old. When Bruer was a teenager, he came back to live with his father. The two moved around, living back and forth across the border with Texas for the best part of ten years, until his father died and Bruer settled at last on the Mexican side. His name had come up every now and then in Nika's research, sometimes in connection to Carver, but it had never occurred to her that he might know something more about the painting.

Inside the adobe was much cooler than she'd suspected it would be. The front door led into a low-ceilinged lounge area, two long leather couches taking up most of the space. The smell of the leather was pungent, new, even though the chairs looked ancient and worn, like they'd always been there. A wooden coffee table sat in the room's centre, and bookcases of matching wood ran the length of two walls, reaching

up to meet the low ceiling. Their shelves were overflowing with bric-a-brac: sculptures, books, plates, trays, bits and pieces of wood and salvaged tumbleweeds. More books were stacked on the coffee table, piles of large and voluminous hardcovers. It was the house of a collector. But despite the clutter, there was no hint of neglect or filth. She wondered if he'd cleaned up just for her.

'Sorry about the mess,' he said. 'Take a seat. Can I get you something to drink? Would you like a coffee?'

'Do you have tea? Just black?'

He nodded and disappeared through an archway into an adjoining room. She cleared some space on one of the couches, pushing aside a cluster of elaborately embroidered cushions in order to sit down. Judging by their titles, the stacks of books on the table were all about modern art. She picked up the nearest one resting on top, its title in English: *Modern Mexican Art*. Flipping through the pages she saw familiar names, familiar pictures. Bruer had used post-it notes to mark out a page on Carver. It was an image of her *Rape of Medusa*, the same one she'd seen in the gallery in Mexico City. A kettle began to whistle in the next room and soon Bruer came back in carrying two mugs.

'I see you've found her already?' he said, eyes darting to the book in her hands.

'Yes. I love this painting.' She tapped her fingers on the image.

'I suppose you went and saw it then?'

She nodded in reply, hoping he wouldn't ask if she'd seen his paintings too.

He leant down and put the mugs on the table then reached over to take the book from her. He looked at the painting a moment, considering it, then flipped through and handed the book back to her open on a different page.

‘This is also one of my favourites.’

Carver’s *Thistle*, a realistic botanical still life. Not the kind of art Carver was known for.

‘Really?’ Nika asked, surprised.

‘You don’t like it?’

‘Oh! No! It’s not that I don’t like it. It’s just that it’s not her usual sort of thing. It’s not the kind of painting of hers that really interests me.’

‘Which ones do you like?’ he asked, tossing more embroidered cushions across to the other sofa and sitting down beside her. His sudden proximity made her uncomfortable.

‘I like the ones about myths and legends the best. Actually, that’s what I wanted most to talk to you about.’ She replaced the book on the table, closing the pages on the botanical image.

‘Ah, yes. *Lilith*, right?’ He’d already told her on the phone that he didn’t know what had become of the painting, but he’d also told her that he had some of Carver’s sketches for it stored away in his archives. If she could see them then the trip here would be worth it.

‘What was it like?’

‘A beautiful painting. Stunning really.’

‘Did someone buy it? It has to be in a private collection somewhere.’

‘I have no idea where it’s ended up, but I do remember that Inez Riker had it hanging in her entry hall for a while.’

‘Inez Riker?’

‘Yes, have you heard of her?’

‘Only recently. I don’t really know anything about her work. Did she and Carver know each other?’

‘Oh, yes. The three of us were great friends for a while, but eventually...’ He pulled a face but she couldn’t decipher its meaning. ‘But, Inez! Now there was a talent. An absolute talent! She was quite often overshadowed... yes, I would say that’s the word, overshadowed by the older artists like Carver. A shame, really.’

‘I’ve only seen her *Weeping Woman*, in the Modern Art Gallery.’

He frowned. ‘That’s the only one of her works hanging in a major gallery anywhere, though I must admit, I’m not a fan of that particular painting. I think I have a few, much smaller works of hers here if you’d like to see them?’

‘I’d love to!’

‘I also have some of Leia’s sketches around somewhere as well, like I told you, but I haven’t fished all these things out yet so you’ll have to bear with me while I find them. It’s been a long time since I’ve looked at any of that stuff.’

Nika could hardly wait. Sketches – real, original sketches – by Leia Carver! She was already doing the maths in her head, wondering how much money she could spare if he’d let her buy one.

‘How long are you planning on being around?’ Bruer asked, picking up his mug.

‘I don’t know. I’m not on any particular schedule.’

‘You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like.’

She thanked him, picking up her own drink, but it was too hot and scalded her tongue.

‘This is lovely, thank you,’ she lied, replacing the mug on the table.

‘So, tell me why you’re looking for this painting then?’

She had to consider her answer for a moment.

‘There are a lot of reasons,’ she began. ‘For one thing I wrote my thesis on Surrealism. Dissertation,’ she corrected herself. ‘I wrote my dissertation of female Surrealists and specifically on how some people don’t recognise Carver *as* a Surrealist.’

‘Ah, yes, quite often she was disregarded in that way.’

‘I wrote my dissertation on her work, and in my research I found just a few references to *Lilith* and it intrigued me, I guess. The fact that I couldn’t find it anywhere sort of made me a bit obsessed with it. I’ve always had an interest in the story of Lilith, ever since I was a girl, so it fascinated me when I discovered she’d painted her. I’ve sort of been on the hunt for it since.’

‘Well, I do hope you can find it. It’s a magnificent piece. I’d love to see it again.’ Bruer had listened with close attention and now he simply nodded his head and leant back into the couch, falling silent. In the awkward moment that followed, Nika reached out again for mug and blew in little puffs at the surface of her tea.

‘How did you come to know Carver,’ she asked finally to dispel the silence. Bruer sighed loudly, thinking for a moment before he answered.

‘The very first time I met her was in New York. I was only a boy and she was already in her thirties, but she knew my mother.’

‘How?’ Nika regretted asking the question; it was clear Bruer had been on the verge of telling her anyway. But she wanted so badly to urge him on, to tell her everything now, this instant. She sipped at her tea to silence herself, burning her tongue for a second time.

‘Well, my mother was an administrator for a gallery. Leia was already living in Mexico then. She’d left New York some time before this, but she still exhibited

there when she could. My mother wasn't an artist herself, but she knew a lot about art, and she made a lot of artist friends through work. My mother was just one of those people, you know? Larger than life. Very funny. Infinitely likable.' He said this in a way that made Nika suspect Bruer hadn't found his own mother all *that* likable. He reached out and picked up his own mug, sipping at it slowly and savouring it before going on.

'She got invited to all the parties, always had people around our apartment. She and Leia got along like a house on fire, and they sort of kept up a correspondence. I was a teenager when I came to live with my father here in Mexico, but by then I'd started painting. Naturally, all my mother's friends had influenced me growing up, so it seemed inevitable that I'd end up painting too. And Leia took an interest in my work, a bit like a mentor. We lived on opposite sides of the country of course, but I sent her sketches and she sent me feedback. Later, when I could afford it, I went and stayed in Mexico City for a while and she took me under her wing.'

There was more to the story than Bruer was letting on, that much was obvious by the way he stared gloomily into his tea. But Nika could sense he wasn't about to tell her about their personal relationship, so she steered the conversation back to the painting.

'And so you say Inez had the painting?'

He looked up from his musing.

'For a while she did, yes. I think she bought it from Leia, or maybe Leia gave it to her as a gift. Inez had it hanging for a long time in her hallway, but then she eventually sold it to Lyndall.'

'Jonathan Lyndall?' Lyndall was someone Nika did know about. He had been a patron for many artists, buying scores of Carver's paintings well before she was

famous. Without his influence, Carver may never have been able to survive on her art alone. It was thanks to Lyndall's patronage that she was able to concentrate on her own work.

'But I've never seen it listed in his collection.'

It was true. Nika had gone through itemised lists of private collections many times, and *Lilith* had never appeared in any of them.

'I'm fairly certain she sold it to him in the seventies. I never saw it after that anyway. But I never went to Lyndall's. He wasn't a fan of me.'

Nika remembered the article from the plane: *El jardín surrealista*.

'He lived in the jungle, didn't he?' she asked.

'Yeah, but I never went there. I think his children might still live there, in his house, though he passed away years ago. Who knows where the painting is now? They may well have sold a lot of his collection for profit. I don't know. Kept it maybe. I'm sure you could get in touch with them? I can probably hunt up their number.' He stood, cutting the conversation abruptly short. 'But there's plenty of time to talk about this,' he said. 'Let's get you settled in.'

Bruer went back out to the car and brought her things inside. Refusing to let her carry them herself, he led her through the archway off the lounge room and into the kitchen. The roof here was low as well, and the room sparsely furnished. A fridge hummed in a corner near a baby-blue formica dining table, both looking like they'd been there since the fifties. A tiny box window over the sink let in a dull haze and through it Nika could see one corrugated wall of the enormous work shed, looming large and silver. The kitchen was the only room connecting the lounge to the rest of the house, which consisted of a short hallway with two doors on each side, terminating in another door at the end.

‘That’s my room,’ he gestured to the one on his immediate right. ‘And that’s the bathroom.’ He gestured to his left. ‘I’m afraid you can’t flush the paper. Just put it in the bin. I empty it all the time, so don’t worry.’ Nika wasn’t fussed. She’d already grown used to this arrangement. In a way it reminded her of home, when living in the country had necessitated the use of an outdoor toilet. For a long time her family hadn’t had any decent plumbing to speak of, but finally, at her mother’s insistence, they had a proper bathroom installed in their house. Nika remembered how her father had railed against such luxury and had only agreed to appease his wife. But, eventually, he stopped protesting about the vanity of such conveniences, as happy as the rest of them not to have to trudge outside in all weather to make their ablutions.

‘These two rooms are just junk mainly,’ Bruer went on, pointing to the other two doors. ‘We’ll have a look through them while you’re here. I’ve forgotten what’s in them really.’

At the end of the hall Bruer pushed open the last door.

‘This is, or was, my studio.’

The room was awash in sunshine, and it almost felt hotter in here than it had outside. On the wall to her left a window was thrown open, the curtains drawn aside to let in the desert air.

‘Don’t worry!’ Bruer said, seeing the sweat begin to emerge on Nika’s skin. ‘I know it’s hot right now, but that’s only because I was trying to air the place out. Tonight, when it cools down, the room will be nice, and then we’ll close up the curtains tomorrow and it’ll stay perfectly cool.’ He smiled, reassuring.

The ceiling here was higher than in the rest of the house, and it gave the room a sense of decadent space. Despite the heat, Nika already liked it; every available surface was decorated in trinkets and ornaments. There were paintings, oils, canvases,

shelves and shelves of statues and woodwork. Brushes were jammed in old jars thick with congealed paint, and the lingering smell of acrylic and turpentine pervaded everything. An empty easel rested by the open window with a pile of large grey stones stacked like a cairn beside it.

On the opposite side of the room, hemmed in by two tall chests of drawers and a tower of shelves, a mattress lay on the floor strewn with cushions and embroidered blankets. The fabric was a riot of geometric shapes and symbols, a mix of blues and purples and reds, with splashes of lace and silk on the bedclothes. It looked so inviting Nika longed to climb in and drift off to sleep, even in the stifling heat.

‘Sorry you’ll be on the floor. But it’s very comfortable. I used to sleep in here now and then.’

Bruer put her backpack at the end of the mattress and dropped her smaller bag onto a fat cushion.

‘This room is great!’ she said, peering at the odds and ends on the shelves. ‘Do you still work in here?’

‘Not for years. I mean, I still come in and tinker with things, but I mainly work on my sculptures these days, and they’re too big to do in here. I’m mainly in the workshop now.’ He pointed out the window towards the shed. At the same time, he must have seen something in her face that told him how tired she was because he paused, looking at her intently.

‘Would you like to take a rest? Have a nap or something? We’ve got all the time in the world.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, trying to stifle a yawn. ‘It was a very long trip.’

‘Of course! Take as long as you want. I’ll be out in the workshop if you need me. Otherwise, should I just wake you for dinner?’

‘That would be great, thank you.’

He stood awkwardly for a moment, patting at his pant pockets as though he was looking for something there. When he couldn’t think what it was he flashed her another smile and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Nika slipped off her sandals and went to the window, the tiled floor, a mosaic of orange and red diamonds, warm against her feet. The view here was the same as from the kitchen, straight onto the gleaming shed. She reached out to pull a heavy velvet curtain to darken the room, a layer of flimsy lace draping beneath it. Through the window she saw Bruer walking toward the workshop. He stopped at its door and turned back to look at the house. Nika, not quick enough to look away, caught Bruer’s gaze and she flinched, embarrassed to be caught watching him. But he simply raised his hand and gave a cheery wave. She returned the gesture as he turned and went into the shed. Yanking the curtain all the way across the frame, Nika shut herself from view and plunged into darkness.

EIGHT

Bruer had gone all out for dinner. There was salad and pasta and a bottle of red wine open on the table. When she came in, drowsy from her afternoon nap, he poured her a glass. She was sure he'd already noticed her swelling belly, but she took the glass gratefully, pleased to be offered the drink without question.

Pots were boiling on the stove and Bruer lifted a lid to stir the sauce, the smell of tomatoes and garlic filling the small space.

'I've already found you something,' he said, replacing the lid and wiping his hands on a tea towel. He was grinning wide as he went into the lounge, returning quickly with a roll of paper. He held it out to her and she reached for it tentatively, scared and excited all at once.

'Go on,' he nudged it towards her fingertips.

When her skin made contact with it she thought she felt a little bolt of lightning, some slight spark. So slight, in fact, maybe she hadn't really felt it at all. She knew this piece of paper belonged to Carver, that Carver herself had touched it and now, however many years later, she was touching it too, about to discover something wonderful.

She unrolled it carefully, revealing at first a few pencil lines and scribbles that grew as she unfurled it further, twisting and gathering into a face. A woman's face. Bruer pushed aside the dinner plates and glasses and brushed the table over with his hand, sanctifying it and making it clean for Nika to lay the picture down. Bruer sat

opposite her, catching the top corner of the paper and holding it flat to the table. She held the other end down very gently, almost tenderly, too awed to speak. Looking back at her was Lilith's face.

'One of her first preliminary sketches. It even has a date on the bottom,' he tapped his finger on the paper and Nika dragged her gaze to the spot, away from Lilith's eyes. Nineteen thirty-nine. In looping calligraphy beneath it was something else indecipherable.

'What does this say?' she asked, thinking at first it was written in Spanish. But Bruer shook his head and Nika looked closer. It wasn't Spanish, she realised, but Latin. Not only Latin: it was also written backwards, a modest, childish trick. Frustrated, she leaned closer, but she knew practically nothing about Latin, and had no recourse to look it up out here.

Et matres, ipsi pascentur.

'I *would* say she modelled her on Inez,' Bruer said, 'though of course that's impossible, because she'd already painted it before they'd even met. She looks like Inez to me anyway.'

'I don't know what Inez looks like,' Nika admitted. 'Do you have any pictures of her?'

Letting go of the top corners of the sketch, Bruer stood to find some. The paper furred back on itself, bumping against Nika's fingers. She re-rolled the picture neatly and followed Bruer into the front room where he began sifting through stacks of albums and tins on the bookshelf.

'I've got some photographs of us altogether,' he said over his shoulder. 'Oh, we were a great threesome, we were! Spent all our time together.' He pulled a thick book from a shelf and flipped through its pages. 'There's one in particular. It's a good

one.’ He frowned, not finding it where he’d expected it to be. ‘It’s in one of these here,’ he said, tossing the book aside and picking up another. ‘You put things in such a special spot you can never remember where you put them, right?’ As he flicked through another volume, his frown lifted and he held a picture aloft, triumphant. ‘Here it is!’

He handed it to her and she took it carefully by the edges, not wanting to muddy it with her fingerprints. The picture was in colour, the same grain of age as the photo she’d found of Bruer and Carver together in the archives in Mexico City. Then she realised that Bruer and Carver were standing in front of the same ivy covered trellis here, wearing the same lurid clothes as in that other photo... This one was taken on the same day, in the same place.

‘That was taken in seventy-two. I was twenty-one there. Not a bad looking kid, right?’

He leant in close, brushing against her to look at the picture over her shoulder.

‘That’s Inez there,’ he pointed to a woman she’d never seen before, standing to Bruer’s left. Her dark hair fell in waves, loose over her shoulders, and she stared out at Nika, unsmiling. Bruer stood in the middle, between her and Carver. Inez was shorter than both of them, and Carver was tallest of them all. Carver looked gaunt beside Inez, whose bright green low-cut summer dress revealed plump curves and brown skin. Looking closely at Inez’s face Nika could see what Bruer meant about the sketch. Hers were the same full dark lips and slightly hooded eyes.

‘That was a good year for me,’ Bruer went on. ‘I had my first proper solo exhibition, sold a few pieces too. Of course,’ he said, taking the picture from Nika to look closer at it himself, ‘none of that would’ve happened if it wasn’t for Leia. She

helped me out a lot, the same way Lyndall had helped her in the beginning, I suppose. I think because of that, she felt the need to pay it forward.'

He gave her back the photograph.

'You can keep that sketch,' he pointed toward the rolled paper in her other hand.

'Oh, no! I couldn't,' she protested on instinct, to be polite, but as soon as she'd declined she hoped that he'd insist.

'No. I want you to have it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course! I did find you something else as well.'

She followed him back into the kitchen, clutching the photograph and the sketch. She couldn't believe she was so lucky. The sketch was worth at least a few hundred dollars, but it was more important to her than that. She'd never dreamed she might own a real Carver original, and such a significant one, one that was another piece in the puzzle of *Lilith*. She wanted to shout for joy, but she didn't want Bruer to reconsider his offer. Suppressing her delight, she reached out to take a scrap of paper Bruer was holding out to her.

'I did some more digging for you and found that number. It's for the Lyndalls' place. I doubt they'd still have the painting. Would've sold a lot of their father's stuff after he died, I imagine, but you could give them a shot anyway.'

'That's amazing! Thank you so much.' She couldn't fight her smile anymore; instead she beamed wide at him, and slipped the piece of paper in with the rolled up sketch. Bruer hunted through some drawers until he found a couple of scraggly rubber bands to secure it with.

‘I’d forgotten all about a lot of stuff in there,’ he said, pointing to the hallway and its jam-packed storage rooms, ‘but I had a feeling I had something like that. Leia gave me one or two sketches; I haven’t found any others yet, but I’ll keep looking. I’m surprised I didn’t wake you, rummaging around. I made a lot of noise, knocking things over. You must be a heavy sleeper.’

He turned back to his pots on the stove and Nika excused herself to put her new treasures away, tucking them safely in her bag.

After dinner, they sat together at the kitchen table drinking more wine. She had brought out her wallet and was looking at the images on the pesos and centavos, asking Bruer to tell her who the faces were printed there. Bruer knew only a few, and was more interested in taking up the shiny Australian change she’d dumped out. The head of the English Queen on the back of each coin. The different animals on the obverse sides. Bruer was trying to name them all.

He picked up the twelve-sided shape of the fifty-cent piece.

‘Dodecagonal,’ Nika said, almost to herself. Practising the word.

‘Emu. Kangaroo,’ Bruer named the animals. ‘That has a pouch, right?’

‘Yeah, it’s where they keep their young. At home, if you hit one on the road, you’re supposed to get out and check in it in case they have a joey.’

‘Have you ever hit one?’

‘I hit a dog,’ she said, surprising herself with the admission. ‘On the road here in Mexico.’

Bruer didn’t reply. He was studying the coin intently. But now that she had said it she was stunned by the silence, by the lack of wrath and shame. She looked down at the table and suddenly, stupidly, felt like she was going to cry. She was all rising heat and panic. She kept her head down, willing the tears to stay away.

After another moment Bruer spoke.

‘So? I’ve hit a bunch of dogs. So’s everyone in Mexico.’

She didn’t trust herself to speak without crying.

‘Does it upset you?’ he asked, seeing that she was on the verge of tears.

She couldn’t even nod assent because she was too scared that moving her head would shake the tears loose.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it. There are worse things you can do than hit a dog.’

He put the coin down, picking up another smaller circular one.

‘I know this one too. It’s a platypus.’

It was clear Bruer didn’t care that she’d killed a dog. He wasn’t even vaguely interested. As she watched him studying the new coin the tide of her tears receded, as though she was never even going to cry in the first place. His lack of pity had extinguished her own. She looked at the embossed silver platypus, duckbill pointed down, webbed feet pressed back up along its sides.

‘Monotreme,’ Nika practised another word, and found she could speak without crying after all.

Bruer picked up the smallest coin but didn’t know what this one was called. He turned it to show her which animal he was holding.

‘That’s an echidna,’ she said. ‘Another monotreme. Those are the only two types in the world.’

‘I don’t know what that word means, mono...’ Bruer trailed off, looking closely at the curled, spikey ball of animal with its long snout.

‘It’s part mammal, part reptile.’

‘Like a woman,’ he said, smiling.

Nika snorted. This was the closest Bruer had come to making a joke and it chased away the last of her tears. But then, she thought, maybe he wasn't trying to be funny.

'E – kid – na,' he sounded it out to himself. 'Is that an Aboriginal word?'

'No. It's Greek.' She was pleased she knew this. 'It means mother of monsters.'

There was something else she could remember about monotremes, but she couldn't get the word right.

'They also just have one hole that they use for...' She paused, unsure how to proceed. She didn't want to talk like a child, but she was also suddenly shy, talking to this man about parts of the body that were secret, sexual. 'Umm, just one hole they use for defecating, urinating, birthing.' There. She'd said it. She'd used adult words to say these things. Clinical. 'It's called a coal... coacle.. cloec... cloac...' The word was lost to her. 'Something like that.' She shook her head, dismissing it.

Bruer raised an eyebrow, impressed by these strange creatures.

'What about the male ones? Do they just have holes? Or do they have dicks?'

Nika raised her eyebrows this time, shocked by the word escaping Bruer's mouth, the nonchalant way he had simply said it, almost vulgar, almost offensive.

'Umm. I don't know actually. I suppose they do. They must. Maybe it's just the females I'm talking about. I don't really know.'

'So the males would be having sex with the females in the one hole?'

Bruer leant in across the table towards her, his hand much too close to hers as he picked through the other coins, looking for more echidnas.

‘I guess so. I don’t really know.’ She picked up a ten-cent piece and held it out to him, changing the subject. ‘This one has a lyrebird on it. Do you know what that is?’

He took it from her, his fingers brushing against hers in the exchange. Nika shifted in her seat.

‘They can make noises that sound like other things, right?’

He already knew that. Uninterested, he put it down and picked up another echidna.

‘Do you have a lot of these where you live?’

‘Some. I’ve only ever seen one or two in the wild. Dead ones on the road too.’

‘They look like hedgehogs.’

‘A bit. They have quills. Protection.’

‘That’s clever. I suppose they need it.’

Nika gave a quick smile, had nothing more to add. She wanted to talk about something else. Bruer was unsettling her, although she was sure she was just being funny. Delicate.

She started plonking the coins back into her purse but kept a five-cent echidna out, handing it to him.

‘You can keep that one. It’s not worth much.’ As she said it she felt cheap.

‘Here, have one of each.’ She took out a fifty, a twenty, a ten, handing each one over in turn.

He took them gratefully, thanking her, and got up to find something to put them in. There was a small dish on the bench with loose change in it and he deposited them there.

‘I really appreciate you coming here,’ he said, looking out the kitchen window towards the workshop. ‘It’s nice to have some company.’ He turned back to her.

‘Would you like to see my workshop?’

She nodded, happy to change the topic.

Outside it had grown dark and the temperature had rapidly dropped. It wasn’t yet cool, but the night had grown balmy in that sweet spot of time just after dusk. The sky was cloudless, full of a multitude of stars, and it almost took her breath away, how clear and bright the sky could be. They walked the length of the short veranda in silence and crossed a dry gravel path to the shed. In the darkness it reared up as a huge black beast, hunched and imposing. Bruer slid back a bolt and the door swung open, crashing against the tin side with a bang.

He flipped a switch and a row of fluorescent lights flickered to life. Nika blinked against their brilliance as she stepped inside. Having stewed all day in the sun the tin shed was like an oven, its baking heat hitting her full in the face. Bruer switched on a tall pedestal fan. It blew out a metallic whir, but it did little to cool her down.

‘It gets pretty hot in here, as you can see, but I like it,’ he said.

Before dinner Nika had changed from her dress into a singlet and skirt, even throwing on a cardigan in the coolness of the house. Inside the adobe it had covered her enough and she’d felt fine, but now the heat was unbearable again, and she was forced to peel off the extra layer. Immediately she felt horribly exposed, the simple black singlet revealing her swollen breasts and straining belly. She hoped he hadn’t noticed, but she also knew that was wishful thinking. It was too late to hide it now.

As if responding to her thoughts, Bruer stared directly at her, his expression one of careful consideration. Under his gaze she wanted to turn away, to crawl under

the nearest table and hide, but she was caught in his blatant scrutiny, unable to move, frozen by the audacity of his gaze. Suddenly he spoke.

‘How far along are you?’

For a moment she couldn’t reply. If she spoke then she could no longer deny it. Speaking would make it real, and she’d tried for so long to pretend it wasn’t. But Bruer kept his eyes trained on her, expectant, waiting for her reply. Finally she cleared her throat.

‘I don’t really know,’ she offered with a shrug. It was the truth anyway.

She expected him to scoff, to wonder how a grown woman couldn’t even know her own pregnancy, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned away and began sifting through the bits and pieces on his workbench.

‘It might be hot in here but at least it gives me plenty of room to make a mess.’

Looking around Nika saw what he meant. There were more bits of scrap metal discarded on the floor. The shed was long and wide but there was barely any free space to walk. Everywhere was a jumble of objects. Brass mouldings, carved wooden blocks, limbs and faces and torsos pounded out of tin. The workbench sat in the middle, spanning almost the entire length of the room.

‘I’ve moved away from painting in the last few years. I prefer sculpting now. I like the fullness of things. I’m done with the two dimensional.’

Nika didn’t know what to say. She was mesmerised by the pieces of bodies lying about, like a butcher’s shop specialising in metal. In the centre of the workbench she saw a half-finished figure, already almost two metres high with its head still missing. From where she stood she could see it was a nude woman made entirely

from pressed sheets of copper. The firm curve of her rump and the deep sway of her back were all stitched together with golden rivets.

‘I’ve been working on that piece for a while now,’ Bruer said, leading her around the table to see it from the front. ‘I never quite seem to get it right. It’s like I’m always starting this one again.’

From this vantage Nika could see the figure’s coy pose, her legs pressed tightly together in a posture like a Greek sculpture, the v of her pubis starkly pronounced. Her hourglass waist scooped upwards towards full breasts, but her stomach was hollow with the front panel missing. Inside her empty body, a brass plated face stared out at Nika, suspended in the void and hanging in exactly the place where her womb should be. The figure’s arms were raised, holding her hands up to her headless neck with palms inwards, as though ready to cover the face that wasn’t there.

There was something shocking about the figure, and as Nika stood looking at it she suddenly felt a tumbling in her stomach, like waves roiling over each other, frothing at her insides.

‘Are you okay?’ Bruer asked. Nika realised her face must have betrayed her shock. She rearranged her expression into a smile.

‘Yes, fine. It’s just a very striking piece.’

She stepped back from it, as though to get a better view of it in full. But really she wanted to distance herself from its headless form, wondering if her proximity to the hollow womb of its torso had set her own aflutter.

‘I like using metal and carving out the moulds,’ Bruer continued. ‘This is stuff I can work on from pictures and from my mind. I haven’t done so much painting mainly because I haven’t had anyone to paint for so long.’

Nika tried to look interested, but she was increasingly conscious of the tumbling in her belly, the sensation of something turning.

‘Maybe while you’re here I could paint you?’ Bruer asked. Abruptly Nika’s stomach stopped again.

‘Sorry?’ she asked, wondering if she’d heard him correctly.

‘I could paint you,’ he repeated. ‘You could pose for me.’

She almost laughed at this, thinking he might have been trying to make a joke, but when he neither smiled nor laughed she realised he must have been serious.

‘I don’t think so,’ she replied cautiously.

‘Why not? As long as you’re here?’

‘What would you want to paint me for?’ She was genuinely confused. There was nothing about her, she knew, that could inspire an artist’s hand. She was no artist’s muse, especially now that her body was expanding. As she stood wondering at his offer, he reached out as though to brush her hair from her face, as if the movement might be enough to answer her question. Instinctively she stepped back to avoid the contact. But Bruer said nothing, not apologising for the unwanted gesture, barely acknowledging her retreat, as though her pulling away barely even registered. He simply cocked his head to one side, appraising her.

‘I think you’d make a lovely model. Pregnant nudes are always very striking.’

Nika stifled a gasp, horrified that he should imagine her this way.

‘No, no thank you. I wouldn’t want to be naked. No. Definitely not.’

He was looking at her with an altogether different expression, slouched into a stance of deliberation, hands thrust into his pockets after she’d flinched away, as if to keep himself from attempting to touch her again. He had shifted into some artist’s mode that seemed separate from the rest of him, calculating and cold, his lips pressed

thin and tight, brow creased in thought. But then, just as quickly, he straightened and settled his mouth back into a friendly smile, composing himself.

‘Well, I’ll work on changing your mind.’ He winked at her.

He continued showing her around the workshop as if nothing had happened, but she was unsettled, both by her own body’s eruptions and Bruer’s strange manner. As he carried on, edging carefully around the workbench to pick things up for her inspection, she thought again about beauty. Wasn’t that what she’d wanted? To be painted? Hadn’t she wondered time and again what it took to be worthy of being immortalised? But then, that was the problem. She didn’t want to be remembered like this, with this body and this version of herself. And at any rate, it wasn’t *her* Bruer seemed to value. He’d made no comment on her beauty. It was the condition of her body that he wanted. Not her.

He showed her some smaller pieces, both male and female forms, but as he walked her around the space the sensation in her belly grew again, building steadily. There was a pulsing quiver, and she knew she was feeling the thing inside her move for the first time. She tried to concentrate on what Bruer was saying but the movement, so foreign and unbidden, consumed her thoughts. In an effort to appear interested in what he was saying, she smiled and nodded, asking the occasional question until eventually the sensation stopped and she was herself once more. But Bruer must have sensed her discomfort because he soon suggested they return inside and say goodnight.

Later in bed, as she tried to sleep, it started up again. Lying down, the feeling was stronger, more like a flicking, a kicking. Even rolling into different positions didn’t make her any more comfortable. Briefly it would stop, then just as quickly came another jab, short and certain, as she began to drift off. All night she slept badly,

waking between dreams of faces swiftly forgotten. She dreamt she could hear Bruer in the next room moving boxes.

It was only the third time in her life she'd slept in a house listening to the noises of a man other than her father. In her moments of lucid wakefulness she thought about what it was like to live with Lydia and her father in Sydney, but she also remembered those times she'd stayed with them as a girl, their rambling house in the country with its deep return veranda and its high, cool ceilings. Her and Lydia always giggling about nothing and dreaming up futures for themselves. Who would they be? What would they do? Nika would never have suspected she would make it this far, halfway across the world, under a strange man's roof. Nika remembered those sleepovers at Lydia's as special occasions that were rarely allowed, only for birthdays or Christmases, and how one morning she awoke in her sleeping bag on the floor of Lydia's room to find Lydia gone.

Stalking down the hallway, Nika found Lydia and her father tucked up under a blanket on the couch, whispering in soft, happy voices. Nika stood in the doorway staring until Lydia noticed her.

'You got up early,' Nika said, and immediately regretted the peevish note in her voice.

'Been here since the sun came up,' Lydia's father replied, flashing his best smile.

She would be careful to get up early too, she remembered thinking. Remembered deciding that next time she'd be there on the couch as well.

Memories, combined with the alien sensation in her gut, kept her half-awake all night, and she slipped in and out of consciousness to the imagined sounds of Bruer's nocturnal movements. When she did sleep, she dreamt in Spanish, but when

she woke she couldn't recall if it really was Spanish or merely some imagined version: a higgledy-piggledy mess that had merely sounded legitimate. There was no way for her to ever really know.

NINE

She spent the next day helping Bruer sort through the junk piled high in one of the spare rooms. Despite the heat of the day, Bruer pushed aside the curtains to open the window, letting in air and sun the room wouldn't have seen in years. Puffs of dust caught in her nose and throat, and spindly spiders scuttled into corners and under boxes, disturbed by the intrusion. There was little room to move, but Bruer shuffled cartons around, stacking things on a chest of drawers that stood in a corner, until he'd cleared a path for her to sit in an old rattan chair, brushing away the cobwebs that crosshatched its arms and back. She was pleased to have some distance between them, remembering the discomfort of his proximity the night before.

Sifting through a jumble of papers and books, Bruer handed her snippets of documents, magazines, pictures. He dredged up some old school books, which he seemed utterly amazed to have kept. Even more remarkable were the stacks of letters from old girlfriends. Bruer was enchanted with these relics, amusing himself by reading them aloud to Nika. She wasn't sure why, but there was something unnerving in Bruer's intimacy, in the way he happily read out intimate details from past loves. There seemed to be a never-ending stack of these missives that appeared at the bottom of boxes or pressed inside albums and notebooks. She kept hoping he'd turn up some letters from Carver, something that would confirm or refute the notion they'd been lovers, but when she finally plucked up the courage to ask if they'd ever corresponded he shook his head.

‘We never wrote to each other,’ he said, leaving it at that. But he wanted her to understand that he’d been a real ladies’ man, so he gathered up more letters to show her.

‘I had quite a few *chicas* on the go over the years,’ he said with a wink. ‘Though I never married. I wasn’t great at settling down. Commitment. That sort of thing.’

Nika didn’t want to be rude, but she also didn’t want to spend all her time talking about Bruer’s love life. Instead, she tried to change the topic, asking him instead about Carver’s married life.

‘Did you ever meet Carver’s husband?’

Bruer stooped to pick up another pile of letters before he answered.

‘He was still alive when I was young but he never came to our house in New York. By the time I’d moved back to Mexico and she’d started taking me under her wing he’d passed away.’

When he didn’t offer anything more Nika understood that this was as much as he was going to say on the matter, at least for now. But Nika didn’t really mind. She already knew about Carver’s husband. He’d died of cancer in the fifties, leaving Carver widowed and childless. She’d never remarried, and went on to support herself completely with her art. In some ways, Nika thinks, Carver’s husband was almost a blip in her life, marriage something she’d tried on briefly and found ill-fitting. She wondered at the gap in age between Carver and Bruer. There would have been at least twenty years between them, but that wouldn’t have necessarily stopped them from becoming lovers. When she thought of the photograph of them together – Bruer young and handsome, Carver older, slimmer, but still graceful, stately even, a commanding presence no matter how much older than him she might have been – she

realised it was entirely probable they *had* been lovers, especially now that Nika was finding out so much about Bruer's seemingly endless appetite for women.

As they sifted through the memorabilia of Bruer's life, he asked again if she'd like to model for him. He was becoming insistent, demanding clear reasons for her saying no. She felt almost threatened by the accusatory way he questioned her reluctance.

'I'd just rather not,' she said again, feebly.

She ventured an argument that she didn't want to be painted in her 'condition', feeling the oddity of acknowledging it to him, but he still wouldn't accept her objection, despite the pain it took her to make it. In fact, he thought the fullness of her body presented even more of a reason to paint it.

'Pregnant women glow,' he insisted, waving an arm at her as if to suggest she emitted some kind of radiance even now.

Nika didn't feel like she was glowing. If anything she felt like she was dimming, retreating further into herself, trying ever harder to hide. But it clearly wasn't working; she caught Bruer looking at her more than once with an assessing eye. She tried to ignore it, pretending she was as invisible as she wanted to feel.

She finally escaped his gaze when, in the afternoon, she was forced to rest. She had reached a point where she could barely keep her eyes open and simply sat in the heat doing nothing, so she excused herself and went to her room at the back of the house. She was disappointed; she couldn't pretend she wasn't. All morning she'd hoped to turn up another sketch, a letter from Carver or a photograph, anything that pointed to the painter's life or work. Instead she's spent her day to taking a tour through Bruer's litany of lovers. She felt cheated. But she knew she was being

peevish; after all, hadn't he given her the sketch? And she had that to keep. That was worth all the trouble of coming here already.

But that night over dinner, as Bruer grew increasingly intoxicated, Nika found herself wondering yet again if it had been wise to come here after all. This time there was no wine but Bruer made his way steadily through a bottle of whiskey. He drank it neat, knocking it back in great gulps, and he was already onto his fourth by the time he shakily poured Nika her second. She was grateful, once again, that he served her without question, and she decided it was as good an opportunity as any to ask him about his painting in the Gallery of Modern Art.

'Can I ask you something?' she began, sitting opposite him at the kitchen table after clearing away the dinner dishes.

'Shoot.'

'In the Gallery of Modern Art there's one of your paintings. *Caballeros*. And it's just that...' Now that she'd started she didn't quite know how to phrase it. 'It's just that it looked... unfinished. Well, no,' she corrected herself, 'not unfinished. It looked like there was something there that had been erased maybe. From the background. Another figure?'

'What do you mean?' He wouldn't meet her eye, staring instead at the glass in his hand, spinning it slowly, watching the liquid sluice inside.

'Well, there's the line of men in the foreground, but then there seemed to be a shadow — a ghost, maybe — of another figure in the background.'

He continued to stare at his glass. She couldn't tell if he was waiting for her to go on, considering his answer, or simply not listening.

'Another man, perhaps?' she prompted. 'But kind of skeletal. Looking over everyone else's shoulders.'

Bruer's silence made her regret having said anything. She sank back into her chair, resolved to let the whole thing drop when he finally spoke.

'Paintings can be funny things,' he said quietly, still not meeting her gaze. 'Reflections. Little tricks of light.'

Of course. That was what Torres had said too. A trick of the light. She gave a short laugh, embarrassed by her own imagination.

'It's funny isn't it? What we think we see sometimes?' She shook her head, trying to rid herself of the image she'd seen. To put it out of her mind, she tried to engage Bruer again in conversation.

'Can I ask you another question?'

'Sure.' He sat upright, suddenly enthusiastic. The drunker he got the more wildly his moods fluctuated. One moment he was lively and animated, the next he was silent and insular. Wanting to make the most of her time in the desert with him she decided to keep asking questions anyway, to probe as much as she could while she had the chance. She forged ahead.

'If your mother knew so many amazing artists in New York,' she ventured, 'why would you want to move to be with your father?'

'That's a good question! A very astute question!' He was talking with his glass now, flinging his hand about while whiskey slopped on the table. Then, just as quickly, he became reflective, his sudden gusto gone.

'She wasn't the easiest person in the world to live with, my mother.'

He looked straight at Nika, smiled wickedly and tipped the tumbler towards her as if in salute.

'One too many drinks.'

Nika couldn't tell if he was talking about himself or his mother, but she lifted her own whiskey to meet his. They connected with a dull chink and she took a sip, feeling it sting the back of her throat.

Bruer propped his head on the palm of his hand, watching the tawny liquid swirl around.

'You shouldn't be drinking,' he said suddenly.

She was taken aback. What business was that of his? After all, he was the one who'd been pouring.

'A few won't hurt,' she replied.

'You haven't said much about it.' He tried to point at her, tipping his glass at the same time, spilling another puddle onto the table.

'There's not much to say.'

'Is it a boy or a girl?'

'I don't know.'

'Don't you want it?'

There was an edge of cruelty in his voice that surprised her.

'Excuse me?'

'You haven't said much about it. Don't seem very excited.'

He seemed to be almost glaring at her now, locking his eyes on hers from under a furrowed brow.

'It's personal,' she snapped back.

'I've told you some personal things,' he responded, a hint of reproach in his voice. 'Why'd you get pregnant if you didn't want it?'

Nika glared back at him. She couldn't answer. She didn't know how to answer a question like that.

‘I don’t understand women,’ Bruer went on, seeming suddenly sober. ‘Why wouldn’t you want a child? What’s so wrong about children? Why do some women even *bother* getting pregnant? Take my mother, for example...’ He trailed off. As he spoke he pushed his drink back and forth across the table, scratching the surface, the crystal squealing against the laminate. He was working himself up to say something more, but Nika wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it.

When he was ready he stopped, flicked the glass. The *ting* of it resonated in the silence between them.

‘Why didn’t you get rid of it then?’

Now that he had asked it he wouldn’t look away. It was clear he wanted to intimidate her, his real nature coming to the surface, but Nika found she was bolder than she thought, holding his gaze and refusing to flinch beneath his scrutiny. When she finally answered she spoke slowly, articulating her words to make sure he understood.

‘It’s not that easy to just ‘get rid of it’.’

‘Isn’t it? Sure it is! In this day and age.’ He snorted, feigning bafflement. Nika could see he was enjoying himself, wanting her to fight back, to argue, to justify herself. ‘Or did you know too late? Or can’t you do it? Good little Catholic girl?’ He pointed to the pendant hanging from her neck. She clutched at it instinctively, clasping it as though to hide it from his view.

‘I thought as much. Good Catholic girl can’t get rid of it, but doesn’t know what to do with it. God forbid you should just decide to want it! I had a little girl once,’ he blurted out suddenly, unburdening himself to her. ‘I loved her, I really loved her. *I* wanted her. Even if Inez didn’t.’

‘Inez?’ Nika repeated the name automatically, without thinking.

‘We had a little girl and *I* loved her.’

He was talking in past tense and it occurred to her that this must be the child Torres had mentioned, the one Inez had lost, that had drowned long after Inez had painted her own version of La Llorona’s myth. But she hadn’t expected Bruer to be the father. She’d thought it was Carver he’d had the relationship with, and yet all this time she’d been wrong. It was Inez who Bruer had loved. She waited for him to say more, but he fell silent, as though he regretted having told her this much. After a pause he swung the glass of whiskey to his mouth so recklessly it clashed against his teeth. He drained the glass and then smacked it down hard.

‘I keep telling you things, but you don’t tell me much, do you?’

‘I don’t have much to tell,’ she countered.

‘You don’t want to tell. You just keep quiet. Why didn’t your husband come with you to Mexico?’

‘I don’t have a husband.’

‘Well, whoever the father is? Why didn’t he come with you?’

He was getting worked up, sneering the question and interrogating her. She wanted to change the subject, turn it back to Bruer and discover the truth of what happened with Inez. She knew she needed to stay calm and keep Bruer onside. Becoming defensive about her own life was only making him angrier. So she decided to placate him by offering him a lie.

‘He couldn’t get time off work,’ she said simply, shrugging her shoulders to show that it simply couldn’t be helped. It was better to tell him something simple and stop his curiosity. He grunted, seeming to accept her answer.

‘Were you and Inez married?’ she said, trying to steer him back to his own story.

‘I was only twenty-two. She was twenty years older than me. How would that look? She didn’t want a baby at her age. Never meant for it to happen. But I wanted her.’

‘What happened?’ She wanted to know for sure if what Torres had told her about Inez drowning was true, but he already seemed to be building up the strength to say it.

‘She drowned. Both of them drowned.’

He was calmer for admitting it, all his ferocity gone. Nika could see it was a false sobriety, but she sat quietly waiting for him to say more.

‘Drowned in the river. Drowned, drowned, drowned... everyone drowned... Everyone drowned but me.’

‘I didn’t know,’ Nika said, hoping it formed some kind of apology. A minute before she’d been starting to loathe Bruer, his brusque cross-examination, but now all she felt was pity.

He pushed his empty glass away and leant across the table, folding his arms and laying his head on the cushion they made.

‘Of course you didn’t know! Why would you know that?’ His voice was muffled, dull. ‘You’re all reptiles. All you women. Just fucking reptiles. You come out and sun yourselves on the rocks and you’re warm for a while, long enough for a man to want to love you, and then you’re cold again. Fucking reptiles.’

To Nika’s horror, he began to sob.

She left him there, crying into his folded arms, and went to her room, discarding her dress and changing into a loose t-shirt. She put her ear against the door but she couldn’t hear anything. Everything was still in the breezeless desert outside, while inside the house ticked and settled around her. Quiet, she tried to hear if Bruer

was still crying. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep there with his head on the table. She hoped he was drunk enough to forget all this in the morning.

#

The rattle of the door handle woke her. She lay still, listening in the dark.

For a few minutes there was no other sound but she still held her breath, convinced there'd been something. Her heart was pounding fast even though she tried to reason with it to slow down.

She had her back to the door and she knew, logically, that she should just roll over and look. There was enough moonlight through the lace curtains to render shapes in the near darkness, but she couldn't compel herself to move and risk the noise the blankets would make, the sound of her body shifting in the sheets, so she lay perfectly still.

Then she heard it again, quite clearly this time. It was the door handle's slow orbit, the faint sound of its bolt sliding from the recess and then there was silence again. An agonising wait until she heard his hand releasing the brass, his flat palm against the wood, pushing the door inwards.

She wanted to convince herself he'd come for some other reason, that he was simply creeping in to find some misplaced tool, some item he needed for a late-night session of melancholic sculpting inspired by nostalgia and drink. She already knew that wasn't true, yet still she couldn't move. If she rolled over she might startle him, or give herself time to find something to shield herself with.

And then his footsteps began, careful and measured. She knew he was listening for her breathing, trying to decide if she was asleep or feigning it. He was

inching towards the bed, and she tried to convince herself she didn't know what he was coming for, even though it was perfectly plain. Was she this passive, she wondered? Was she just going to keep lying there, waiting? She closed her eyes, as if the pretence of slumber might vanquish him.

When he sank onto the mattress, it was like the rolling of a wave.

In one quick movement she braced her arm and pushed herself up, hard and fast. But she'd left it too late, and in a flash he was on her, pushing her back down, his legs across hers, pinning them. She kicked at the sheets but they only twisted up beneath her feet. She wanted to speak, to scream, but her voice failed her, she could only manage short pathetic chokes, she couldn't even gasp out 'no'. She couldn't believe this was happening, that her voice was lost to her. Mutiny! She wanted to cry. Traitor! At the same time she wondered why she was thinking such useless thoughts *right now*.

Her voice may have failed, but her legs, her arms, the rest of her, was fighting, fighting hard. She was barely conscious of her body's efforts, as though it and her mind belonged to separate beings. She slapped his arm away, grabbed his fingers as they closed around her wrist. He squeezed so tight she thought her bones would snap. He breathing was ragged. Like her, he said nothing.

She hit at his face and he deflected her. They were grappling like feral dogs in an alley, snapping and struggling, trying to get free of each other's grip. She reared and bucked as he tried to pull away the covers that swaddled her, and as he wrestled with the sheets she managed to writhe out from under him, scrambling off the mattress and onto the floor.

Pedalling her legs behind her, she tried to land her feet on the tiles, tried to stand, but he was on her again, this time pushing her flat on her swollen stomach,

climbing onto her back. He tugged at her underpants, hauling her sideways, flipping her onto her back. In the dimness she couldn't see his face, only the shifting outline of his head and shoulders, a slick black silhouette. She knew she was nothing to him but darkness, a faceless thing. Nothing but shadow.

He swiped her thrashing arms away as though they were merely the buzzing of flies. She bucked feebly, rapidly losing strength, tiring from the fight. Rallying, she slapped at the ground, searching for something, anything to grab onto, a weapon, a paintbrush, *anything*. She grazed the patterned floor tiles, cool and smooth and useless beneath her grasping fingers, until her hand collided, joyously, with the pile of stones beside the easel. The standing stones. The prayer stones. Markers that reminded her that she was here. *She was here.*

She knocked the pile with her fist, sent the stones tumbling. She snatched the nearest one, so big and heavy her small fingers couldn't quite close around it. But she hefted it anyway, knowing its weight was right. It was exactly the same weight as his body; exactly the same weight as the part of her that would not let this happen. Precisely the same weight as fear, but also of courage. As she swung it towards him he was so preoccupied, so dog-on-heat mesmerised, that he didn't see it coming until it was already connecting with the side of his skull.

He slumped sideways from her body.

She clambered to her knees, scuttling away from him. Writhing on his side, he moaned, making some awful wet gasping sound. Nika imagined spittle and blood and she crawled cautiously forward, the stone still in her hand, to see what she'd done to him.

'You bitch,' he murmured, 'you bitch.'

His face was still the same black oval of indistinguishable features, and hers must have looked the same to him. They were two faceless black holes staring at each other, seeing nothing of each other.

He spat and some unseen wetness struck her shoulder.

‘You fucking bitch!’

He tried to rise, struggling to his feet and lunging, but she sidestepped his floundering arm. All her bravado fell away. She’d struck him as hard as she could and he was still coming for her. He was slow, groggy, one hand clutching his head, but he was shuffling forward, unstoppable. She spun around and bolted from the room, tugging the door shut behind her.

The hall was dark and she swiped at a switch on the wall, desperate for light to chase away the terror, blinking and stunned in the sudden brightness. Behind her, Bruer had reached the door and was scratching at it like a dog, slowed by pain. Nika ran to the bathroom, slammed the door and pushed the bolt home. She fumbled for the nearest switch, chasing back more shadows, but the flimsy lock wouldn’t be enough to keep him out, it wasn’t enough to make her feel safe, so she grabbed the edge of a squat linen cabinet and dragged it heavily across the door. Then she flipped down the lid of the toilet and sat, rocking frantically to and fro. Looking down she saw the rock still firmly clasped in her hand, a trace of blood on one curved end. There was blood on her shirt and hands as well. Other wetnesses too.

A thump at the door made her start. Bruer was trying the handle, turning it violently, pushing hard, but he couldn’t get in. She could hear his laboured breathing; he was weakening, dazed and sore. After a while there was silence. He’d either gone away or collapsed, Nika didn’t know which.

Behind her was a window, too small and high for him to get in from outside. She was safe for now. The wastebasket beside the toilet reeked of human waste and she buried her face in her shirt, covering her nose and mouth. Soon enough it wouldn't seem to stink so much; she'd become accustomed to it like all bad smells. Slipping off the toilet she pulled towels and blankets from the cabinet, making a nest on the hard tiles. She curled up there, clutching the rock to her chest while she listened for noises, for Bruer's return. But the only sound was a faint squealing that started up in her left ear and became a swell of pressure before a pop. Momentarily deaf, the world was noiseless, and then the night returned to her slowly. The rasp of her own breathing. The occasional drip of the tap.

For a long time she lay there before the turning in her gut began once more, building as the life inside her railed against the exertion it had taken to struggle free of Bruer. She shut her eyes tight against the world and fought back tears. Outside her shelter, the house was still.

TEN

At some point, the world outside the high frosted window shifted from black to navy to a grey-blue that suggested it was morning. She was stiff from lying on the floor with her body curled in the same position all night. The stone was close to her outstretched arm. She sat up and listened, but couldn't hear anything. Now that the day was dawning she knew the next thing she had to do was leave the room and find a way out of the house. The thought of doing that made her palms sweat.

She stood and went to the basin, splashing water on her face and down the front of her bloodied shirt. She wiped at the clammy skin between her thighs. If Bruer was still out there he would have heard her by now. He would know she was up. She knew she wouldn't fit through the window any more than he would, even if she could climb up to it in her state. There was no other way out than the same way she'd come in.

Dragging the cabinet away from the door, legs screeching on the tiles, would alert him, she knew, if nothing else did. If he wasn't already lying dead out in the hallway. With the cabinet out of the way she pressed her ear against the doorframe and listened for signs of movement. Everything was quiet.

She began to unlock the door and then stopped, thinking she should arm herself before venturing out. The rock still lay where she'd left it and there was little

else to use as a weapon. She picked it up again, holding it tight, and finished unlatching the door.

There was no one on the other side. Bruer wasn't there, as she'd half expected him to be, slumped and unconscious, or else dead, murdered by her hand. But worse than this, she didn't know where he was, a reality more alarming than the prospect of having killed him. The hall light was still on, but there was other light too, a faint morning glow creeping in from her bedroom where the door was flung wide, but also from the kitchen on her right. She turned towards it.

Gathering all her courage, she moved cautiously forward. Despite all her bravery she couldn't stifle her scream at the sight of Bruer waiting for her there, seated at the table. And yet, even still, she was somehow relieved to have broken the silence with the sound of her own voice.

Bruer's face was grey, and it wasn't an effect of the weak morning sun that made it so. It was a greyness coming from the inside, from pain and a loss of blood. Some of that blood was pasted down the left side of his face and neck and onto his shirt. His hair jutted up in clotted tufts above his ear. He blinked sluggishly at her, like a drunk trying to act sober and compose himself.

'I would've cleaned myself up,' he drawled, 'but you were in the bathroom.'

It was such an absurd thing to say, and she imagined him sitting there all night putting that together, thinking up some clever comment, while his head throbbed and ached. She wondered if she'd fractured his skull, he looked so awful. Whatever she'd done, it was something irredeemable.

'Now,' he said, slowly and deliberately, articulating his words. 'You can get out.'

'What?' She was as stunned by her own question as she was by his command.

‘You can get the hell off of my property. You can get out.’

For the first time she noticed that her bag was sitting on the floor by the table, loosely packed, with her shirts and dresses flopped over the open zip.

‘That’s your shit there and you can take it.’

‘But your head...?’ She said this with concern, feeling like an idiot as soon as the words left her mouth. What could she do now for him, having inflicted the wound herself?

‘You can fuck off,’ he slurred. It was the first time he’d sworn at her, and he spat the curse out, flecks of saliva flying in the morning light and coming to rest on the little blue table.

‘But...’ She couldn’t finish the thought; she didn’t even know what to say. If she left him like this what would happen to him? Perhaps he’d call someone for help. Perhaps he’d die.

She stared motionless at him until he pushed back his chair and wobbled to his feet. She took a cautious step back and lifted the stone as though to throw it at him. But it was a useless gesture of defence because now Nika saw that the whole time they’d been speaking Bruer had been hiding a rifle on his lap beneath the table. He was lifting it now, unsteadily, and aiming it at her.

‘Get out,’ he said again and she dropped her arm, but not the rock.

She moved around the table without looking away from him and he kept the muzzle of the rifle trained on her. When she reached her bag she hesitated, scared to bend down to it and take her eyes off the gun. For a second Bruer’s aim faltered; he teetered forward then righted himself, and Nika seized the moment to stoop to her bag, dropping the rock inside with her things and gathering them up to her chest. Then she backed away, eyes once more on the rifle. He didn’t move to follow her and she

stepped through the archway into the front room, clutching her bag but freeing one arm to feel about for the wall, for the furniture. She walked backwards across the entire length of the front room, not trusting herself to take her eyes away. But again, he didn't follow, and soon her back collided with the door. She fumbled for the handle and, grasping it, tore her eyes from the archway, pulling the door open and rushing out into the growing day.

#

Later she wondered whether or not he would have done it. Whether or not Bruer was any more capable of shooting her than she was of finishing him off with the rock while he lay bleeding. He'd wanted one thing from her, and she wondered what he thought would happen afterwards. If he'd even thought that far ahead. The chances of her going to the police were slim, they both knew that. After all, how many times had she been warned about going to the police in Mexico? It was hard to for her to know who to trust.

She stoked the fire with more of her clothes, sifting and sorting, deciding what she could still keep and carry. What was most important? She'd brought so many unnecessary things and she had to lighten her load. It was too hard to walk lugging the burden of her whole life crammed in her backpack.

She'd been walking since dawn. When she escaped the house she'd briefly considered taking Bruer's car, and had run to where it sat under the guajillo trees, its metallic body gleaming in shafts of morning sun. But when she'd tugged at the handles, the steel cold against her skin, they were firmly locked. And then she'd heard

something inside, Bruer's footsteps across the kitchen floor, something banging and his raised voice cursing, so she'd simply started running.

She ran east in the beginning, towards the rising sun, and when she turned back, over and over again, to see if Bruer followed, there was nothing but her own long silhouette stretched out across the ground. She stopped for only as long as it took to pull clothes from her bag, yanking a skirt and her shoes on hastily, zipping the rest of her belongings away. He didn't come after her.

She tried to get her bearings, to locate the highway, but before long she was hopelessly lost. She'd run too far, too frantic to pay attention. She tried following the course of the sun, turning back in the direction she'd come, but she didn't recognise anything. Completely disoriented, she wandered aimlessly. The hills on the horizon kept changing so she knew she was making progress, but towards what or where she didn't know. Every step was filled with the dread that a scorpion or snake would strike out from the scrub, but she saw no living thing all day except for ants and a few vultures circling far above. The landscape was at times rocky, sometimes covered in thorny shrubs, sometimes spiked with cactus or flowering weeds. As the sun grew higher she pulled a creased broad brimmed hat and a long sleeve shirt from her bag, trying to protect herself from the beating sun even as she sweltered in so many layers. She wondered what Bruer was doing back at the house. Had he called for help?

As the day wore on her energy flagged and she was constantly forced to rest. At least she no longer felt sick; her belly was quiet, for now. She negotiated colonies of fire ants that swarmed the desert floor, and she wondered about succumbing to such a fate, stripped down to the bone by a million tiny mouths. If someone found her skeleton, bleached and picked clean, would they also find another skeleton inside her, in the place between her ribs and pelvis?

Her bag quickly wore on her shoulders, and she resolved to rid herself of whatever she didn't need. When she'd walked the whole day and the sky began to darken, she knew she needed to find a place to make a fire. The night would be unforgivingly cold.

Towards sunset she saw something that, for a moment, filled her with hope. At first all she saw was a dead tree, and she'd seen plenty of those already. But there was something else close by it, something too straight and upright to be natural: a pole, sticking up out of the ground. She ran to it as fast as she could, burdened by her bag and her heavy body. It was the first mark of human presence she'd seen since leaving Bruer's. But that was all it was. An old pole wedged in the ground, nothing more.

Extending from it in a cross were faint tracks, the crossroads distinguishable only because the earth was recessed here, a slight depression marking out the roads. To Nika's frustration each road on the compass point dwindled to nothing when she followed it a little way, and she was forced to turn around and go back to the pole to try another. By then, the day was dwindling, and she knew she couldn't go much further before darkness fell. She would need to settle down for the night, so she collected a few dry tumbleweeds, snapped branches and twigs from the tree, and made herself a fire that she'd been feeding for hours since with her clothes and all the flammable bits and pieces from her life.

Long ago she'd learnt to be the kind of person to have matches, needle and thread, Band-Aids, all those little things ready to go in the bottom of her bag. Her mother was a practical woman who lived like a scout, always believing in the importance of being prepared for anything. They'd had a cupboard of preserved jams and fruits and fermenting vegetables that her mother always seemed to be making; growing up in the dark forests of snowy European mountains made her squirrel goods

away for long winters that never came to the part of the world she'd found herself in. Yes, their country winters grew cold and wet and miserable, but the ground rarely hardened with frost, and the community was sufficiently close to the nearest big town to allow some complacency. Her mother hoarded these things all the same, ancestral habits dying hard. Nika's father encouraged such prudence, seeing in it Christian foresight and holiness. Nika learned early that she should never waste a thing but find a use for it whatever it might be. A stray rubber band, a solitary thumbtack, a discarded piece of string.

She went through her pack, putting aside what was essential. Everything else she tossed into the fire. Her shorts, most of her t-shirts. None of them fit her anymore anyway. It was so much easier than she could have imagined to get rid of all these things, all the trinkets and junk that was supposed to remind her daily who she was. Her makeup compact twisted and curled in blue flames amid bits of cloth and she thought about how Lydia had insisted she start wearing makeup when they'd begun uni together, how before that, back at home, her father had forbid it. She was glad to be rid of it. It had never suited.

Her bag was rapidly emptying and from the bottom she produced the sketch of Lilith, along with the Lyndalls' phone number. She set them side carefully; she'd been through too much to lose them. When she was back in civilisation, she thought, she would call the Lyndalls, resume her mission. She wouldn't let someone like Bruer ruin everything, not now that she had come so far.

From a pocket of her bag she fished out the article she'd taken from the plane, trying to read it by the glow of the fire. She knew now why the cover had caught her attention, because it was Lyndall who had built the jungle garden it referred to. She'd heard of it before in her studies: a labyrinth of surrealist sculptures strewn through the

dense foliage and greenery of a mountainside jungle. The article showed glimpses of it, a few small pictures, but the work of translating what it said was too hard so she tore the magazine to pieces and threw them in the flames.

If her father could have seen her he would have likened her to a Bible story, a prophet lost in the wilderness, though she felt more like those women in old classics, the ones her mother read surreptitiously, distilling the stories down sometimes for Nika at bedtime, adding them to the clandestine fairy tales she told with the bedside lamp dimmed and her father in the other room. She was like those women, all alone, who stumbled along the moors, forced to scramble through the bracken and heath, searching wildly for the man's house that would save them, a beckon that might lead them towards redemption, towards salvation. But she knew that wasn't going to happen. There was no path to follow here but her own.

It felt like she was returning in time, moving backward into a land of wild desert plains roamed by scalp-hunters and cowboys and dusty pilgrims. Would she play the part of wild woman? Prostitute? First settler? What was she now if not her own myth?

She'd staked out a patch of earth and swept it clear with her hand, wary of things that could pierce and bite. Pressing her half empty bag against the tree trunk, she leant against it and stared into the fire.

Above, the sky was crisp and clear, full of nothing but stars and the universe spinning. She'd put on practically every layer of clothing she hadn't burnt and this, along with the little fire, would have to see her through until morning. She struggled against drowsiness, scared to let her guard down in the night air, but her body ached and soon her eyes grew heavy, closing, sending her off to sleep, vulnerable and lost in the middle of nowhere.

ELEVEN

The sound of a woman crying woke her. A sobbing and heaving right beside her.

When she opened her eyes she was surprised to see she was completely alone, and the sound of the woman's weeping abruptly ceased. She wiped at her face, finding her own cheeks wet with tears. Perhaps it had been the sound of her own crying that had roused her? Or was it the tail end of a dream?

The world was awash in the blush of pre-dawn, the sun not yet visible on the horizon. She shivered and sat up, stiff and sore from sleeping on the ground, and she reached out to stir the embers in the fire with a stick. It flared a little, catching on the remnants of last night's sacrifice, and she tried to warm herself by it.

She'd slept fitfully, waking at the faintest noise or the slightest gust of air, her body jerking, muscles spasming every time she snapped to attention or drifted off again. Even as she mopped at her wet face she wondered if it really had been her own tears that had woken her; the noise had seemed to come from beyond her. She could almost swear she'd felt a presence beside her, breathing in her ear.

But now she was alone, there was no doubting that, and as she looked about the brightening desertscape she felt utterly desolate. She couldn't remember what had driven her to weep in her sleep, but awake, solitary, she began to cry now, the memory of Bruer's attack flooding back. Yesterday, even last night, she had kept the memory at bay as she forged ahead, but now she could no longer ignore it. She wept

for herself then, shameless, ugly tears. She let out a heaving cry and covered her face. How had she come to this? What would she do now?

She cried until the sun came up; its growing warmth soothed her a little, her resolve returning with the new day. She began to gather what was left of her things, packing away the sketch, her remaining clothes, and flinging the diminished bag on her back. She stamped out the fire's embers and looked for a way to go. Bereft, forlorn, standing in the middle of nowhere, no more found than she was before.

A soft shifting of the air prickled her skin, an almost electric thrumming, and she sensed before she saw it that something new was winging its way towards her on its own desert breeze. Before she could even turn to see what it was there was the brushing of silk across her cheek and a soft *thwamping* of wings at her ear. In a moment she was engulfed in a storm of butterflies, a whirlwind of black and tangerine. They veered around her, fluttering their frantic path as she stood perfectly still, not wanting to turn into their swarming in case she was inundated, their velvety bodies pummelling her face. They massed around her, overtaking her in their millions. Ahead the desert sky was filling with them, the noise of their beating wings deafening. Everything was thrumming, the ground, the air, her body, and she felt she was becoming them, becoming an insect of many eyes and many moons and many months of travel. Instinctively she knew the path they'd taken, she could see the journey of milkweed and miles, could see the world through the myriad lenses in their soft downy heads, in the grey dust of their bodies that was her body now too. They landed on her, crawling and tasting her sweat with their feet. If any more touched her she was sure they would lift her up with them, carry her away, and the caterpillar child inside her would be gone, gone, gone...

But then she felt it, the tightening and stretching, the burning and the pulling, as though her stomach was exploding, pushing outwards and growing. Suns and moons passed overhead, days and nights flew by, and still the swarming came. And just when she thought she could take no more, that she would burst with the dazzling planets that sped across the horizon, the electricity in the air dropped away, the butterfly breeze subsided, the last of them lifting from her. Floating upwards on ethereal wings, they flitted and jerked away, the stragglers chasing their brethren, until at last they were all gone.

She looked down at her distended stomach, grown weeks in mere moments, and knew she'd lost time again.

Turning her face to the sky she was startled to see contrails streaming from the wings of an aeroplane. It was so far away, high and soundless, and the people on board, looking down, as she'd done on her own flight here, couldn't possibly see her. They wouldn't know she was wandering lost below them. They were of the clouds, and she was of the earth. Had they seen the butterflies? She watched for a long time until the plane passed from sight and its trail of vapour dissipated to nothing. Other than those thin, wispy remnants, the sky was utterly empty.

Following its line of flight, she wondered if she should set off in the same direction when her eyes fell on something else: the thin streak of a power line cutting across the hills. So far away it seemed miniscule, this line led to a tower, and from that the line carried on to another, and so on it went, she knew, all the way back to civilisation.

After half an hour, they'd grown closer and she could see the next few towers along the horizon. The earth rose and fell and she stumbled at times, staggering with the weight of her own body and the exhaustion in her legs. Eventually she crested a

small rise and looked out across a valley that transformed again into more hills.

Below, like a mirage, she saw a shack.

It glistened in the sun, hazy like a watery oasis. Beyond it was a series of buildings, a few huts dotted next to each other with a road leading away, its dirt clear and white and distinct, easy to follow with the eye. And out beyond that another shack, another cluster of buildings. Far beyond them, near the hills, everything changed colour, beginning to green. She had made it to the very outskirts of the world.

If she'd had the energy she would have hurried, but there was nothing to hurry for now that she was so close. Slipping down the rise she sent up a spray of dust with the scrape of her descent. As she neared the shack she called out '*Hola*' and there was a banging inside, as though someone had heard her. She called again and was answered by the clanging of a bell. A face appeared in the doorway, long and thin, and for a moment she saw La Llorona, the image Carlos had described that day on the boat. But as the figure stepped forward and the image cleared, she realised it was only the soft, grey face of a donkey, with its wide flat snout, dark eyes fringed with thick lashes, and a cowbell tied with frayed rope around its neck.

It came forward and she could see it was skinny and ragged. It raised its head, setting the bell to clang again, and flicked up its tail as if in greeting. Nika didn't know if she should try to get near it but it came to her unbidden, seeming to desire her touch as much as she desired the relief of its presence. She ran her fingers along its bristly mane, and it nuzzled her shoulder, wetting her skin with its nose.

There was a clatter from around the side of the building, and in another moment an old woman emerged, striding across the brown dust until she saw Nika standing there.

‘¿*Que quieres?*’ she asked, stopping abruptly.

‘*Lo siento, pero estoy...*’ Nika had to pause to think of the word, ‘¿*perdida?*’ She said this like a question, turning her statement into an enquiry that seemed to confuse the woman.

‘¿*Perdidos?*’

‘*Si, I’m lost,*’ she repeated in English. ‘*Y buscando tu casa y quieres... quiero,*’ she corrected herself, ‘*ayudarme.*’

She knew she had mangled the sentence almost beyond recognition, but as the woman cast her eyes along Nika’s filthy limbs and her bulging midsection, she must have seen something in her to pity because her stance softened, and she reached out a hand, beckoning Nika to follow.

The woman led her around to the front of the house, the donkey following behind them. The woman threw up her hands in exasperation and turned to shoo it back inside its shanty, but it simply stood and stared at her. The woman gave up, dismissing the *burro* with a wave. She took Nika by the wrist and led her inside.

They entered a small kitchen, neatly furnished, though cramped. There was enough room for a sink, a cupboard, a humming bar fridge, and a table with two chairs. Behind the table a closed door shut the rest of the house from view.

The woman dragged one of the chairs out and gestured for Nika to sit. A water-cooler next to the sink caught Nika’s eye, and she realised how agonisingly thirsty she had been all morning. Catching Nika’s stare, the woman rummaged in a cupboard for a glass, filling it to the brim while the cooler glugged and gulped with its shifting volume. When she was handed the cup, Nika tried not to drink it down too fast, but to slow her sips and take a bit at a time.

‘¿*Que pasó, chica?*’ the woman asked, slumping onto the other chair and extending her hand to pat Nika’s wrist. Nika didn’t know how to answer the question, how to even begin. What had happened? How could she possibly explain? She tried, in her stilted Spanish, to tell her that she had lost her way, and she needed to get to a bus station or an airport. She couldn’t tell this woman that what she really wanted to do was call the number Bruer had given her for Lyndall’s children.

Nika was running out of things she knew how to say, and the woman waved a hand for her to wait. She stood and opened the door behind the table, revealing a small bedroom. A single bed in one corner, a dresser beneath a lace-frilled curtain. On top of the dresser Nika saw framed photographs and an icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe. But then the woman stepped inside and closed the door again, shutting Nika out. In another minute she heard her voice, clear and firm but with muted gaps, and Nika knew she was on the phone to someone.

When she came back in she smiled at Nika.

‘*Mi hijo vendrá,*’ she said, sitting back down.

‘*Gracias,*’ Nika said, not knowing whether or not it was the appropriate response. The woman had called her son and he was on his way. Was he coming to translate for the woman, or was he coming to help her find a way out of here? The woman asked more questions, and Nika gleaned she was asking how long she had been lost for. Nika said it had been all night and, only because she remembered the word for butterfly, she told her what she saw, about the swarm that had come to her at dawn.

The woman sat back in her chair, looking Nika up and down, considering.

‘¿*Mariposas?*’ she said, and Nika nodded her head uncertainly, wondering if perhaps she shouldn’t have mentioned it.

‘*Una bruja,*’ the woman muttered after a moment, shaking her head with conviction.

‘¿*Una bruja?*’ Nika repeated. A witch?

‘*Si, si,*’ the old woman said, waving her hand contemptuously now. She refused to say anything more and sat with her mouth pursed, rocking gently from side to side in her chair, avoiding Nika’s eyes.

Nika had upset her somehow. When she tried to talk to her again she wouldn’t be drawn, so they sat in uncomfortable silence waiting.

After a while Nika heard the sound of a car in the distance, faint at first, like a soft rumble of distant thunder, wheels crunching on gravel as it grew closer. Thinking of how she’d arrived at Bruer’s only a few short days ago, her stomach lurched in fear. She looked toward the door, holding her breath, expecting Bruer to enter any second. A car door opened, then thumped shut. The old woman had deceived her. In league with Bruer, she’d called him and led him straight to her, like the ending to a horror film in which she’d come full circle. She listened to his footfalls approaching, crackling through the dirt, and then the door swung open.

The man standing there wasn’t Bruer, and Nika blushed in relief and shame. It wasn’t Bruer. This man was handsome and clean-shaven, wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt beneath which taut muscles strained. As he stepped over the threshold he immediately acknowledged her presence, charming her at once with his smile. His mother rose to greet him, kissing him on both cheeks and speaking to him in quick-fire Spanish. She carried on talking as he came to Nika, extending his hand in greeting. She shook it, and it was firm and strong.

‘My mother tells me you got yourself into a bit of trouble,’ he said in English, letting her hand go. Nika looked down to the floor, embarrassed. How could she possibly explain to him what had happened?

‘I got lost,’ was all the reply she could muster.

‘And you’re all right?’

‘I’m fine. I was lucky. I had my things with me.’

‘How did you end up out here anyway? Where were you trying to go? Did you break down?’

She knew she should construct a story to answer all these questions: a lie to tell him that would account for her ending up here like this, but she didn’t know what to say. The old woman had stopped trying to talk to her son and was watching Nika quietly, waiting for her to say something, but Nika couldn’t think of a single thing. The woman’s son, sensing Nika’s discomfort, let his questions go answered.

‘It doesn’t matter. You don’t need to tell me.’

He smiled again, a lopsided grin.

‘Where do you need to go?’

‘I don’t even know where I am,’ she admitted, shrugging. ‘But I should get back to Mexico City.’ This wasn’t entirely true. Nika was already making other plans.

For the first time his eyes fell on the bulge of Nika’s stomach. He seemed to comprehend something about her then and his posture changed, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and almost leaning away from her, like her pregnancy might be a contagious disease. He dragged his gaze back up along her chest, her neck, and met her eyes again. It was his turn to blush.

‘I can take you to the airport, but it’s a long drive. Two hours.’

‘I can pay you for your time,’ she added. He seemed to think it over for a second before replying.

‘Okay. I’m Eduardo by the way. Just call me Ed.’

‘Kate,’ she said on a whim, her real name far too unusual to be easily forgotten. Maybe it was better, she thought, to remain cautious in case Bruer was dead, or in case he wasn’t.

The old woman could no longer contain herself, muttering something to Eduardo. He raised an eyebrow, then laughed.

‘She says that you’re a witch. Is that true?’

‘*I’m a witch?*’ Nika hadn’t realised that the woman was accusing her of witchcraft. ‘Oh, no, I thought she was saying a witch helped me. Why does she think that I’m a witch?’ Nika was affronted. The woman had accused her unfairly.

‘Did a witch help you?’ he prompted, a sly smirk on his lips.

‘No, but I...’

He laughed again.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘She thinks everyone’s a witch. Let’s get you to the airport.’

He gestured for her to lead the way out of the shack, following with his mother close behind. Outside the donkey hadn’t budged, and was standing where they’d left it. It watched them make their way over to Eduardo’s pickup truck, lazily swishing its tail in the day’s growing heat. The truck looked as though it was supposed to be white but it was encrusted with a layer of dust and sand that had turned it beige. The back tray was littered with bits and pieces of wire and metal that made her think of Bruer’s house, all his odds and ends and the figure he’d made with its headless body and dislocated face. Suddenly, the memory of him coming into her

room, of him pushing down on her bed, came racing back and she shuddered, as though she could shake the memory loose from her body.

‘Are you okay?’ Eduardo had seen her tremor and was looking at her with a mixture of concern and confusion.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Do you need a drink? Have you had something to drink?’ He turned to ask his mother.

‘She gave me a drink,’ Nika interrupted. ‘She was very kind. Thank you.’ Turning to the woman, she tried to offer her thanks, but the woman stood with her arms folded across her chest, all friendliness gone.

As Eduardo helped Nika up into the cab of the truck, tossing her bag in by her feet, his mother came alongside and spoke to him, her words intentionally too fast for Nika to catch. Eduardo tried to soothe her as he walked back to the driver’s side, but she was speaking almost frantically, and Nika guessed she was telling him to be wary of her, that she was some kind of sorceress. She heard her spit the word *puta* and she wondered what she’d done to deserve such vitriol, to invite so much of this woman’s contempt. Eduardo stopped short at the word and turned to his mother, speaking to her calmly and slowly. Nika could sense he was defending her. He seemed stunned by his mother’s vehement distrust of Nika, and she felt a pang of triumph that he should take her side, a total stranger. What was it about him that had struck her so strongly? There was something about him that reminded her of home but she wasn’t sure she wanted to think too much about that.

When he was satisfied that he’d said all he could, he kissed his mother on each cheek and climbed in behind the wheel, pulling the door tight. Through the open window he reassured her some more, then started the engine and pulled away from

the house. In the rear view mirror Nika could see the woman watching them go, still muttering curses.

The road was hardly more than a dirt track; they bumped along, Nika jolting in her seat. Instinctively she clutched at her stomach though she wasn't sure why. The movement was oddly protective. As they rattled forward, Eduardo shot her a glance, then turned his eyes back to the road. She felt the weight of his curiosity building up until after an excruciating pause he finally spoke.

‘So what really happened?’

‘I got lost.’

‘Okay.’ He let her answer sit. ‘And the butterflies?’

‘Oh, she told you that?’ Nika felt a pang of embarrassment. ‘I don't know,’ she tried to sound indifferent. ‘Perhaps it never happened. I might have been hallucinating.’

Eduardo was quiet, thinking.

‘Maybe,’ he said eventually. ‘But out here things like that happen. Lights. UFOs. Ghosts. I've never seen anything, but she believes in all sorts of things.’ He flicked his head, motioning back to the woman they'd left behind. ‘Out here if you see something strange it's either leading you to your death or it's leading you to treasure.’

‘Treasure? Well, it definitely didn't lead me to treasure.’

‘It lead you to me,’ he grinned at her then, pleased with his wit and Nika couldn't help but laugh.

‘I'm serious,’ he protested, flirtation beginning to surface in his voice. ‘You're very lucky you found me.’

‘Is that right?’ Her own voice was teasing, playful, and she was surprised by her provocation. She rarely spoke this way, but he had an air about him that she recognised. Authoritative but reassuring.

‘So, who’s waiting for you back in Mexico City?’

‘No one. A friend.’ She had answered too quickly, and then thought better of it. It wasn’t wise to let it seem like there was no one waiting for her. That no one would come looking for her should she disappear, no matter if it was true or not.

‘Your husband?’

‘I’m not married.’

‘Your boyfriend then?’

‘I don’t have one of those either.’

He snuck a sideways glance at her stomach.

‘What about you?’ she asked, trying to change the topic. ‘Do you have a wife? Children?’

‘No, not out here. I was married once. No children though.’

‘What do you mean ‘not out here’?’ He flashed her his playful smile again and she couldn’t help smiling back.

‘Not out here. Pretty girls don’t want to live out here. They don’t like it.’

‘I like it out here.’ The words left her mouth before she had time to realise it sounded as though she counted herself among his pretty girls.

‘You do? Well, you’re the first pretty girl I’ve met who feels that way.’

Nika’s face flushed.

‘You want to live out here?’ he went on. ‘With me?’

She let out an incredulous snort, and turned to look at him.

‘I’m serious!’ but as he said this he was laughing too. ‘You could live with me. I need a wife, and you need a husband,’ his eyes fell again on her belly.

Was this supposed to be gallantry? The statement dampened her enthusiasm for flirtation. What did he think he’d be saving her from?

‘You don’t even know me,’ she said, too coldly.

‘I know you’re very beautiful.’ She scoffed at this. ‘It’s true!’ he went on. ‘And I know you’re very tough. You managed the desert on your own. And I know you’re in a bit of trouble.’

‘No you don’t,’ Nika interrupted him. ‘You don’t know that I’m in any trouble at all.’

‘No husband? No boyfriend? A baby on the way? You must be in some kind of trouble.’

‘Can’t a woman just have a baby?’

Now he scoffed at her.

‘Was it Immaculate Conception? Should we have put you on my mother’s donkey?’

Nika sulked, sitting in silence and watching the flat land roll by. The hills in the distance never seemed to get nearer even though it felt like they were driving straight toward them. Everywhere white scrubland was dotted with the khaki of thirsty shrubs and Russian thistle. Dust storms picked up in a vortex of wind, lifting debris from the earth, only to fall away again, while Nika was lost in a daydream of the desert, watching it pass by.

‘I do like it here,’ she said quietly, after a long silence, but Eduardo didn’t answer, perhaps he hadn’t heard. He leant forward, crossing his arms on the steering wheel. He turned to look at Nika, too long, and she worried that they’d veer off the

road and crash into something. But she couldn't look away either, caught up looking back at him. Soon his dark lashes dropped for a moment over his eyes before he turned again to the road, gripping the wheel and resettling back in his seat. After a while she spoke, raising her voice over the shuddering rattle of the truck as it bounced through a pothole.

‘And what if I said yes?’

‘Are you saying yes?’ he didn't take his eyes off the road this time to look at her.

‘No, I'm not saying yes, but if I did, where would we live?’

‘I have a house. Closer to town.’

She chuckled.

‘I don't think your mother would approve.’

He laughed at that, a laugh of genuine mirth, and the sound filled the cabin with a happiness she hadn't felt in a long time.

‘Should I take you there? We'll drive right past it.’

‘Where?’

‘To my house, of course!’

This was the end of the game.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Let's just go to the airport.’

They drove the rest of the way talking now and then but with long silences in between. Once they turned off the dirt road onto bitumen, the scenery began to change, the trees growing denser and long grasses fringing the roadside. After a while a town came into view, and Nika felt a flood of relief. They drove through the main street, passing a Pemex station, a main square, a schoolyard full of shrieking children.

Eduardo announced that this was the town where he lived, but he didn't suggest they go to his place again.

Soon they were through the town and onto a two-lane highway. They sped by cattle trucks and cars, Eduardo driving dangerously fast at times, but Nika said nothing, pulling her seatbelt tighter and digging her fingers into the seat. When he noticed her discomfort he slowed for a while, but soon seemed to forget and then they were hurtling along again, the world outside whipping by. He could have been taking her anywhere, she thought, somewhere to keep her captive, or somewhere to kill her, but she didn't really believe that, and soon enough she could see signs along the roadside for the Aeropuerto.

The airport was small, attached to the outskirts of a town she assumed must have been quite a bit bigger than Eduardo's, but there were people coming and going, cars pulling in to pick up or drop off passengers. As Eduardo pulled up to the curb Nika could hear the familiar clatter and scrape of luggage wheels on concrete and she finally knew she had re-entered the real world.

Eduardo came around to open her door, taking her hand to help her down from the cab's height. He stood so close to her that, as she ungraciously stumbled out, her swelling belly pressed against his hips, creating a rush of energy between them. She reached for her bag in the foot well.

'Here, let me give you something for the petrol.'

'No, please,' he said, putting his hand up in protest. 'It was my pleasure.'

'Don't be silly, here...'. She fumbled about for her wallet.

'No. I insist.' He gently put his hand on hers to stop her rummaging and she let him leave it there a moment before she drew her fingers out from under his.

'It was very kind of you to drive me all this way.'

‘I enjoyed your company.’

He bent forward to kiss her on the cheek and she had to stand on tiptoe to receive it. His face was warm, so close to hers, and his hair smelt like wood smoke and earth.

‘Thank you so much,’ she said, walking towards the entrance.

He leant back against the dusty car, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched her go. The terminal’s automatic doors slid open with a hiss and he called out just as she went to step through.

‘You know where to find me!’

She turned around and called back.

‘Actually, I have no idea where to find you! Unless I get lost in the desert again.’

‘Well, you’ll just have to do that then, *bruja!*’

She waved and walked away.

PART FOUR

TWELVE

From up here the mountain peaks were brown, but also red, white, blue. The ranges snaked out to the sea in sprawling salt lake arteries. Hewn into the mountainsides were quarries, carved out in scrawling symbols like calligraphy on grey paper. A hole in the earth was slashed into the ancient rock like a giant's mouth that might consume her at any moment, sucking her down from the sky. It was the wound of an open-cut mine, an abscess puckered white around the edges. But then, abruptly, this landscape stopped and another began. Staggered rows of houses materialised, so perfectly arranged in their symmetry and sameness that they fanned out to create the effect of a beaded necklace. Then roads appeared, arranged like a child's finger painting. A main road from which eight cul-de-sacs branched off looked to Nika like a drawing of a many-legged horse – Odin's Sleipnir, she thought, permanently etched in the hillside.

This game of finding shapes in the landscape was one her mother had taught her, the only time they'd been on a plane together, when her mother had finally taken it upon herself to leave Nika's father. Nika had started weeping in terror as the plane jostled down the runway for take-off, but her mother looked out the oval window and began pointing to things – buildings, cars, people – and making stories for them that Nika couldn't ignore. When they were so high that those features were too far away to discern her mother kept at it, finding faces in hilltops and animal forms in lakes. It was like seeing shapes in the clouds, only inverted. They were in the clouds now. Perhaps it was the sort of game God played when he looked down. Nika had clung to

the St. Christopher pendant her father had given her before she left, and she reached for it now, holding it tightly in her fist. Later, when Nika's mother had finally relented and they returned to live with him in the country, things were better. She'd never thought it was possible for a man to change so much, but he was more open, softer, and the air of seriousness that had always shrouded him seemed to have dropped away. He still jiggled his leg when he was nervous or impatient, but now the movement was almost imperceptible, so slight that not even a teaspoon rattled when he pressed his twitching thigh against the table leg. The Virgin still watched over them, she was inescapable in that house, but at some point during their absence he'd gotten rid of the chaise-lounge, and she realised with relief that she'd always quietly feared the expectation that she too would be expected to recline there when her turn came to add to the family line. Up here in the sky she wondered what they would all think of her if they could see her now.

The land gave way again. Civilisation abruptly stopped and desert began in pink sands that soon gave way to pastures, to plains, to wilderness and, at last, to jungle. This was where she was going: deep into these mountains that rose up to meet her in the sky.

A mist of rain came to settle in her hair as she walked to the terminal across the tarmac. At the baggage carousel soldiers in camouflage gear, rifles slung over their shoulders, checked boarding passes and luggage, nodding to her stony-faced as she exited.

She had a long bus ride ahead to reach the Lyndalls' house, skirting the city and heading out into flat farmland. More soldiers manned roadblocks along the highway but they waved the bus through, more interested in stopping trucks and

private vehicles. She watched the men standing in the soft rain, joking with each other, waiting for the next driver to pull over.

They passed three more roadblocks like this, bumping along across badly paved roads as the scenery began to change. Clumps of trees along the road grew thicker, wild places reclaiming their hold as they moved further and further into the mountains. They turned off the highway onto a smaller byway and the road climbed steeply into misty cloud, obscuring all but the nearest sights. When they broke through the fog they emerged in the glow of freshly washed scenery. Twisting up the winding hills the bus wavered precariously close to embankments choked with greenery on one side, and the sheer drop into the valley on the other.

There were ten or so passengers on the bus and only one other of them was a woman, an old *abuela*. The male passengers had been polite, helpful, practically lifting the old lady up into the bus, while fussing over packing her luggage into the undercarriage. They helped Nika aboard as well; chivalrous now that her pregnancy was so obvious, her stomach taught and distended like it might pop at any moment.

When the bus came around a corner she saw, across a wide valley that dropped away from the side of the road, a glimpse of the town they were moving towards, teetering on the mountainside, the emerald jungle studded with red rooftops. These seemed to be built into the very canopy of the forest, like a city made from children's tree houses. Night was not far off now; she'd been travelling all day, and along the mountainside windows were flickering to life as though the jungle was strung with fairy lights. She gasped at the beauty of it but in a moment they'd turned another corner, roadside trees obscuring the vision.

But soon enough they'd scoured the tangled cliff face to arrive at the village of tree houses. Only, they weren't in the trees, but simply built along such steep hillsides

that their upper-most floors mingled with the ascending forest. The bus slowed and turned off the main mountain path, chugging its way along a narrow street until the street evened out and the bus came to a stop, letting out a hydraulic sigh of relief.

Quietly the passengers collected their things, arranged their clothing, returned hats to their heads, and disappeared into the falling night. Nika slung her half-empty bag on one shoulder and followed the line of passengers off the bus. Stepping down onto the street, she looked around and saw Manuel already waiting for her, coming toward her with his arms extended.

Of course, they'd never seen each other before, but she was the only foreigner to descend from the bus so it wasn't difficult for Manuel to spot her. She'd called from the airport, not knowing what else to do, thinking she may as well try the number Bruer had given her. Manuel's sister, Juana, had answered. She'd seemed happy to oblige Nika's interest in her family's connection to Carver. Nika asked if she could recommend somewhere to stay nearby but Juana offered her own house. Nika was hesitant at first, distrustful after Bruer, but Juana told her that she rented the rooms out anyway, in the peak season, running the place as a bed and breakfast. She didn't have any guests at the moment, and it would be perfectly simple for her to accommodate Nika. She accepted gratefully. Juana didn't ask how she'd come across their number, and Nika was glad.

Buoyed by Juana's enthusiasm Nika ventured to mention *Lilith*. Juana hesitated before she answered, but said she knew the painting, and that yes, they'd owned it once, but they no longer had it. They'd never sold it; it had been stolen. Nika was shocked and dismayed, although she'd half expected something like this to have happened to it. But since the trail had taken her this far, she felt sure there was more to discover if she could only speak to Juana in person. So Juana explained which

flight to take, which bus, and assured her that Manuel would meet her at the bus stop. And now here he was welcoming her, as Bruer had, without knowing the first thing about her. It scared her at first, but she also knew that she wasn't staying with him, but with Juana and, after all, here she was in a town full of people. It wasn't the same, she assured herself, as being out in the desert with Bruer. That, she saw clearly, had been a stupid mistake and she was beginning to understand why her mother had always warned her against trusting everyone the way she often did. And hadn't she just learned that same lesson before leaving home? No. She wouldn't think about it. She knew better now.

'Nika?' he asked unnecessarily as he neared. 'I'm Manuel. Welcome!'

As he went to greet her, his eyes meet her bulging belly, processing its presence. He seemed momentarily stunned, shocked that he hadn't been forewarned and had no way of ferrying her through the steep streets but on foot.

'It's not far to the house,' he offered, reaching out to take her bag.

'It's not heavy,' she said, but handed it to him all the same.

As he hoisted it onto his back he realised how hollow it was.

'You're right! There's not much in here, is there?'

'I like to travel light,' she said, hoping it was a believable excuse for being a world away from home and pregnant with a half-empty backpack.

He walked up the street slowly and she shuffled behind him, the bus passing them on the road, vanishing around a corner, empty of passengers now. She was shocked by her new lumbering gait, suddenly aware of how much her figure had shifted in just the last few days. Time had sped up and up, her body racing ahead of itself.

'A long journey, right?'

She couldn't answer; she was too busy puffing, unused to the thinness of air in such high mountains, to the steepness of the streets, and to her newly reconfigured body.

'I bet you're looking forward to a rest?'

'A shower would certainly be nice,' she managed to gasp out, straining to sound unfazed by the physical exertion of keeping up with him.

'Thank you for taking me in at such short notice,' she added after a moment.

He was tall and slender, striding in wide steps without struggle. Despite being at least twenty years older than her he was much fitter, breathing up the incline with ease. But then, she reminded herself, he wasn't burdened with the extra weight she carried. Still, she was embarrassed by her inability to keep up.

Looking around her she saw that one side of the road was a high stone barrier, and on the other side houses boxed them in. They walked close to the wall, above which she could see the overhanging branches of more trees as well as the railing of another road. The streets zigzagged their way up the mountainside, lined with more buildings and barriers and sheer drops.

At the top of the street they came to an intersection. To their left and right the road ran away, lined on the one side by shop fronts crammed in the bottom levels of houses, selling groceries and tools and everything required for life in such remoteness. Directly in front of them the steepness of the street continued in a wide pedestrian avenue, with broad cobbled steps creating small plateaus on the upward climb. Perched on the corner of this avenue, as though sprouting from the hillside itself, was the place she had come for.

The house was overgrown with tumbling vines, its cracked eaves and flaking paint choked by greenery. It was built from multi-coloured bricks of purples, pinks,

and blues and there were tiny slivers of mirrored glass in the mortar, making a shining mosaic through gaps in the vines. The house towered up, three or four storeys high; Nika couldn't quite tell because it was built at such odd angles, making its height deceptive. A balcony here, a portico there, juttied out from the structure, and the slope of the avenue rising beside the building made it hard to see where anything began or ended. The top of the boulevard, Manuel explained, where the footpath met the town square, was almost at the same height as the topmost room of the house.

‘Wow,’ she managed to pant.

At a high stone fence that hemmed the building in, Manuel stopped at an iron gate latticed with bars. Beyond it Nika glimpsed a courtyard overgrown with foliage and tropical flowers in bloom. The scent of pollen and decay mingled with the smell of her own sweat. Here, at the top of the world, things grew fast, but they died fast too, and she saw everywhere scattered petals and fallen leaves rotting in puddles, stagnant among the cobbles. Manuel called through the gate and pushed aside a spray of vines and pungent flowers to uncover the string of a doorbell. He tugged it and it let out a high-pitched trill.

Peering in at the house Nika tried to hide her excitement. Even after everything she'd been through she was truly happy to be here. She realised that this joy was something she hadn't truly felt for a long time, not even when she'd first set out to come to Mexico. Then she'd only been anxious, unaware of her body and its plans, unsure of what she was leaving behind and heading towards. Or perhaps not so entirely unaware. She had suspected even then that her body was sparking with life, but it'd been far too late to do anything about it. And, after all, what could she have done? Bruer was right. She was a good Catholic girl. Even though she feared it, hated

it even, her body was marching ahead without her consent, but there was nothing she could do to stop it now.

She'd been too preoccupied and scared to be excited about leaving Australia behind. She'd only known that she had to get out and get away, from Sydney, from her family, from Lydia and her father. It had been a mistake to leave her simple country life and live with them. To pursue her dreams of studying art, to find romance. It was always going to be a mistake, she understood that now. But now was too late. She tried to push these thoughts from her mind, focussing instead on what lay before her, wanting the euphoria of anticipation to engulf her. The eagerness of standing so close to her destination.

A woman emerged into the courtyard through a pair of French doors. She skipped lightly down three steps, calling a hello to Manuel and Nika in turn. She fiddled with some keys and slid a bolt, swinging the gate wide. Nika stepped across the threshold, quietly, finally.

'Welcome! It's lovely to have you here,' Juana said in greeting, but Nika could see she was taking her in, recognising her stomach the same way Manuel had only a short time before.

'It's wonderful to be here,' Nika said, trying to ignore Juana's scrutiny. But at the same time, she meant it. They weren't merely words or pleasantries. She did feel wonderful to be standing there, even in her swelling, aching body, so close to rest, so close to the end of her journey.

'I've put you on the second floor I'm afraid,' Juana said, seeming embarrassed that she hadn't known about Nika's condition. But of course, how could she have? Nika hadn't told her.

‘That’s okay,’ Nika said, trying to turn her body away from Juana, flinching from her gaze. But when she turned to the side she realised her stomach was only more pronounced. ‘I’ll get a better view of the mountains from up there, won’t I?’ she asked, trying to change the subject.

‘A gorgeous view! As long as you don’t mind the steps?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ she assured her.

‘I’ll take you up there now if you’d like to put your things down?’

She reached out to take Nika’s flaccid backpack from Manuel, looking at it sceptically. Manuel gave them both a jaunty wave and went back out the gate.

‘Do you have another bag?’ she asked when he was gone.

‘No, just this one. I like to travel light,’ she repeated.

‘Come, I’ll show you to your room.’

Juana led her to a staircase in the courtyard half hidden by ferns. It spiralled its way up to the next level. They climbed it in careful circles and Nika tried to take in her surrounds. Mottled with age, the building was decaying in places where exposed ends of reinforced steel protruded from concrete blocks. Ivy crawled along everything, tearing up the paintwork as it went. The house seemed to breath heavily with the weight of its own greenery. It was a jumble of disordered terraces and hallways, as though it had been designed and added on to over the years in spontaneous bursts. A large central building acted as the house’s core, around which wrapped a patio with a lounge and a dining room off to one side. Juana explained that the kitchen and her own living space was off to the other. The corridors and walkways that connected all these areas were exposed to the elements by continual archways, and only slow ceiling fans to push the humid air around. On the second storey was a huge open balcony surrounded by more bedrooms, one of which had been made up

for Nika's stay. The building went up again, she could see, with more levels above this.

Nika's room was huge, so big it housed two double beds that sat side by side, separated only by a side table. A built-in cupboard ran the length of the wall opposite. But what awed Nika as she entered were the room's vaulted ceiling and the austere, almost church-like effect of the arched and lead-latticed windows. It was as though she'd walked into a medieval castle hidden away in the steaming tropics. She imagined the absurdity of fairy tale princesses in corseted gowns and knights in armour on sweating horses in this place, before she realised, of course, that was just what the Conquistadors must have looked like, incongruous and ill-suited to this new world of jungle climes.

'You must be starving,' Juana said. 'I'll leave you to settle in and go downstairs and make us something.'

Nika protested, telling her that she could eat in town, but Juana dismissed her with a wave of her hand. Nika, tired and hungry, was thankful that she didn't have to head out into the night of an unfamiliar town.

When she was gone, Nika peered out the tall windows into the darkening sky. On the roof of the house directly opposite perched five grey vultures, silently watching the street below. One bird opened its wings wide and strutted, airing out its feathers, drying them from the recent rains. It hopped a few steps and lifted, fluttering a wingspan across the roof to the dish of a satellite antenna. Alighting on top of it the creature turned to face her window. She met its stare and it blinked lethargically, as though Nika was the most boring thing in the world. Beyond the bird the mountain range rolled on forever in a vista of hills silhouetted against the sky. The vulture's stare unsettled her, and she turned away from the view.

She slumped on the nearest bed and pushed off her shoes. Juana had left her bag sitting on the foot of the bed and Nika dragged it close to take stock of her meagre possessions. What was she left with after everything? She still had the sketch of Lilith, rolled tightly and bound with a rubber band at each end. Part of her wanted to call Torres and let her know that she'd managed to find hard evidence, irrefutable proof of the painting's existence. But she knew she couldn't speak to Torres now without having to invent a desperate-sounding lie about Bruer. And yet, she'd never promised Torres she would go and see Bruer. Could she act on it now? Call Torres to thank her for all her help in supplying her with Bruer's details, but tell her that she'd never contacted him in the end. Instead she'd gone somewhere else, on some other mission, tracing some other clue perhaps? Was it worth devising a cover story now? Yes, perhaps that was the thing to do, the best course of action. The one step of preservation she could actively pursue. But then again, maybe that would appear obviously suspicious. Why contact her at all? Just keep the alibi in mind and think it through in case anyone started asking her questions.

It was hard to put it out of her mind with Carver's sketch clutched in her hands, so she took it to the cupboard, placing it at the back of one of the shelves and unpacking her few other possessions in front of it. She draped a dress over the scroll to conceal it. She'd probably killed a man, she thinks, but maybe no one would ever know it. How could they? Then she reminded herself that he might not even be dead.

Nika propped up the pillows on the other bed and eased herself on top. Too uncomfortable to lie down flat, she merely reclined, cradling her hands under her belly. It struck her as a strange gesture because she'd spent so little time holding herself like this, almost lovingly, almost an embrace. Holding her flesh for a reason other than to adjust it for comfort or to support it so it ceased to hurt. She was

clasping at it now absent-mindedly, like all those mothers she'd seen do before. Cradling the life that was swelling there as though it was already free, out in the world and in her arms. But those other women all seemed so content in this action, so considered, as though they knew this was the way things would be.

She took her hands away, unsure, and laid them uselessly by her sides.

When she went back downstairs Juana was ferrying a tray of plates and cutlery from the kitchen along the patio and into the dining room. Nika followed her through the set of French doors, but it was dark inside so Nika stopped, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She heard Juana clunk her tray down heavily somewhere and then the lights came on.

The room that was illuminated was long and wide, separated into a dining area and a lounge area. A wooden dinner table filled one area, on which Juana now arranged plates and cutlery. A tall curio cabinet loomed against the wall behind it and while Juana busied herself, Nika wandered over to admire the arrangement of objects inside it. Bullet casings, an ivory pipe, arrowheads and darts, ceramic bowls, shards of pottery. There were small statues and figures, including a bronze Kali with all her arms raised high, brandishing heads and swords and a trident, and a plaster Virgin of Guadalupe. There was also another, unfamiliar female form. It was a clay figure in a white dress that caught Nika's attention because of her pose, her hands raised to cover her face, and it reminded her of Bruer's copper woman. The pose, she observed, was the opposite of the Virgin's. *Her* arms were spread wide, inviting, palms out-turned.

In the other section of the room was an old Chesterfield, flanked by two armchairs arranged around a coffee table. More cabinets and bookshelves cluttered with objects filled this end of the room, while on the walls hung framed paintings and sketches that covered practically every other inch of space. Nika began examining

these excitedly, discerning familiar patterns and tones, recognising signatures, works, artists.

‘This is fantastic!’ she gushed at Juana.

‘Yes, he collected so much important work. Look at this.’ She stopped what she was doing and showed Nika to the opposite wall.

‘Magritte,’ she announced, pointing. It was a fantastically simple pencil sketch of a fat penis with wings.

Nika moved along to study the picture next to it, and then the next after that. She was looking for something familiar, for a sketch or a painting she could attribute to Carver. Yet much of the work that lined the walls was unfamiliar to her, signed with names she didn’t recognise.

‘After he passed away we had to sell a lot,’ Juana said, as though she’d read Nika’s mind. ‘He racked up a lot of debt, my father. Most of what’s left is by relatively unknown artists.’

Juana pointed to a tiny wooden frame clustered among some much larger works.

‘It’s the only one of hers that’s left, I’m afraid,’ she said.

The image inside the frame was no bigger than a few inches wide, done in coloured pencil on paper. It was an illustration of a young woman with a pixie face, her pointed ears poking out from beneath plaits of black hair. Across her naked torso she covered her breasts with her crossed arms, but at her waist she morphed. At first glance Nika thought she was a mermaid, but on closer inspection she saw that her legs ended not in a fin but in the defining tip of a serpent’s tail. In tiny handwriting in the bottom corner was a scrawling signature, but Nika didn’t need to look at that to recognise it as Carver’s work.

‘Did you ever see her *Lilith*?’ she asked Juana while she studied the picture.

‘It was hanging over there for years,’ she said, pointing to a place on the wall now crowded with small frames.

‘How big was it?’ The arrangement of pictures made it impossible to know how much of the space Carver’s painting would have taken up in the first place. Juana held her hands out, measuring the invisible length and height of the frame, about sixty by forty centimetres, Nika guessed, and in keeping with the photograph she’d seen of it sitting on the easel.

‘It was in a gilt frame though,’ Juana added another hand-span to her mime.

‘And what happened to it?’

Juana gestured for her to take a seat at the dinner table.

‘It was stolen. I was just a teenager when it happened. Aunty Leia...’ she stopped, smiling at the memory. ‘We used to call her Aunty Leia because she came to visit so often. But it wasn’t her who gave my father the painting. Aunty Leia had already given the painting to another artist as a gift, a woman called Inez Riker.’

Nika nodded, acknowledging that she had heard of Riker, but not wanting to admit too much of what she knew about her in case it linked her too obviously to Bruer.

‘Inez had it for a number of years I think,’ Juana went on. ‘Leia had painted it back in the early forties. But Inez must have downsized or didn’t want it anymore, I don’t know the reason, and she gave it to my father to hang here. He loved it, but Manuel and I hated it! Urgh! I remember it. It was so ugly!’ She looked at Nika to judge her reaction. ‘Sorry! I mean, I understand its significance to you, and artistically of course, but I just hated it. It was so violent I could barely look at it. I was actually glad when it went missing. One morning we woke up and it was simply gone from the

wall. Nothing else was taken, all the priceless art my father had back then, and that was the only thing that was gone. He had an engraving by Dali and it wasn't even touched. It was like the thief wasn't interested in anything else. Or maybe they knew nothing at all about art and they just took one of the biggest paintings they could carry, thinking that size equalled value. In the end it turned out that the gate was unlocked. Whether someone had left it unlocked when we went to bed that night or not we couldn't say. My father hadn't even insured most of this stuff,' she motioned around the room. 'He wasn't very good at organisation. My mother died when we were quite young, and he never really managed without her I suppose. He always used to tell us about how she was the brains. He was a bit lost without her. I never even really knew her, but I can imagine her looking after him. He was a dreamer.' She looked up at Nika. 'Here I am, going on! I hope you'll take the time to have a look around while you're here. There are some papers and things of my father's tucked away that I can get out. We can see what we find. But you should look around the town too. It's very well catered to tourists. They all come here for the Gardens.'

'Yes, I've read about them. I'll have to go before I leave.'

'Oh, you absolutely must! It might be a bit difficult for you to get around them. There are a lot of steps but just take it easy and you'll be fine.'

Juana sat up suddenly, swearing in Spanish.

'Our dinner! It's probably burnt to a crisp!' she got up quickly and dashed from the room.

THIRTEEN

An old church dominated the town square. Although it had undoubtedly been renovated many times since it was built, its white-washed exterior and domed belltower made it look like something left over from an old western film, like the whole thing should only be viewable in grainy black and white. The square itself was full of market stalls selling leather goods, shoes, hats, DVDs. Hundreds of things she didn't need or want. But she was oddly buoyed by displays of Christmas decorations – the holiday fast approaching. Comforted by the incongruous paper snowmen for sale, the snowflakes and reindeer and winter-clad Santas in the humidity. It reminded her of home, and the way her own family would deny summer reality and insist on embracing the adornments of the Northern Hemisphere. On pretending it was winter and there was snow on the ground while they all languished, sweating in the heat.

In front of the church was erected a stage on which a trio of musicians were singing a folk tune. On the cobbles in front of them a congregation of women and men, old and young, were stamping in circles around each other and Nika stopped to watch, the sound of their feet reverberating off the bells high up in the church.

In the market she wandered between the fruit sellers, rows and rows of them, with their strange fruits ripening in the midday sun while swarms of flies skipped from browning bananas to piles of wilted greens. There was produce here she'd never seen before, tropical and exotic, and she lifted them to her nose, inhaling the scents of their unfamiliar skins before exchanging her pesos and depositing them in her bag.

The late afternoon sky was already darkening, a storm threatening in the distance, so she took her haul and lumbered back to the house, plodding down the avenue steps to the gate.

Back in her room she devoured each new fruit in turn. When she was done she lay back on the bed, sticky with foreign juices on her fingers and face. She wiped at her mouth with her sleeve, feeling bloated and sickly. She wondered about the sketch in the cupboard. She wanted to take it out and look at it, her prize, but at the same time it was tainted, ruined by Bruer and the memories she tried to ignore. Was she destined to have such a wonderful thing as that sketch and to have to always keep it a secret? To never be able to admire it fully? To always associate it with terror and grief?

A knock on her door startled her but it was only Juana inviting Nika to join her for dinner again.

They ate their meal in the dining room among all the sketches and paintings and curio cabinets. Juana had turned on the floor lamps and the room was full of an orange ambience. When they were done they moved to the comfort of the lounge area, Nika nestling into an armchair under a low lamp, sinking into its warmth and comfort.

Juana went to a cabinet and swung open a door to reveal bottles of liquor and crystal decanters. She pulled the stopper from a bottle of brandy and Nika could smell its thick sweetness from where she sat.

‘Could I have one of those?’ she asked, nodding to the bottle.

Juana hesitated.

‘One won’t hurt now,’ she said, rubbing her stomach with forced cheerfulness.

Juana was in no position to deny her, to make up rules about what she could and couldn't do with her body, so she gave Nika a quarter glass of the tawny-coloured liquid and then sat heavily on the sofa opposite, slipping off her shoes and tucking her feet up beneath her.

When she was settled Nika ventured to ask her about Inez and the painting.

Juana settled back in her armchair. Nika was soothed by the lamp's warm glow and the glass of brandy in her hand. She waited patiently for Juana to begin.

'I was young when it all happened,' she started. 'I remember bits and pieces of it for myself, but the rest is what I learnt much later, over the years. I didn't know Inez as well as I knew Aunty Leia. Aunty Leia always visited a lot and would play with us. Back then Inez hardly ever came and, when she did, only ever when Aunty Leia was here as well. But all the drama started when it emerged that Inez was pregnant. She ended up practically moving in here.' Juana sipped her drink, considering how best to continue. 'Aunty Leia and my father argued a bit about it I think, but I don't know if Inez had anywhere else to go. She wasn't married and I don't think her family would have been very pleased with her. I don't know if they knew or not.' She paused as she said this and looked at Nika as if considering her for the first time. She seemed on the verge of asking her something, but when she opened her mouth to speak she merely continued her story.

'She had a little girl, called her Tulsa. She was the loveliest little thing,' Juana paused, recollecting, and then she went on. 'I don't know if Inez ever admitted who the father was, but I remember everyone speculating. Those quiet conversations that adults think children can't hear, you know? But a lot of that stayed with me, it made an impression. I remember everyone saying that the child belonged to Bruer Marcus, another painter.'

Juana looked at Nika for recognition and Nika wondered for a moment if Juana knew what had happened between her and Bruer. Though, of course, how could she? But then again, she thought, Bruer knew she'd contact the Lyndalls, knew she'd more than likely come here. Perhaps he had contacted her first? Was that possible? Then he was still alive. But this was all speculation and she couldn't tell for sure that Juana knew anything at all about her and Bruer.

'I know his work, yes,' she ventured, and Juana returned to telling her story. Of course she didn't know. Of course Bruer hadn't called. Bruer was most probably dead. She held the brandy to her lips, though her hands were shaking. The liquid was warm and sweet and it calmed her.

'Well, it was a scandal really, because Aunty Leia and Bruer had been an on-again-off-again couple for years. He was a lot younger than her, I remember. There was something like a twenty-year gap! It was similar with Inez, she was a bit younger than Leia, but still much older than Bruer. He obviously had a thing for older women.'

'Obviously,' Nika grimaced, flashes of Bruer's face as nothing but a dark absence in the night coming down upon her. She went to take another sip of brandy but her hand shook so violently that she sloshed some onto her lap. 'Damn it!' she muttered. Juana rose to help her.

'Let me get you a cloth,' she said, turning to leave, but Nika wanted to know the rest of the story.

'No! It's fine, really. I have some tissues here,' she said, rummaging in her pocket.

'But it might stain!'

‘It doesn’t matter. This dress is old. It’s black anyway, it won’t show up,’ she produced a fistful of scraggly tissues and patted at the wetness. ‘It’s fine, really. Please go on.’

‘Well, if you’re sure?’ Juana sat down again. ‘Okay, as I was saying, he’d been involved with Leia, but supposedly fathered this child to Inez,’ she paused, thinking how to express her next thought. ‘But I always found that hard to believe because Inez was devoted to Leia. I mean devoted! And it just didn’t seem like Inez would get involved with Bruer romantically.’

‘Really?’ Nika’s surprised. She had imagined Carver and Riker had been vying for Bruer’s affection.

‘Well, yes. I mean, the three of them were friends, of course. Inez spent a lot of time with them, but I think she did so for Aunty Leia’s sake. It was Leia Inez really wanted to be around. They were the closest of friends. Sometimes Inez would just reach out and grab Leia’s hand. They’d drape all over each other. Not like a couple, you understand, just the best kind of friends. But I think Aunty Leia was maybe jealous of Inez, of Bruer’s interest in her. Certainly, by the time Inez had Tulsa Leia had started to hate Bruer. She had nothing good to say about him around us children. But it was never actually confirmed who the father was. Inez never said.’ She took a sip of her drink before continuing.

‘Inez wasn’t ever really interested in Tulsa, that’s for sure. Some days she would perk up, play with her, look after her. Other days Aunty Leia looked after her, or we did. I remember Manuel and I babysitting when we were barely old enough to be trusted to look after ourselves. It was probably ten or so months later, so Tulsa wasn’t even a year old, when, one night, they were gone. And everyone was furiously concerned because, I’ll be honest, Inez was no mother. It was so out of character for

her to disappear and take the baby with her. A search party was put together, but Manuel and I were told to stay here, in case she came back.

‘Everyone went out in the dark, calling and calling. It was a hot night, I remember, calm and muggy, but it’d been raining that afternoon and the river was running fast. Aunty Leia was the one who found them. She saw them from the bridge. She happened to look over and shine her torch down and there Inez was, face down in the water. But her body was already caught up in the current, and she washed downstream so fast that by the time they all got to the water they couldn’t find her. They searched and searched, but she’d been washed away. But they did find Tulsa. She was caught up in the weeds on the riverbank. Drowned.’ Juana stopped. Her voice had begun to waver, the memory taking hold. Nika sat patiently, waiting for her to go on. Juana sipped her brandy again for courage and then she swallowed to clear her throat, blinking back tears, and continued.

‘Anyway, they never found Inez’s body. There was a big search, but they never found her. It was an absolute tragedy. Aunty Leia was devastated. After all, she was the one who saw her drowned, and the one who found Tulsa in the weeds. She blamed herself for it all in some way. I don’t know. She just went very, very quiet after that.’

Nika was bewildered. Why had this incredible sorrow in Carver’s life never been documented in anything she’d read about her? How had she never discovered it in all her research?

‘I don’t understand how I never heard about all this before,’ she said, shocked.

‘Oh, no, you wouldn’t have. It was all covered up really. Of course, people knew that Inez had drowned, that much was made known. But the baby and what had happened to it was all very hushed up. And Aunty Leia stopped coming to stay after

that really. She started to distance herself from here, from us. I don't think she ever really spoke about having had any involvement to anyone. She'd already cut her ties to Bruer at that stage, so it just seemed natural that after a while she drifted away from us. My father still called her and they still spoke but she never came back here again. I missed her a lot. I felt abandoned I suppose. She'd been like a mother to us for a while.'

'But maybe it was an accident,' Nika said after a moment. 'The drowning? Maybe she didn't drown her baby on purpose, maybe it was an accident?'

Juana steadied herself to reply.

'No. There were rocks in Tulsa's pockets. In the tiny pockets of her dress. Even in her nappy, can you believe it? Like Inez had hoped she'd sink. But she was too small, and the rocks didn't do much to keep her down.'

Nika remembered what Bruer had said and it all started to make sense. It wasn't just Inez who had drowned, she'd taken her own child with her too. Even Torres couldn't have known just how prophetic Inez's painting had been.

'Anyway, what you're really interested in is the painting of Lilith, and it must have been about a year after all of this happened that it was stolen.' Juana feigned a smile, the memories overcoming her. 'I'm sorry, but maybe we could talk about something else now?'

'Of course. I'm sorry to bring it all up. I just... I just didn't know about any of this.'

'As I say, not many people do. Anyway,' Juana said, standing up, 'I found a shoebox of old photographs and papers. Here, I'll get them for you.'

Nika thought she saw Juana brush a finger against her cheek as she stood, wiping away a tear. But Juana was soon gone from the room, the sound of her feet slapping on the patio tiles as she disappeared to the other end of the house.

So this was who it all came down to, she thought. To Inez. Inez had owned the painting, given it by Carver, and then, for whatever reason, eventually gave it to Lyndall. And then it simply walked out the door one night, taken down from the wall quickly and quietly. Vanished. Where could a painting like that disappear to? What trail did it leave behind? Even Nika, who loved and respected Carver's work knew her paintings weren't worth anything near the price of a Magritte or a Picasso, the fate of most female artists. If someone wanted to make money they'd have made more out of the Dali, a smaller sketch but by a much more renowned artist, and easier to steal and to sell because of its size. There seemed no good reason for someone to steal that painting alone. Perhaps it had even been destroyed after that, long ago, and she'd never find out what really happened to it in the end.

Juana's footsteps returned down the hallway, and she came back in carrying a box. She placed it on the coffee table and pulled the other armchair over closer to Nika, its legs screeching resistance across the slate floor.

'I think there are mainly photos in here, some receipts and bills, that sort of thing. As I said,' Juana sighed, 'he had a lot of debts, my father.'

'Do you think that's why someone stole the painting?' Nika suddenly wondered aloud. 'To recoup some loss? Or perhaps as revenge?'

'Maybe, but it doesn't really make sense. There were much more valuable things here that they never touched.' Nika nodded, already knowing that to be true.

‘And as much as my father loved Aunty Leia, and her art,’ Juana went on, ‘there were other works that were more precious to him than *Lilith*. Better ways of getting to him than through that one painting.’

‘Was there an investigation?’

Juana chuckled at the suggestion.

‘We’re very remote here. My father sort of just took it on the chin.’

‘And what about Carver?’

Juana cocked her head, thinking about it.

‘Do you know, I don’t think he ever actually told her it was gone!’ She furrowed her brow. ‘No, no, he mustn’t have. As I said, it was quite a while after the accident that it went missing, and Aunty Leia had already stopped coming to visit. Perhaps he just didn’t think there was any point in upsetting her?’

They sifted through the things in the box, mainly invoices and bills and Lyndall family photos. Among them Nika found pictures of a young Juana smiling back at her, as a teenage girl and a child. A young Manuel as well.

‘That’s my mother,’ Juana said, taking a picture of a woman holding a baby from Nika’s hand. ‘That’s her with Manuel.’ She handed the picture back.

From the bottom of the box Juana extracted an envelope, browned with age. Thin cursive labelled it ‘familia’, written in a completely different hand to the mannish capital letters with which Lyndall has filled in his invoices and receipts. Juana opened it with interest.

‘These must be Inez’s things,’ she said after a pause, and tipped the contents out on the table. A handful of photographs fell out. ‘When she died my father just packed up her things. I guess he couldn’t stand to throw these out.’

Nika didn't know anyone in these photos. Were they of Inez as a child perhaps? Her family? Her own mother and father? There were only a few pictures in which Nika saw the woman Bruer had showed her in his own photo, snapshots of a young girl becoming the woman who would have his child.

'That's her there,' Juana pointed to one of the pictures. 'Look at this one,' she said, handing her another. It was Inez and Leia together, arms wrapped around waists, smiling happily into the camera. It only took a second for Nika to recognise Inez's bright dress, Leia's floral one, and the red brick wall in the background. It was a third in the instalment of pictures taken from that same day. Carver's copy showed only her and Bruer; Bruer had kept the one of the three of them, and now here, among Inez's things, was a third of just the two women together.

'I don't suppose I could keep this photo?' Nika asked on impulse, realising after she'd already said it that perhaps it was a peculiar request, to keep a stranger's photograph.

Juana hesitated before replying.

'Well, I guess, I don't see why not...'

'Oh, no. Sorry. How rude of me. Never mind. Of course not.'

'No. No, it's okay,' Juana was warming up to the idea. 'It's not really of much significance to me, and I don't know what else we'd do with it. You can take them all if you want.'

'Really?' Nika didn't know what she'd do with the rest. She had no desire to take these other unknown faces, this other woman's family, with her. But Juana was already putting them back in the envelope for her.

'Yes, you can take them. I really don't want them.'

Nika could see this is the truth. They brought back to Juana bad memories, reminding her of that time. Of Inez and the baby that died. She bundled up the envelope and passed it to Nika as though ridding herself of the entire memory in the act.

Nika took the packet reluctantly. What would she do with all of these?

‘I think I’ll turn in now,’ she said. ‘I’m very tired. Maybe in the morning the weather will be better and I might be able to get to the Gardens.’

‘We can hope.’

‘Thanks for dinner. And thank you for these,’ she held up the envelope. ‘Can I help you wash up before I go to bed?’

‘No, no. I’m fine, thank you.’ Nika didn’t insist.

‘Thanks again,’ she repeated, rising from the couch. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’

As she climbed the stairs she thought about how a life could be distilled down to an envelope of photos. She couldn’t help thinking she’d condensed her own life too, down to only what was left in her travel bag. Yet here she was filling that space back up with bits and pieces of other women: with Carver’s sketch, with Inez’s photos. Patching herself back together from the scraps they’d left behind.

FOURTEEN

The next day it rained so heavily that Nika was forced to stay indoors all morning, only venturing out in the afternoon when the sun finally came out. Juana warned her against trying to walk to the Gardens now that the roads were so wet, and in her condition. She had referred to it as that, a 'condition', and Nika thought it appropriate. It was like a growing disease, overtaking her, making her pant for breath when she walked even small distances, making her uncomfortable at night as she tried to position her body in the bed, constantly rising to go to the toilet, all the time aching, her breasts tender, her back sore. And growing inside her was something else, a growing fear that it wouldn't be long now until the baby came. She wondered how much longer she could encroach on Juana's hospitality. Now that Juana had told Nika everything she knew it seemed like it was time Nika should leave.

As soon as the sun was out Nika went up to the square, wanting to keep out of Juana's way. But by the time she got there it had started to rain again, and so she took shelter in the church.

It had been a while since Nika had spent time in a church. She sat in the back most pew where she was mostly unobserved by the worshippers who came and went, kneeling silently for a while, before lighting a candle or easing into a pew to pray. Weak sunshine slanted through the stained glass windows along one wall of the nave, filtered by the varicoloured glass into a murky, reddish brown that cast everything into half-darkness.

Small alcoves were recessed along the stone walls, housing icons wreathed in flowers in varying stages of decay. More popular effigies displayed fresher flowers, visited more frequently by the devoted. On the main altar was a statue of the Virgin, her face tilted up and her hands outstretched. She was draped in a mantle of midnight black scattered with stars, and all about the hem of her robes were the dried and brown remains of ancient flowers. Their wilted petals and curled leaves lay among the carcasses of long dead insects amassed at her feet, like a host of disciples prostrate in worship. The colour in her painted eyes had almost completely faded and the tip of her nose was broken away, revealing the aging surface of exposed plaster beneath. An inscription ran along the stonework pillar below her: *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*. All that devotion, Nika thought, and still nothing but sorrow to show for it.

If she stared at it long enough, the statue's form began to shift as though she were moving, turning her imploring eyes towards Nika, reaching out to her, while the constellation of stars sprinkled across her mantle spun and swirled. Nika had to look away quickly, terrified that time might speed up again if she stared too long, that her belly would swell until it burst under the Virgin's gaze.

She remembered her childhood sitting under that very same stare, but she also remembered the terror she'd felt under the eyes of Jesus on the cross. That statue, bloodied and tortured, had tormented her through the long sermons; she'd never been able to look away from the open wounds slashed into his abdomen, his shattered hands and feet punctured with nails. When she had left with her mother, for those brief few months, she'd forgotten all about that spectre on the cross. But when they returned to her father, and to the church, he came rushing back into her life and her nightmares. In the time they'd been gone Lydia's mother had left as well. But she didn't take Lydia with her and she didn't come back. Lydia's father wasn't nearly as

lost as Nika's own had been; in fact, he had thrived as a single parent. Where Nika's father was pitied and humiliated by their abandonment, Lydia's had turned pity to his advantage. He turned loneliness into teasing and flirting, made his appearances at church with his motherless daughter appear heroic and dashing: a man who, having survived the torment of an ungodly wife, was getting on with his life. He was praised for making the best of things for his budding daughter who needed his guidance now more than ever.

On the other hand, Nika's newly-mended family seemed almost foolish when they turned up in church. Nika's mother was considered a sinner returned from Sodom, and Sodom had tainted her daughter too. Nika wondered why her father didn't resent their return; it made him seem meek and small and Nika was almost ashamed he had taken them back at all.

Lydia, Nika knew, took pride in her father's popularity, even if it was just among the churchwomen eager to flirt with him. He was young and handsome and charming, while Nika's father probably hadn't been flirted with once during their absence. Nika saw it now as a funny kind of jealousy, the way she coveted the kind of father Lydia had, even though her own had become such a vast improvement on himself, changing in so many of the ways her mother had demanded. In his newfound leniency she was able to convince both her parents that Art History was a respectable career to pursue, and her father had, surprisingly, agreed. He must have imagined she would eternally look to the Caravaggios and the da Vincis, rather than the debauched surrealists she dedicated herself to.

She had almost forgotten entirely about Lilith by the time she stumbled across the description of Carver's version, but when she did she found the memory of that

first woman, draped in sin and snakeskin, came flooding back to her. All the things it had meant to her as a girl, under Lydia's roof, nestled in her family's house.

But she had to shake all these thoughts from her head now, determined to carry on and find the painting no matter what. Under the weight of her memories the church atmosphere grew oppressive and she thought to return to Juana's. Even though she liked being out and away from the house, she tired rapidly and she had no choice but to give in to the constant need to sleep, as well as to the hunger that came upon her in short, violent bursts. Languid and bloated, she suspected she'd become comical to look at, waddling back down the avenue to the house. She was unbearably uncomfortable in her own skin. Itchy. Hot. Fat.

Back at the house Juana made her tea, and sat with her in the lounge while she drank it. Nika could tell she was working up to say something.

'Do you know what you're having?' Juana asked after a while. Nika hadn't expected this question and she shook her head, gave a weak smile.

'Sometimes it's better not to know,' Juana continued. 'A nice surprise.'

They were silent. Nika took another sip of her tea. If she kept her mouth full, she thought, she might be able to avoid having to give detailed answers.

'Any thoughts for names?'

Again Nika shook her head. No. No thoughts for names.

'You'd be getting close now?'

The answer seemed obvious and Nika didn't think it required a response. She let the silence drag out until Juana broke it with another question.

'How much longer were you thinking of staying?'

It was exactly the question Nika had feared Juana would ask next.

‘I only ask because I wouldn’t want you to get stuck here. The nearest hospital is an hour away.’

Nika understood Juana’s growing concern. She didn’t want to play midwife. She didn’t want to be responsible for this stranger and her baby.

‘I’ll be heading home soon,’ Nika assured her, swallowing hard.

‘Not to Australia, I hope? You won’t be able to fly like that.’ Juana gestured to Nika’s enormous stomach.

‘Not to Australia. To Mexico City.’

‘Do you have family there?’

‘Friends.’

Nika said this in a way that must have sounded definitive because Juana fell quiet again.

‘Actually,’ Nika said, breaking the silence herself this time. ‘I was thinking I might leave tomorrow. I need to get back before next week and I guess I’ve found out as much about *Lilith* as I’m going to.’ She was making this up, of course, prompted only by Juana’s scepticism. ‘Is there a bus tomorrow?’

Juana seemed relieved, and smiled as she answered.

‘Buses run every second day. Tomorrow would be fine.’

The prospect of Nika’s departure seemed to put Juana at her ease, and she became suddenly friendly, kind. ‘It’s been lovely to have you stay. Maybe you’ll come again sometime, bring the little one?’

‘That would be lovely. I’d like that.’ She realised as she said it that she meant it. She would like to come back one day after everything was over, when her body was her own again and she was no longer tired, hungry, grumpy.

Excusing herself she went back to her room. She was rudderless now. She hadn't considered what to do past coming here because she had been so sure she would find *Lilith* after all this, and that in finding the painting something would become clear to her. Some question would be answered. *Lilith* had been her end point all along and after so many leads the trail had finally run dry. The painting had given her a sense of direction at each turn, driving her forward. Torres, Bruer, Juana. She felt like something was steering her toward all these people even if, like Bruer, they were cruel and threatening. It was as though some power was drawing her on, closer, and closer to the painting. She couldn't have come to a dead end now. There must be something else, she told herself, some clue she hadn't found yet. And even though everything felt like it was coming to an end she wasn't ready to give up. There was still one more place she hadn't been.

FIFTEEN

She walked along the roadside to the Gardens, the occasional car veering too close for comfort. The morning was hot, but the earth was still damp from last night's downpour; overhanging ferns, their fronds still slick, deposited droplets on her shoulders as she passed underneath. She was slow and careful, waddling, really. Mercifully, most of the walk was downhill. She didn't want to think about the effort it would take if she had to come back this way.

Halfway to the Gardens she was overtaken by the bus she promised Juana she'd be on. It wended its way back down out of the mountains without her.

Following the signs, she turned off the main road and onto a gravel path and it wasn't long before she arrived at the Gardens. She had imagined they would be empty, having begun to build up an image of them in her mind, so she was surprised to find two tour buses idling in the road, stragglers from a tour group climbing aboard. Great concrete towers loomed up out of the jungle beyond them, beckoning her on to explore. At the gate she paid her pesos and entered.

She'd heard of the Gardens long before she'd torn those pages from the plane's magazine, but she'd never made the connection between them and Carver, even though it seemed so obvious now that Lyndall had always been the link in the chain. The Gardens were built upwards into the mountainside, where Doric columns clashed with acanthus-topped pillars, and Gothic porticos opened onto stairwells that lead nowhere, terminating in sheer drops or mountain views. It was a jumble of

architectural styles from across the globe and the centuries, Lyndall having designed the garden for no other purpose than aesthetic pleasure, to build a dreamscape of follies where he let his imagination run wild. Nika could see the tips of structures even now, peeking over treetops, patinaed with lichens and moss. These structures sat above her; she would need to climb the steps to her right to reach them. To her left there was a path that led to the Garden's other attraction: pools and waterfalls where visitors could escape the jungle humidity. From where she stood she could hear splashing and voices and the patter and slap of wet feet on rock. She turned and made her way towards the stairs.

Giant lotus flowers of concrete loomed over her as she negotiated a cobbled walkway that ran between two ranks of mosaic snakes, rearing up either side like sentinels. They arched up on their tails, their open mouths sporting forked tongues of steel. Ferns and flowers and abundant greenness clambered over itself to twist and flourish, and when she looked upwards, towards the tips of more structures breaking the tree line, it was as though there was some impermeable wall built from the intertwined fronds. She passed through an archway and began to climb the cobbled steps, slippery with the recent rains. She went slowly, puffing at even this slight exertion. But she was stronger than this, she told herself. Surely she could climb a few steps without losing her breath? She had changed, she realised. She'd grown bolder. Where, only a few short weeks ago, she had abandoned the pyramids for fear, she forced herself onwards now, heavier and more tired than she had been back then. She wanted to believe she could do this, make this final effort toward... what? She wasn't sure yet, but she knew, as she panted up the stairs, that it wouldn't be long until it became clear.

With no handrail and nothing to steady herself against she grabbed at the straps of her bag, slipping her thumbs underneath them at her shoulders. It gave her the reassurance of clasping at something. Around her the day rang with bird song, and the smell of jungle flowers in bloom sat heavy and pungent in the air. But among the idyllic scenery there were unexpected interruptions. The whizzing of a power drill and the thwack of a hammer as someone out of sight worked on repairs. The faint tinge of sewage wafted in the air. These were things she'd not counted on as a part of this world, this journey. Just like she hadn't counted on her belly.

Ahead two women appeared, passing her on the path going in the opposite direction. For a moment she was convinced they were the same American women she'd met when she had first arrived, who she'd rode with across the water to the cemetery and later lost in the carnival. She was suddenly overcome with the sense that this moment was happening simultaneously with that one, the past and the present colliding, and she wondered, if that was the case, could she change anything about it? Send a message back with these women to her earlier self, a note slipped in a pocket? But what would she warn herself of? Bruer? It would be too late to warn herself about anything else.

As they went by she realised her mistake. These women were completely unknown to her. There was no recourse for sending messages to younger selves. No way of letting things slip or putting actions in place that might alter what had already happened. All she could do was leave notes in pockets for future selves. For the woman she might be when all this was over and done with.

At the top of the stairs she came out onto a wide clearing, paved with stonework. Structures like space ships, like hump-backed aliens, squatted around the periphery, while a turret of steel and grey rock sprung up at the centre of the space,

circled by flying buttresses. These audacious sculptures, dwarfing everything around, somehow made her notice so many little things: the tiny red-black bug on her shoulder strap, the buzzing of a mosquito by her knee, as though the world were focused down through their giant lens to its smallest elements. Motes in the air. Fizzling spits of mist. Sweat beginning to bead on her skin from the heat and the exertion of walking. But she knew she couldn't stop now. She pushed herself forward, forcing her enormous body to carry on and on and on. There was a choice of paths that led out from the paved clearing. She chose another set of stairs that disappeared up in a tangle of more jungle.

After an arduous climb these steps ended abruptly at a crossroads. A path descended back down to her right, one to her left, and another continued upwards through tree roots and ferns. A sign beside the upward path contained a warning. She tried first to read the Spanish but, not making much out of it, she resorted to an English translation below. Beyond this point there were walking trails deeper into the jungle, it said, but these went beyond the boundaries of the Garden. It recommended taking suitable provisions for hiking.

Although she was tiring she wanted to go further, to take the challenge of what might lie down the track. She felt something tugging her this way, and she had some meagre provisions. In her bag there was water, some food, and all her earthly possessions strapped to her back. She wanted to keep her body moving, knowing it would only be harder to start again if she stopped. So she began to follow the unpatrolled path, heading deeper into the jungle.

#

She'd been walking for a long time lost in her thoughts and the lulling rhythm of moving her feet, almost relishing the growing ache of her exercise before she realised how far she'd gone. She was away from other tourists now. Bird calls filled the air, along with the crunch of her feet on the path. Sometimes it undulated up and down and she found herself climbing while at other times there were knee-jolting descents, but now the path seemed to be petering out, dwindling to only a thin track that was increasingly overgrown. It seemed to be disappearing before her and soon it ended abruptly in a wall of impenetrable greenery. There was no way through. She looked about, wondering what to do next.

Then she saw, thrusting above the tree line, the concrete spire of another structure like those from the Garden, tipped with a yawning lotus flower that dripped with plant life. It seemed strange to find it here, so far from the Garden itself, but she was determined to make her way to it. Keeping her eye trained on it through the treetops, she left the path, stepping into low undergrowth that took her downward. She could hear the growing sound of rushing water and soon she was tripping down an embankment that spat her out at a river's edge.

She was dazzled by the spectacle, a paradise of lushness. All around her were clusters of blooms and butterflies that feasted on them, as big as her hands. Bigger. The flowers were pink, white, orange, purple. Everywhere there was green, green, green. Nothing seemed still here, no silence, not for a moment, just endless jungle noise. Birds, running water, insects crawling in the bark and leaves: she could hear it all. She could hear the butterflies unfurling their tongues in each pollen-laden flower. She could hear the spiders spinning webs, the soft *schuck, schuck* of the thread against their lazy legs, and the slow death drones of wayward flies inexplicably compelled to

tangle themselves in the silken nets. And then there was the fall of the light from between the trees, warm and magical on her back.

How to capture that light? She could if she were a painter, if she were like Carver or Riker. How to describe it? Luminous. Making everything glow at the edges. That was as close as she could come to it. The river sent up a spray that caught in that brilliance, swirling like dust particles, tiny and almost insignificant. There were dragonflies of blue and yellow, and a pair passed her, joined in their mating, then another pair and another. The whole fertile jungle was throbbing with sweat and lust, everything mating, ripening, and spewing out life. And underneath it all was the rot. The layers of old life expended, and she could smell the dank deposits of leaf litter, generations deep, fermenting in the mud: the whole cycle happening simultaneously. There a copulating, there a death, a rebirth, another death, on and on.

The undergrowth that tangled the riverbank was too hard to negotiate, so she scrunched through the pebbled riverbed out into the flowing water to avoid the slick slime that flourished in the stagnant shallows. She brushed a bull-ant from her breast as she went, and it tumbled, head over legs, hitting her thigh mid-stride, bouncing off and plummeting into the stream where it was swept away. She felt herself shrinking then, coming down to the insects, becoming the ant in the current, smaller even, a drop of water, an atom, its nucleus. When she was this size it became easier to travel, easier to avoid the slips and falls. Bubbling in the stream she merely closed her eyes and hummed along, jostled by her fellow molecules.

Then she grew again, floating, lifting into the sky like a dot of mist, an alchemical object, a being made of nothing but condensation. The sun caught her back. It shone through her.

But suddenly her foot slipped and she was returned to the earth, her descent quick and cruel and painful. Hands splayed, she fell forward and landed hard on her knees in the water, her wrists jolting as they collided with rock. She cried out as she went down, and the noise reverberated back to her again and again as she crouched, motionless on all fours, trying to regain her breath.

Eddies of blood whirled away in diluted watercolour from her scraped and torn knees. She pushed herself up with aching arms, shocked in their sockets by the impact, and rested on her haunches, the water only deep enough to lap at her thighs as she sat. Her dress front was soaked from the fall and clung wetly to her belly.

She looked at her grazed palms, imprinted with rings of tiny pebbles. Butterflies, argon blue, hurried past, and she wasn't surprised to find that such beauty should be so indifferent to her pain. Heaving herself up, she tried to stand, pressing her sore hands back into the water to struggle like an ungraceful thing from the riverbed. Once she was up she bent forward again with difficulty, trying to inspect her knees. They were cut and tender and trickles of inky blood ran down her shins.

She trod more carefully now, wary of succumbing again to the sense of weightlessness the river inspired in her, to the foolishness of believing she could rise above it all. She tested rocks that looked smooth and dangerous with her foot before trusting they'd hold firm.

Between the gaps in the canopy she saw the sky darkening for a storm, and as if to match her thought there was the rumble of thunder drawing near. The noise of it bounced around, not one sound from one place but stereo, at once behind and in front and to the side of her, reverberating off the hillsides and echoing up the valley. The weather turned so abruptly here in the mountains, and the sky, so recently bright and cloudless, was rapidly becoming threatening, ominous. But the rain hadn't broken yet.

Already wet, she forged across the river. It stayed shallow where she crossed it, rising just high enough to wash the mud and blood from her scraped knees. The tip of the spire was just visible above the trees on the other side and when she reached the opposite bank she scrambled through the foliage, clawing at roots and vines to haul herself upward.

She found foot-holes in the tree roots and rocks, though her feet slid now and then in the slippery mulch of the forest floor. Summiting the ridge she paused, panting, pain shooting through her sides, her legs, her back. She was sick with the effort it had cost her. But in front of her was structure she had seen from the river.

It was another concrete folly, completely dilapidated. Three storeys high, it looked ready to tumble over; already boulders of crumbling concrete lay strewn about. It was an octagon studded with porthole windows, staring back at her like dozens of black, unblinking eyes. A ring of half disintegrated Grecian pillars encircled it, some long toppled over, their cylindrical bodies lying like kinked spider legs. Against the building's circular windows they made of the structure one enormous arachnid. She entered the bottom level through a high archway just as a quake of thunder boomed overhead and the rain came teeming down. Inside, the smell of damp earth greeted her.

The floor was nothing more than packed mud, but on the far side of the room an iron staircase spiralled upwards. Instinct, cat-like, compelled her to seek safety on higher ground, rather than stay where rivulets of rainwater were already wending their way across the dirt.

The staircase was green and red with mould and rust, but sturdy enough for her to climb. She looped around it once and came out on the next level in another room identical to the one below. Another staircase took her up again, but the third

level was a flat roof open to the elements, with only a half-collapsed entranceway protecting the stairwell. She had the sudden, violent urge to piss so she went back down to the ground floor.

Long after she was done she stayed squatting, listening to the rain outside until the wind changed direction and drove the rain in on her back through a window. Getting to her feet, thighs aching from the crouch, she struggled back up the rusting stairwell to the second floor. To stay dry she kept to the centre of the room, away from the windows, and she laid her bag down between the cold concrete and her aching body. She had nothing to do now but wait.

#

A cry woke her from her sleep. The storm had levelled out and the sound of rain was less insistent. When she unfurled from the concrete floor and peered out one of the windows she saw it was still drizzling, though now it was a soft, incandescent trickle.

The sun was out from behind the clouds but low, setting behind the trees. Everywhere the world shone orange and flushed. A pinprick of that radiance caught in a dangling raindrop before it tumbled from the edge of a leaf, only to be replaced by another. This tumbled too, full of light; the whole thing multiplied in itself, forever replacing itself. The world was ignited in a pink haze.

There was another cry, distinct. Nika could hear it clearly this time, like a sob gasped out, rapid. It wasn't close, but carrying from somewhere. Down near the river. It came again a third time and Nika recognised what it was. She knew the sound of her own kind well enough.

She hurried down the rusted stairwell and almost fell when she reached the bottom, the sodden ground thick and slick as oil. Everywhere the earth had turned to mush, and in the strange twilight it was coloured red, clotted and bloody. Nika hesitated only briefly on the edge of the rise and then gingerly stepped out, clutching at the same trees and vines she had grabbed at only a few hours before to steady her ascent. Now she clung dearly to them, lowering herself carefully down the hill. Closer, the cry came again, drawn out into a long, low wail. Nika was amazed to find herself compelled onwards, unwavering. She couldn't stop herself, even if she wanted to. She was slipping down, down, down.

Some stretches she slid on her rear, safer to stay close to the ground than to try to stand. Her dress, her legs, her shoes, everything was covered in mud and litter collected from the jungle floor. Leaves, twigs. A butterfly's torn wing, brilliant yellow, gleamed on her thigh, embedded in the muck glued to her skin. And the light made it all seem so surreal, enhancing the colour of things. The world was brand new, fresh and vivid before its swan song of luminosity faded.

She slithered to the bottom of the slope and crashed through the trees at the river's edge. The wailing came from her left, longing and constant, but she couldn't see anyone around. Her hair was stringy with rain and stuck to her face, impossible to brush from her eyes with her wet and dirty fingers. Following the sound, she stumbled along the river stones, tripping and overbalancing and righting herself again with her arms out for leverage like a tightrope walker.

Then ahead she saw her, the back of a woman crouched in the stream, black hair wet over her shoulders, and the sound rising and falling from her.

Nika froze and the woman stopped crying. A sharp, quick silence, as though she'd sensed Nika's presence and was listening for her, straining to sense who it was that had come upon her here, in her sorrow.

Nika took a step forward. The sound of the shallow water against her foot, the whirlpool slosh of the movement, made the woman turn. There was a moment of slow motion, of clarity and stillness as the woman looked back over her shoulder at Nika.

First the wide, black nostrils, then the chestnut brown suede of her mouth, her face, her perfect sheer black eyes: her enormous horse's head.

But Nika didn't care, she didn't need to stop, because she'd known all along this woman would have the head of a horse, she was expecting nothing less. So she stepped again towards her and each footfall preceded another. The woman began to rise from the water, the hem of her dress heavy and dripping, her hands turning over and over, an anxious, desperate gesture, a wringing of the wrists, an actual *wringing*. Nika understood this expression now because the woman was trying to twist her hands around each other to squeeze them free of the water that soaked her skin. And she opened her horse's mouth and cried again at Nika's approach. But despite her appearance, her bestial form, the sound she made was unmistakable.

It was a woman's cry.

SIXTEEN

Above the tower the sky cracked open with a clap of thunder. Nika jolted upright, shocked, strained. Confused. A flash lit up the concrete room, and in that instant it was as clear as day. She was still inside the concrete tower and it was still raining.

Another clap of thunder followed the lightning: a tearing banging as though the roof was coming down. It was pitch dark and Nika didn't know how long she'd slept, but she was haunted by the memory of something unsettling, something she couldn't quite put her finger on though she knew it would come to her, something terrible, and she longed for the next bolt of lightning and what it might illuminate, although she dreaded it as well.

It came again quickly and she swept her eyes around the space, looking for someone, something. The light was gone too soon and another peal of thunder came, though gentler, the sound of the storm moving away.

The next flash struck silently, no crack, no fizz and cackle, just the pure bright flare of it, and in that staccato firework she saw the room was empty.

But she was still filled with terror and she couldn't remember why. She struggled with her thoughts, almost hoping she could keep the memory at bay, scared that in remembering she might make things worse. Yet her mind kept clawing at it, pulling it forward, dragging it from her subconscious almost against her will and then, suddenly, it was there. The reason her heart was pounding and she was too scared to

move. The woman with the horse's head. She had dreamt her, and in dreaming her she had manifested her presence here in the tower.

She could hear something on the lower level, a shuffling of soft footsteps, and she knew it was only a matter of minutes before they climbed the stairs to her. Where would she run to, even if she could will herself to move? Up to the exposed roof? What would be the point, unless she was to simply fling herself off of it in order to escape whatever else might hurt her if she didn't hurt herself first.

Then came a soft padding on the iron stairs. It was climbing, its steps fumbled and lopsided; a ping and ding rang against the railings as a body drunkenly knocked its way upward. Nika squinted into the gloom where she could see the darker black of the stairwell. She waited for the top of the horse's head to rise into view, to turn and look at her the way it had in the river. But when a shape did come into view Nika was confused, she couldn't make it out. Snuffling at the ground, the creature hunched close to the floor, as if it was coming for her on all fours. She waited for it to rise and stand but it stayed low. It crept toward her and then it stopped, motionless.

Under the noise of the rain a low growl erupted, a soft rumbling like the thunder, and Nika realised, her terror fading to relief in an instant, that the outline she could see was a dog. Not a demon, or a ghost, or a wailing woman with the head of a horse, but a dog.

Seeing her better in the dark than she could see it, it barked a warning, and the noise shattered the air like a ricocheting bullet. And although she'd been saved from the terror of her nightmare, although she could cry with relief that the horse-headed woman hadn't really come for her after all, this dog posed a new threat. At any moment it might attack and she was unarmed, couldn't think how to protect herself, hadn't even bothered to get a rabies shot before she left home. She couldn't see more

than the blurry outline of it, a black snarling mass, and she wondered when it would launch itself at her, but it did nothing more than stand and growl.

With effort she opened her mouth to speak, whispering at first, but then her voice grew louder, her confidence building.

‘Here boy, here buddy,’ she said.

The growling stopped. The dog listened. Waited.

‘Here boy! Good boy.’

Nika shuffled to sit up and the dog whined, stepping backward. It was as afraid of her as she was of it.

‘Come on,’ she said, more confidently, and she reached out, clicked her fingers, cooed.

‘Come on boy, come here fella.’

The dog was sizing her up, deciding what to do and whether or not to trust her. It was a village stray, tame enough to listen to her calls and used to people. She sat up taller, reached out further, and the blackness of it took a step forward.

‘Come on then,’ she encouraged it. ‘That’s a good boy.’

Suddenly, as though it had trusted her all along, it trotted over. It nuzzled into her outstretched hand and she rubbed the top of its head. It tried to lick her face and she pushed it away. Dirt and hair clung to her palms, the dog wet through and rank with the smell of drenched fur. She wiped her hands on her dress but it was pointless and she was patting him again in a moment anyway. He pressed into her touch. Even this close she couldn’t quite make out what he looked like, though his fur felt short and rough and his sniffing snout was bristly with coarse whiskers. When she touched the damp crust of a scab her hand recoiled, so she patted him closer to his neck, feeling for the places free of sores. He leant into her while she rubbed at one of his

ears, and then he lifted a back leg, trying to scratch at the same spot with a desperate pedalling motion. Swollen patches of skin were raw to her touch, clumps of fur missing, and Nika realised he must have had mange. But there was nothing to be gained by shooing him away now, and she was more than relieved to have his company. Pushing his rump hard against her thigh, he craned his head back to reach her face. Nika ducked away from its lapping tongue even while she welcomed the plain, simple familiarity of the stink of dog's breath.

‘Okay, okay!’ she said pushing him away, and he slumped down, settling in next to her. His body was warm along her leg and she was happy to have him there. She'd had worse bedfellows. And he'd bark, perhaps, should anything come near them, prick up his ears, scare them away, maybe even protect her. Exhausted she lay back down and welcomed sleep, resting a hand on the dog even though his sores oozed and wept. She couldn't help but feel its presence was some kind of forgiveness, redemption, for killing that dog on the highway, for killing Bruer, for taking her body deep into the jungle, for following the path of Lilith, for all the things that hadn't happened yet.

SEVENTEEN

The dog was still there in the morning, breathing low in soft snores and snorts. Nika had slept better than she could have hoped, comforted by the dog's company even in the recollection of her dream. How would she have survived the night without it? Without driving herself insane with fear and sitting and staring into the darkness, watching as inky black blobs swirled and twisted into apparitions of monstrous, animal women.

She sat up and ran her hand along the dog's neck to avoid the worst of its sores. She couldn't stop touching it, using its soft body as reassurance. The room was awash in half-light and Nika felt like a child, elated that the terrors of the night could be chased away by the morning sun. When she was a girl the dark scared her like this, made worse, she remembered, by the torments of some horror movie that, unsupervised, she'd sat up to watch illicitly one night. She'd been unable to take her eyes away from a young girl's ruined face and her yellow eyes, her head twisting on her neck as she crawled like an insect down a set of stairs. Nika's mother had caught her there in front of the television and scolded her, switched it off and sent her packing before her father could find out. And because Nika had never known how it ended she'd been haunted by that image, a never-ending moment replayed over and over, that couldn't ever end because she didn't know what happened next, her mother had switched it off too soon. Nightmares. For weeks and weeks nightmares, and she'd

hated herself for watching it. Even when she was older and living away from home and could pick and choose what she should watch, she could never go back to that film and finish it. She still didn't know how it ended, what came after the girl's spider-creep descent, but now the memory was coming back to her to compound the horror of the night just gone. The girl-spider. The horsewoman. The animal mixed with the human, all so much more terrifying when it chose to take her own female form. No Minotaur, no Ganesh, no jackal-headed, claw-footed monster or god could scare her the same way as that female part of her mixed with that animal part. And here she was, comforted by an animal, comforted, she supposed, by the guarantee of their separateness. No wonder, she thought, that people were cruel to animals. The apartness must be maintained: the difference must hold firm. Love an animal too much and you could become one yourself.

Shifting under Nika's hand the dog blinked its eyes open and yawned stench into her face. It rolled over on its back wanting a belly rub. Nika obliged and as she went to pat the dog's underside she saw that it was female. Its nipples swollen and distended, its genitals hidden beneath matted fur. How many litters has she had? How many puppies had she spewed forth, how many times had she suffered the barb of a male dog? Nika would keep her, she thought. Find a way to take the dog with her and give it a proper home, this poor sick thing that had, when she really considered it, practically saved her life, or her sanity at least.

But then she thought of the logistics of quarantine and disease control and the nightmare of paperwork. Then she decided to stop thinking about anything at all: it wasn't doing her any good.

Soon the dog made up its own mind anyway. The morning was getting brighter and the rain had long stopped, and suddenly she got up as though Nika

wasn't even there and scampered away, off down the stairs without so much as a backward look. Nika struggled to her feet and went to one of the porthole windows. Pushing her head and shoulders out she saw the dog tottering off into the undergrowth. She tried a whistle to attract it back.

‘Here girl! Come back!’

It stopped, turned and looked at the tower.

‘Come on! Come back.’

She swivelled her head back to the trees, picked her way through the leaf litter, and was quickly swallowed from view.

Nika's hands on the concrete window ledge were brown and filthy. She looked down: she was filthy all over, covered in muck and leaves and dog fur. She peered over her stomach and saw that her legs were splashed with mud, even though it wasn't muddy when she arrived at the tower. It hadn't started raining until she was safely inside. The ground on which she'd slept was by no means clean, but it wasn't muddy. But there was dried mud on her shins in flakes and there, on her thigh, a luminous yellow butterfly wing. She slapped it away furiously, angered by its presence. Why was it there?

She spun around and eyed the room suspiciously, looking for a clue, a place where the rain could have driven dirt in at her while she slept, but there was nothing. She couldn't think of any way she could have become this filthy other than by going out in the storm. Perhaps, during the night, she went downstairs to piss and splashed the dirt up her legs with the force of her own splattering on the ground? But already she knew that wasn't true. She knew she could never have gotten up the courage to go downstairs in the dark. Thinking of it now, she was suddenly consumed with the urge to piss, and so she would have to go downstairs soon, would have to start walking

again, while it was still cool and before the sun steamed the forest too hot. Day noises were beginning and they reassured her that she was safe, at least for now.

Back down the stairs the earth was still soft and wet. She pissed in a corner, hiking her underwear back up damp and cloying. She thought to walk back down to the river and follow its course, but when she stepped outside, unhurried now in the morning air, she saw there was a track leading away from the tower and back into the trees.

With the dog gone in the other direction she set off along the dirt trail, sidestepping rich brown puddles, swatting at the mosquitos that rose to meet her. Ferns brushed her ankles but the dirt was trodden wide enough to show her the way. Branches hung close, but they didn't cross the path, some snapped back and cleared out of the way. Someone had been this way recently, maybe even yesterday, but she was no tracker and she could only guess.

The path took her upwards, almost imperceptibly, but it wasn't long before the ache returned to her, her thighs straining, her breath labouring. Her muscles began to cramp and seize and she'd been walking barely five minutes before she had to take her first rest.

On a nearby rock she sat down. It was worn smooth, like a seat many hikers had used before her, but it was low and it took her some time to manoeuvre her cumbersome body so close to the ground. For the first time since yesterday she realised she was hungry, starving, and she looked in her bag for the few bits of food she'd brought. A packet of chips, a bar of chocolate, a few other bits and pieces. Enough to keep her going. Out of caution she rationed these all the same. She left the chips alone and ate only the bar for now. It would have to suffice. She washed it down with a few tentative sips of water.

Straightening out her legs she anchored herself and pushed up with one hand while the other searched for something to grab. She found a hanging branch and used it to hoist herself upwards. She couldn't help but laugh at her own floundering, with all the grace of a walrus lugging itself along a beach. When she was finally upright she tottered on.

The morning was chilly and the world was returned to her in small fragments of movement and sound. The butterflies were out, their iridescent wings throbbing past. Birds were singing. She wished she knew their names and the difference in their calls.

Would she die here? The question came to her quickly, before she had time to blot it out. No, she thought, don't be silly. She hadn't died in the desert, why should she die here? The desert was worse than this, she thought. At least here there was water, shade, a path to follow. If she hadn't died in the desert she could survive the jungle. Yes, she argued back at herself, but in the desert she wasn't near to bursting. She wasn't on the cusp of giving birth, and she was close now, so close. The baby would come soon, she knew. She could only shake her head and try to dismiss the thought. There was a real danger that she'd go into labour on the filthy jungle floor and that she'd fail to do this on her own. And then, once she was dead, ants would come and consume her body, her expelled placenta, and the newly born child.

Or perhaps she would survive the rip and tear of her body, the blood and shit and piss. She'd heard stories, plenty of stories, about women giving birth alone and unaided and surviving. Women had been doing that for centuries. Animals did it. She was, after all, just another animal. And wasn't this what she really wanted anyway? To be alone? To be solitary and unwatched? Wasn't that why she'd come so far in the first place? Why doubt herself now.

Everywhere around her the trees grew in thick clusters and she couldn't see beyond them. She continued along the track, heading downwards now. It hurt her swollen ankles and her tired calf muscles more than the climb upwards: the return more painful than the ascent. Soon she could hear the noise of water again, that rush and push. Soon she would come to another river.

It was only another few minutes of trudging before she reached it, the booming sound of a waterfall growing as she neared. Sure enough, when she came out on the bank there was a tall overhang to her left and a ribbon of water tumbling over it to the river she now stood by, sending up sheets of spray. The river meandered off to her right and the path she'd been following stopped at its bank. She squinted at the opposite shore, looking for where it might start up again, but there was nothing there. The path she was on simply petered out at the water's edge.

The day was growing warm but when she stepped into the river it was startlingly cold against her flesh. When she was deep as her knees she squatted and washed the mud and muck from her body. She pissed into the stream and welcomed the brief warmth of it against her water-frozen limbs.

Then she heard it and her stomach jumped: an involuntary spasm like she would vomit. That cry. That sad, desperate sobbing she'd heard before. Only it was broad daylight and Nika was wide-awake and this couldn't, in any way, be a dream. But the woman with the horse's head was manifest here, in the daytime, and had crossed over from nightmare to reality.

Nika shot up and went splashing across the stream only to slow abruptly, trying to quieten her steps. She didn't want to attract the woman's attention, although she knew, she *knew*, that she was already here. Was it absurd to try to outrun her? Nika was on this woman's island of the world, caught between two river streams

flowing in opposite directions, at the confluence of the horsewoman's domain in a place charged with her power.

Once she was on the other side of the river she scrambled up the bank, up through ferns and biting plants, ignoring the scratchings of the thorny flora. The horsewoman's weeping was closer now and Nika climbed in a panic, a maniac's flight, breathing so hard her head was light and she had started, without noticing, a whispered chant, an almost-prayer: *no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...*

Was it possible to outrun terror?

She'd almost reached the top of the rise, almost placed enough distance between herself and the river, when it finally happened, the thing that had been threatening to happen all along: her foot didn't find purchase and she slipped. Her leg collapsed out behind her and she fell, fat stomach first, head colliding with the ground, and the whole world stopped.

PART FIVE

EIGHTEEN

She followed the stream of birds because she didn't know another way to go.

The birds didn't progress in a straight line but drifted in clusters, making them easy for her to keep in sight. They never quite flew fast enough to disappear but were congregating over something, like seagulls circling above a fishing boat.

She had been covered from head to toe in sweat when she'd come to. Her head hurt, though it wasn't throbbing, not like she thought it would from the crush of her temple against the solid earth. It was her stomach that really hurt. She'd rolled onto her side with a grimace, pulled her legs up and tried to squeeze herself into a ball. But her body was against her, too big and cumbersome. Willing the ache away she lay like that, listening to the jungle noise.

There was no woman's cry.

There were bird calls, *whit woos*, the sound of the waterfall carrying upwards, the overpowering scent of crushed blossoms, but there was no sobbing, no woman's sound except her own shallow breathing. The shadows had shifted and most of the day had passed. How long had she lain unconscious? What had happened in that time? The horsewoman hadn't come for her. Had she escaped that fate?

Eventually she got to her knees and onto all fours with her belly hanging beneath her like an udder. Her dress clung to her clammy thighs and she struggled to free herself from it to stand. Giving up she slumped back to the ground, decided that

standing was pointless, walking was pointless, carrying on was pointless. She didn't know where she was going and she had no idea where she was. She may as well just sit and wait to die, wait for the horsewoman to come back in the night, or for the baby to rip her open and kill her that way. She would die in the jungle, one way or another.

But that was when she looked up and saw the birds, thousands of them, swallows she thought, *golondrinas*, flocking above the trees.

No. She wasn't ready to sit and wait for death. She still wanted to go on even if only to get away from the river and the mosquitoes that left white welts on her skin, having feasted on her uninterrupted during the long, hot day. Since there was nothing else to guide her, she decided to follow the birds.

They'd taken her through the thickest part of the jungle but she'd kept the stream of their bodies in sight and followed the sound of their trilling, finally breaking out into different terrain. The trees opened out, standing further and further apart, and the mulched ground turned to clusters of jagged rock. They were sharp beneath her but her shoes held firm, and she did her best to bend low to the ground and steady herself with her hands as she went, grasping at the outcrops of stone. The birds were spinning a whirlpool overhead. She watched as groups broke away and dived headlong towards the ground, disappearing somewhere into the earth between the rocks, tumbling in a cacophony of water noise, like a rain-stick turned over and over. Drops fell sporadically around her, though it wasn't rain but bird shit, and she was lucky again and again to narrowly miss being hit. Above a hawk circled with them, trying to catch those few birds that were separated from the group or who fell out of pace with their lightning flight.

Dipping and diving the flock came closer to the earth, closer to where she crouched, awed and heavy on the rocks, watching as they closed in on her as though

they were seeking her out. Feathers and wisps of wing-down landed on her shoulders, in her hair, coating her with the detritus of the sky, of flight and cloud. The air began to spiral too, whipping up as the swallows churned it around her, spinning her about, spinning everything. She was caught up in it, her hair lashing in the torrent while the birds created their own storm, generating an electricity that swelled her body, entering her stomach and the cavity of herself where the child was almost ready. She felt it stretch again, womb-time sped up, and who knew what else? How many days had she lost like this? How much time had been obliterated in the marching of animals, the swirling of fish and butterflies, how much of her life had they spirited away? It was agony to feel her body shift so, but the screech of the hawk brought the swallow's enchantment to an end, and they lifted away from her, eager to escape their hunter. She sensed the hawk as it passed overhead, taking the last remnants of the spell away with it. She looked at her belly and knew it would not be long now.

Bright stars appeared in the cloudless sky and a crescent moon ascended even as sunlight still held on the horizon. She rested on a smooth wall of basalt and cast her eye back towards the tree line. Among the mess of the jungle leaves something appeared, moving closer, the undergrowth shaking and rustling. Unable to make sense of it Nika watched curiously. Its progress was a sluggish zigzag, slow and haphazard. What creature could it be now? Was it a *bruja*? Had it come to lead her off a precipice, or to lead her to treasure? She couldn't tell yet but she knew, as it broke through the cover of trees, that she'd follow it anyway.

When it came into view she saw it was her dog, the one she thought had abandoned her that morning. It had come back to her, bounding across the rocks without a care for their jagged tips, bobbing along to where the birds still fell. It stopped only for a moment to turn and look at her. Tripping and faltering, Nika

followed it to the lip of the chasm where the swallows were tumbling into a huge crater carved deep into the ground, its mouth at least a hundred metres wide. At her feet the earth fell abruptly away and in the growing twilight she saw the shaded floor of the cavern where the birds were headed. On the crater's other side, far away from her, where the jungle met the abyss, vines and flowers trailed down the cliff face inside, clawing their way towards the darkness below.

The dog sat waiting by a path. It was a rough formation of steps leading down into the hole, whether manmade or natural she couldn't tell. When she moved towards it, the dog began to descend, showing her where the footing was safe. She trusted that her feet would land, one after the other, on the stony steps even though she could barely see them over her enormous stomach. She found the courage to edge forward.

Down and around the perimeter of the hole the path went, and soon she stood on the other side from where she'd started, under the hanging vines of the jungle with their tendrils sweeping down to brush her face. The clamour of the rain-birds continued, echoing louder in the amphitheatre of the pit, but the noise was a reassurance that made everything seem safer, clearer, as though she were coming home to applause and fanfare.

Around she went and the dog showed her the way as the world became darker with each step downwards. The day was almost gone, but the dog was guiding her and it would not let her fail.

Then there was a rush and a trickle and, against her will, without even realising, there was a river of urine slipping down her legs. She stopped, startled. She still had such a way to go. The dog stopped and waited, and after she'd let the surprise of it pass they moved on, leaving behind a puddle on the rocks. And yet there was no pain, no cramping. It hadn't begun, not yet, though it was getting close.

Down she went, and further, and she had almost completed the circle, finding herself opposite the jungle wall again, close beneath where she'd begun, but there was still so much further to go. How long would it take her to reach the cavern floor? How long would it take her if she fell? Jumped? She'd already be there by now, her journey so much easier, the roosting swallows nestled warm around her sprawled body. But the dog wouldn't let her slip. It urged her to follow the surest path.

By the time she reached the cavern floor she was exhausted. The effort of the descent was revealed to her when she craned her head up to the sky. How had she come this far? But, strangely, the fatigue was fleeting, and she was given a new burst of energy when the dog gave a yap, amplifying in the air and calling her to attention. Ahead a cave mouth loomed and into it flocked clusters of the birds. The dog took her this way. Follow the birds, follow the birds.

It smelt like wetness, the ground spongy, covered in lichen and soft green mosses slimy and slicked with bird shit. She stepped across them cautiously, picking her way through the driest patches, wary of slipping, the dog skittering ahead and then stopping, patiently waiting for her to catch up. There was all the time in the world, she thought, no need to rush these things. At the opening of the cave she joined the throng of birds, so close overhead that she could reach up to touch them as they swooped down to enter. They paid her no mind; they just went about their business, coming back to roost. She slipped into their stream, becoming one of them and following them home.

If it wasn't for the dog she'd be lost now; the extinguishing of earthly light was swift and complete. There was no path to perceive in the blackness but she followed the sound of the dog's shuffling between rocks, and she felt her way slowly, stumbling on clumps of stone that rose upwards, trying to trip her. She had to steady

herself where she could by reaching out to grab at the cool boulders surrounding her. In some places the rocks seemed to form natural stairs beneath her feet, with gentle declines that she could manage easily; in others the dog would bark sharply and she let the sound bounce around her, using it like sonar to judge her way forward. They tunnelled deeper and the birds were left far behind her. The sound of their wing beats, their chirruping, had ebbed away; but for the dog's soft padding and occasional barks, there was a resounding stillness. Nothing else to be heard but the scrape of her body inching along stone.

She felt above and ahead of her, sensing now that the roof had lowered, and that at any moment her face might collide with stone. She ducked her head to avoid being impaled on spear-points she could feel stabbing out from the dark. In spasms she was visited by more contractions, excruciating pains that left her doubled up on the ground. But the dog urged her forward and she was astonished each time she found the strength to stand and go on.

In one such surge of pain she found herself lying on her back, staring up at the stars through a gap, some deep solution hole to the surface, through which she was glimpsing the cloudless sky far above. When the pain eased she noticed that pale moonlight illuminated the ground, revealing animal bones scattered in the dirt from things that had tumbled long ago to their deaths. She was prompted by their presence to move quickly from this place. She didn't want to lie writhing where so many little things had fallen before her.

As they moved on from the chamber the murky light persisted and something caught her peripheral vision, brighter when she looked away than when she tried to look at it directly. It was haze that became ever clearer, and the dog was agitated, whining, its shadowy form spinning in circles.

Ahead the tunnel shrank to a crawl space but a light was coming from within it and she sank down and carried on, crawling crabwise, padding with her hands in front and to the side, warily sliding and creeping. The cave's features were becoming sharper, shady outlines of rock and stone forming. She thought she must be nearing an entrance, a way back out to the world and she was almost elated, wondering if she'd finally reached her journey's end, when, without warning she stumbled, slipped, and went tumbling back into darkness.

NINETEEN

She was once again in utter blackness, an imitation night. But this blackness was interior, not the darkness of evening under the heavens, but a blackness that crept along walls and doors, that dangled suspended from ceilings and trapped her, dripping, falling with a slow and measured sureness, at once both deliberately gentle and suffocating, tender and clinging, like the embrace of an overbearing mother. There was no moon and there was no noise. The dog was gone, not having followed her into the crawlspace and down the rabbit hole. With certainty she knew she was deep within the earth.

How far down had she come? She could be in a huge cavern for all she knew, or in a cranny the size of a cupboard. Then it tore at her, that pain again thrusting up from her groin, shooting across her stomach. She yelped, and the noise was stifled, without echo. The shout carried nowhere. She was swaddled in a void, in a primordial absence of space and sound.

She moaned, reaching out to feel what was above and around her, but her hands collided with empty space. The ground was soft with loose dirt and she rolled on her side, tried to get to her knees, anything to shift the pain. She was scared to cry out again, unsettled by the lack of sound her voice made, and the close intimacy of the darkness. But she couldn't help but scream, her body hurt too much for stoic silence, and she cried and cried in long drawn out exhalations of bawled breath, until the pain

began to subside and the stabbing turned to an ache, and she was washed with relief that, at least for the moment, it was over.

After a while she began to crawl gingerly, flailing her hand around her. She didn't trust that the roof of the cave wouldn't rear out at her, smacking her square in the face, or that the ground wouldn't suddenly drop away and she'd tumble to her death. But when her hand couldn't find anything she began to feel horribly exposed, without even the safety of a wall to place behind her. So she turned around and crawled back in the direction she assumed she'd started from. After a few moments grappling about her hand collided with rock. She padded her palm across it, wide and low, and finally rested against it, unsure what else to do, using it as an anchor because there was nothing else to hold on to. She sat with her eyes closed because there was nothing to see.

A faint stirring, as of a soft breeze, made her eyes fly open again. There was a flicker. A tiny pinprick of light flared into being, illuminating fingers, a hand. Someone was holding a match.

Then the light moved away, obscured, only to return, raised upwards, sparking a flame that grew tall: a candlewick catching. Another wick caught, and another, and soon there was no denying the presence of a woman in the chamber with her.

Nika watched, dumbfounded, as the woman moved about, lighting candle after candle, lifting the darkness in increments. She was in a small cavern and Nika's attempts to crawl across it now seemed ludicrously pathetic; she couldn't have crawled more than a few metres before giving up. Had she gone on, she would have collided with more rock soon enough. But the ceiling was high above her, slanting down towards where the woman was stooped, busy lighting more candles, their bases melted onto stones. Most remarkable of all, the walls of the chamber were lined with

objects perched in nooks and balanced on shelves of rock. There were things – debris – everywhere. To Nika's left there was a natural short pedestal of stone worn flat and smooth. Upon it was a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary in her dusky pink gown and her turquoise robes, arms spread wide. At her feet, as in the church, were piles of dried jungle flowers, withered, colours gone and brittle petals creased, frail stalks and leaves black with age. Looking around the room Nika saw other statues just like her, while an assortment of broken ceramic shards littered the floor. There were other shrines on makeshift altars, miniature statues of women in white robes with tumbling hair, their faces covered by their hands. This same figure appeared again and again among the Madonnas, a simple repeated pose, and through her fingers streaming tears gushed out, hardened in droplets of clear resin that caught the candlelight. Every one of these statues was adorned with crystal tears.

The woman had her back to Nika, nearly finished with her ritual of illumination. Nika feared what she'd see when the woman turned, but she could do nothing but wait for the horse's head to face her again.

This woman moved differently to the other one Nika had dreamed in the river. The figure before her was stooped, wearing a black lace dress over which her hair flowed long and grey. She moved slowly, shuffling across dirt. The sound of her sliding footsteps unsettling the soil was her only noise.

Soon all the candles were lit, and when she turned to Nika there was no velvet horse's head, only the weathered face of an old woman. There was something in her features that struck Nika as familiar. She'd seen those eyes, that slanted mouth, somewhere before.

Then she noticed, perched behind the woman, a little higher up on a shelf of rock, the rectangle of a faded frame. The gilt was worn away but its few remaining

scratches glinted in the light, and Nika almost forgot the woman before her, almost forgot her weakness and her tired and throbbing body, as she grabbed hold of the rock behind her, pushing herself up. The woman watched her silently, stepping aside to let her pass, and Nika staggered to the spot, her eyes coming finally to rest on the painting.

Even now she could see that time had dulled the pigments, the surface coated with a thin layer of grime. Insects had chewed pinholes at intervals across the canvas and one corner was almost black with water damage. The image itself, the torn and bloodied creatures, the caverns on the shoreline, was clear, and the thick oil paint revealed each of Carver's brushstrokes, right down to the bristle. But Lilith's face was in shadow; Nika needed to bring a candle closer to see it better. She turned to reach for one but stopped. The woman was looking at her and she spoke.

'Estado esperando mucho tiempo.' Her voice was crackling and coarse, long dormant.

Nika was momentarily baffled, and then she replied in English.

'What for?'

'Tu,' the woman said.

Nika wondered if this could be true. Could this woman really have been waiting for her? Had she known Nika was coming all along? Nika searched her face, looking for what it was that made it so familiar. There were echoes of Nika's own face there, of her cheekbones and brow, like time sped up, looking into the future. But there was something else and it tugged at her memory.

The woman reached out a hand to Nika, gesturing for her to come nearer, and Nika complied. But as she took a step the pain was on her again, and she froze with fear that any more movement would only make it worse.

The woman moved fast, going to a pile of rags and blankets tucked beside a pillar of rock. She bent swiftly, scooping them up. She was a combination of quick movements and slow shuffling, a strange amalgamation of youth and age, her body strong beneath her dress. Kneeling down she arranged the blankets on the floor, piling them one on top of the other to make a bed. Then she came to Nika and, placing her arm around her waist, moved her to the blankets and lowered her down. To stem the ache Nika gasped in short breaths, and the woman hushed her, swaying with her side to side, rubbing her shoulders, her back, with her bony hands.

What was this? Nika wondered. This soft comfort in pain? Despite the old woman's kindness she was terrified of what was still to come and she let out a sob. The woman patted her, little reassuring taps like her mother once had, while Nika, scared and already so incredibly tired, began to cry.

#

The pains came closer and closer together, and Nika couldn't ignore the pressure building in her lower back, the stretching and burning in her groin. She wanted to vomit but she only gagged, and the woman brought her water to sip from a chipped cup. Nika swilled it around and spat it on the dirt, unable to swallow. An hour passed. More.

She needed to push but she was scared to. When she finally did her bowels opened too, and she felt a sinking hatred for her body's base humiliations. The woman was unfazed, going through motions like a midwife. She hardly spoke, listening to Nika shout and cry. She told her in Spanish when to push. But when she did it felt like nothing was happening, and she thought this would never end.

No matter how hard she screamed the noise didn't echo; it simply fell, flat, to the ground. The strangeness of this, of her own muted voice, made her more scared. The more she pushed the more everything burned. A tearing burn, a searing up her groin and through her stomach that peaked in her chest and tried to expel itself, screeching, from her mouth. The woman told her to push hard and she did, over and over again, and mercifully she felt something shift, push through. The woman called encouragement.

‘¡La cabeza!’

She pushed again, even harder, with such force she thought she would explode, until there was a spilling of flesh, a wave of relief as muscles contracted back, and a child slopped into the light.

The woman caught it up and Nika stared, stunned and confused. The woman rubbed the baby, wiping away the mess of blood and mucus that clung to it, and wrapped it in a cloth. In another moment it began to cry. With a high plaintive wail it greeted the world.

Nika lay back, letting her head drop, her body spent. She listened as the baby howled, but then she felt a pulse in her belly, like another contraction, and she didn't know what it was. The woman, rocking the baby in one arm, used her other hand to knead at Nika's stomach, and she shushed her, shushed the child. It took another minute for the placenta to come, slithering out onto already bloody blankets.

‘Here,’ the woman said in English, handing her the baby. Nika took it awkwardly, laying it on her breast. It was still crying, a shrieking rasp, and she had no idea what to do about it.

The woman busied herself, finding a sharp knife for the umbilical cord, wrapping up the placenta and taking it away, tidying up the bloody blankets, laying

out newer, cleaner ones. Nika gaped at the squawking thing in her arms and couldn't comprehend it. What was it? She didn't want it. She just wanted to sleep.

'Take it, please,' she said, looking up to the woman. 'Could you please take it?'

The woman stopped what she was doing and came back to Nika, lifting up the baby.

'You sleep,' she said. And even though the crying didn't stop and she could hear the screams growing more desperate, Nika was exhausted from her journey here, to this place, as much as from the birth itself, and in a little while she was fast asleep.

TWENTY

The squirming bundle in her arms mewed like a kitten. Little fingers stretched and reached, little eyes scrunched tightly closed. Nika couldn't hold it for long, and not only because her arms were weak. She could barely stand to look at it.

'It's...,' the woman began to say, but Nika raised her hand in time to stifle her, stop her from completing the sentence. She didn't want to know, didn't want to begin thinking of it in terms of one thing or the other. She was careful when the woman handed her the swaddled thing, careful to keep it wrapped up tight, to avoid touching or looking anywhere near the place between its legs, because she didn't want to see, to know, the signifier of this child's sex.

The woman looked at Nika for a long moment, something like a mixture of pity and hurt in her face, before she took the bundle away again. She was speaking more and more in English to Nika, testing out the words as though she hadn't spoken them in a long time, and Nika heard her coo to the baby in English as well, calling it 'little one'. Nika was glad of this. When the woman spoke in English her words weren't gendered and it was easier to ignore the tell-tale signs.

It didn't cease its crying, though the woman rocked it and rocked it, jiggling it at her heavy breast. She told Nika take it to her own breast and feed it, and even though Nika's breasts ached, heavy with milk and leaking through her dress, she refused to do it. She had done as much as she had the energy for. She'd carried it all this time, accommodated it to the detriment of her own physicality, and now she was

done. She wanted her body for herself again. The woman didn't insist, so she rocked the howling baby. There were moments when it cried itself to oblivious sleep and the woman placed it down. Then she tended to Nika, bringing a pan full of warm water to her side, sponging at the mess between her legs.

'You have to eat,' she said, fussing about with something on an old plate, and Nika realised she was hungry, starving even. The woman brought the plate to Nika and knelt beside her, lifting a fork to her lips with a sliver of raw meat speared on the end.

'It's good for you.'

Nika could smell the coppery scent of blood, but she opened her mouth and let the woman pass the piece of flesh between her lips. It was gamey, but she chewed, the copper taste swelling across her tongue. She was famished, so she swallowed and the woman lifted the next morsel to her lips. Soon her mouth tingled with the taste of blood and meat, and she knew what it was but she didn't really care. She was taking it back, she supposed, her own body, her placenta and blood. She didn't even care what harm it might do her, her own uncooked innards, slices of this organ she'd expelled, and she didn't care what good it might do her either. She simply wanted the meat of it. After all, it was already hers.

She ate as much as she could before a wave of nausea rose, but she kept it down, pushing the next forkful away.

'Inez,' Nika managed to say. 'Inez Riker.'

And because it was a statement, not a question, the woman didn't respond, and it was enough for Nika to know she was right.

She slept in fits and starts, waking to pains that streaked through her body in bursts and then came to rest as dull aches in her belly. She was hungry again and Inez

offered her more of the raw meat. It sickened her less with each bite, and she was hungry for whatever sustenance she could devour. After she ate, Inez brought cold water to her lips, and she drank long.

Every time she woke Inez was there by her side. She cradled the baby but didn't try to offer it back to Nika, and Nika was glad. She was beginning to fear its cloying fists. They reached out from the swaddled rags searchingly, and she knew it was trying to find her. But she kept her distance as much as she could.

TWENTY-ONE

Perhaps hours had passed, or it could've even been days, when Nika next awoke to the baby's screams, wailing like a siren, high and unceasing.

She sat up, her body less sore if still stiff from lying on the makeshift bed of rags on the ground. She looked around the chamber, but Inez was gone, though she'd replaced candles at intervals, new ones burning, others almost extinguished.

She saw the baby tangled up on the floor in a pile of sheets. Without Inez there it was desperate to be held and consoled, but Nika didn't want to touch it.

She managed to stand, grabbing at a rock to steady herself, light-headed from the effort. The baby kept crying in short, sharp snatches punctuated with hiccupping gasps.

Making her way around the perimeter of the room, Nika circled the baby, coming to the shrine on which Carver's painting rested. She wanted to look at the picture closely; she'd been too dazed and tired since arriving to think of it again, so she went to it now.

As she moved she couldn't help but reach out to touch the nearest Madonna, to run her finger across its porcelain face. It was dusty and her finger wiped away a layer of grime. Next to this Madonna was one of the weeping statues, and Nika picked it up without thinking, leaving a dirty smear on the white ceramic dress the statue wore. She rubbed at it with the hem of her own dress, but this too was dirty with mud and dirt and blood, and she merely spread the stain wider. The figure's arms were on

pivots, and she pulled them down and away from its face. In shock, she almost dropped it, while the baby's howls grew ever more insistent.

The face looking back at her was undoubtedly Carver's, a portrait in miniature. It had the same aquiline cheekbones, the dark, hooded eyes, and the thin, taut lips. Nika was awed by the craftsmanship. Inez had painstakingly replicated the woman she knew, but now Nika wanted to see the others, and see the faces they hid behind their hands. She placed this one down and crossed the chamber to another, while the baby's strange echoless bleating continued.

The next figure's features were completely different to Carver's, unrecognisable. The eyes were large and brown, the lips full, the nose short, almost upturned. She put it down and went to another. One after the other she exposed their faces, and each one was different, though they were all stained with the resin of crystal tears. The last she uncovered was unmistakable: Inez's own image. A self-portrait in clay.

This, she thought, was the face she'd first seen in the sketch Bruer had given her. Here were the features she'd recognised in Inez's wizened face. To the baby's plaintive shrieks, she finally approached the painting on its plinth. Snapping a candle loose from its rock, she brought the flame forward. Holding it close, the painting was revealed in small sections.

There were the demon children from Harrow's description: decapitated monsters, things ripped apart. Blood on a cherub arm. The gristle of an infant's torso. It was unlike anything else Carver had painted, so violent and gruesome. The carnage was mythic, monumental, but when Nika at last brought the flame close to Lilith's face she saw what she'd always half feared she might. It wasn't Inez looking back at her, not even Carver. There was only one face she knew like this, and it was her own.

It should have been impossible, but there was no denying it. Her own features stared back at her, blood down her own chin.

The baby was wailing louder and louder, wailing without end. It didn't tire; it was simply unstoppable. But there were other noises converging with it now, other voices rising to join in. They were soft at first, quiet whispers, but they quickly rose and crashed, colliding with the infant's screaming, growing more urgent. All around the dim chamber the Madonnas suddenly seemed to wear her own face, all the Lloronas too, whose arms she'd torn away from their eyes. They were calling to her, competing with the baby's desperate shrieks, but she couldn't understand a word, her head too full of terrible thunder, and for the first time in this place sounds were echoing and bouncing, redoubling back to her, making her head throb. Covering her ears made no difference at all, and the women's screaming and the screeching of the child couldn't be turned off. It was growing and growing and it felt like it would never stop. Nika, frantic, did the only thing she could think to make it better, bending low to the rust coloured earth, thrashing wildly for an implement, for anything to put an end to it. She searched through the shrine of figurines, past the virgins and the whores. Knocked carelessly from their perches they shattered on the earth. She saw her bag tossed in a corner, all the belongings she'd forgotten about, useless things she'd thought she'd lost. But there, as she tore the pack open, her hands collided with it: the prayer stone from Bruer's house, the cairn that had marked her way. She hefted it, felt the weight of the things she'd already taken with it, the things it had taken from her, and she'd had enough of that, enough of all that give and take, and she wanted it to end. So she raised the stone high and slammed it down. There was a crunch of bone, like an explosion of light, and all the voices stopped.

#

When Inez returned carrying a bundle of supplies she found Nika squatting on the ground. Inez put her things down and listened. The baby wasn't crying.

But there was another noise in its place, like rain slapping on gravel. A wet sound of chewing, of a jaw working meat. Inez had already disposed of the remaining placenta because the smell had begun to turn from crisp and metallic to rotting fish. Now she moved forward, taking up a candle.

Nika was crouched over a mess of blood and sinew. The infant's head was smashed completely, the skull popped like a balloon under pressure. The face was gone, staved into a pink mess, the tiny torso spattered with blood, its arms spread wide. On the left hand there was more pinkness and Inez came closer with the light, seeing that each finger was flayed, half severed from the hand as though a rat had gnawed them. Remnants of tendon cleaved to tiny bones.

What had she done, this woman who looked up now, unseeing? Gore smeared across her mouth, down her chin and neck, and her hands were slick with it. Despite Inez's presence Nika kept eating, working on a chubby leg, much of which was already gone. She chewed with open mouth and great smacking lips, and as she ate she looked otherworldly, unreal, the child before her broken apart. Nika swallowed hard but immediately gagged, hacking back up pieces of meat. When she was done, she returned to her task with flecks of vomit in her hair. There was more blood on Nika's thighs and groin, though this was her own.

But Nika, unbeknownst to Inez, was watching her. And she knew what she was doing might have seemed strange, even mad. But it wasn't mad, Nika thought. It wasn't. It was the sanest thing she'd ever done.

Inez sank to the cave floor beside her, watching. She waited for Nika to eat her fill.

TWENTY-TWO

The candle flames were steady, no breeze to disturb them, and the cave was warmer than expected, no moisture to make it damp. Nika hadn't noticed any of this at first, but now, in her convalescence, she was becoming aware of it. She understood how Inez could live here, with just a few blankets and trinkets to make it a home. Had she been here all this time? She'd brought them fresh supplies from town, so they couldn't be too far away from where she'd started. Inez probably visited there all the time and, Nika supposed, after all these years, who would have recognised her? Perhaps she'd walked past Juana and her brother a thousand times without them noticing her. She was just another old woman from the surrounding countryside; who would ask her questions? Maybe even Nika had brushed by her in the markets, buying fruit or stamping her feet in the fierce dance outside the church.

Inez tended to her, fed her warm beans from cans that she heated on a camp stove. Nika had been bleeding in bursts for days, but she was feeling better, her stomach settled and her blood drying up, only coming now in murky brown spots. Her breasts still wept and ached and Inez helped to clean her, taking her clothes and washing them in the river, Nika supposed, because they came back soft and new. But blood was hard to wash away, and brunette stains remained everywhere. It didn't matter. When she was away from here she would throw it all away and start again.

She grew stronger. Soon she could walk about the chamber to help Inez with small chores, though she kept well clear of the painting, refusing to go near it or even look in its direction. In the gloom of the cave it was mainly obscured from her, for which she was thankful. But she was growing restless and wanted to be out and away. Inez watched her warily, looking for signs of weakness, but Nika knew she couldn't stop her when she decided to go. They'd fallen into a silent companionship, speaking rarely.

Inez had cleared away the smashed Madonnas and Lloronas, but she had already started to sculpt more.

'This one is you,' she said in a moment of brief conversation, pressing and kneading the clay. Nika was appalled.

'No, don't do that, please,' she begged. But Inez wouldn't listen.

'*Tiene tu cara ahora,*' she insisted, and Nika couldn't make her stop. She knew she had to leave before Inez finished the likeness.

#

Perhaps a few days had passed before Nika remembered the photos, tucked inside her bag with the sketch. She didn't want to show Inez the sketch; it was a secret she wanted to keep. But the photographs were Inez's and, after all, she didn't want to hold on to them.

Inez was busy sculpting when Nika produced the envelope from among her things. Inez looked up from her work at the package Nika held out.

'Here,' she said. 'This is yours.'

Inez looked uncertain but she wiped the clay from her hands on her skirt and, as she took it from Nika, a look of recognition passed over her face. She could see her own handwriting on the front. She opened it with trepidation and tipped the contents out, straight onto the red dust of the floor. She let them stay there, scattered how they'd fallen, while her eyes moved across the images on top of the pile. Friends, family. A life long gone.

She reached down and took one up, looking at it for a long time before she turned to Nika. There was something in her expression — of reverence, of worship — that scared her, as though Inez was seeing her for the first time as an angel, some courier from her past that had brought her this gift. Why else would Nika have this, if she wasn't sent on this special mission purposely? Nika wondered if this was why Inez had helped her all along: because she'd mistaken her for some mythical being, for a phantom or a folk tale.

Inez stood, shuffling across to where *Lilith* was propped on its makeshift shelf. She placed the photograph she held down gently in front of it and then, grunting with the effort, lifted the painting from its place. Dried flowers and expired candles rolled and dropped, a clatter of things disturbed, as she brought the painting down to rest against her stomach. Inez blew on it, hard, and a whirl of red dust rose from the surface. She turned around and came back toward Nika, holding it out on unsteady arms.

'You should take this,' she said, pushing the painting toward her.

Nika stepped backward, avoiding it.

'No. I don't want it,' she protested, holding up her palms in objection.

She realised, having said it, that it was true: she didn't want it. She didn't want *Lilith* and she never had, never wanted it for herself, not to keep. Never wanted to be

burdened with another woman's myth. She just wanted to know, merely needed to *know*, and in knowing, understand a little. She had that now, and that was enough to take with her.

'But it's yours.'

'No, it's not mine. It isn't!' She stepped away again, Inez coming at her with the painting like a weapon.

'You must have it.'

'I don't want it!'

'Take it! ¡Tómalo! ¡Tómalo!'

She thrust the painting at her, swinging it wildly, and Nika had to back away to dodge her advances. She shouted at her to *take it*, shutting her eyes tight in desperation as she began to cry, sobbing and wailing for Nika to *take it, take it*. Nika grabbed for the painting, wrenched it from the woman's hands and screamed back at her, a reverberation of her frantic shrieking in this place without echo.

'Stop! Stop it!'

Nika tossed the painting aside, no longer even caring, and she lunged at Inez, grasping her tightly by the arms. Inez stiffened and stopped, panting like a dog with the exertion of her outburst. Nika watched the woman's face slacken, stillness returning, and she spoke to her gently.

'I won't take it. It's not mine to take.'

Inez let out a sob, gesturing to the discarded frame.

'But she has your face,' she said.

So she had seen it too, Nika thought. Nika's own face there all along. But when she turned to look at it now, cast into the candlelight, it became clear that the face wasn't hers after all, if it ever was. It was a wholly new face, at once a horse, at

once a virgin, a mother, a monster, as though it were even possible to know these things just by looking. It was Carver's face, Juana's, Torres'. It was every woman's face and it was no woman's face. It was just a trick of the light.

'No,' Nika said, certain. 'No, she doesn't.'

Inez moved closer, kneeling to see, picking up the painting to study it. Then she let out a high, plaintive sigh.

'*Es mi cara,*' she whispered. But Nika knew it wasn't Inez either.

'No, look again. It's not. It's not you.'

Inez paused, the realisation dawning on her as she squinted harder, trying to see something that wasn't there.

'¿*Quien es?*' she asked, stunned. 'Who? Who is it?'

Nika shrugged.

'I don't know. No one.'

There were tears on the painted visage, drops of light so fine as to be imperceptible at first. But they were there, and the closer Nika looked, the clearer they became, shimmering and slipping across the woman's cheeks. But she didn't cover her face with her hands; instead she wore her pain for all to see. Wore it like a badge, Nika thought, because what was the good of hiding her face?

TWENTY-THREE

When Nika finally left she didn't go back the way she'd come. No need to climb back to the world that way. Inez took her by an easier route, leading her by torchlight. As they went, the narrow walls widened and the trail became easy to negotiate. Inez was strong for all her years, though she went slowly. This suited Nika, who needed to take her time as well. She was still sore and weak, but determined to leave.

They rested at intervals, and Inez turned the torch off when they did to save the battery. They sat in the blackness and silence and she couldn't even hear Inez breathing beside her. In this nothingness Nika wondered if she was being made again. Then Inez switched the torch back on and they continued.

When the roof of the cave began to rise, Nika knew they were nearing the tunnel's mouth. This time when they rested and Inez turned off the light there was the haze of daylight ahead. A first hint of freedom. As they carried on the light became brighter. Everything swam up out of the shadows and soon Inez turned the torch off for good.

The cavern they entered was huge. Birds flitted about high above, spattering the floor with the wet and tangy scent of droppings, darting and diving into unseen nests. Nika heard their wing beats and chirrups reverberated tenfold, as though she'd crested the surface of water, her ears popping to let the noises of the world flood back in. She turned to speak to Inez and her own voice was given back to her in echo.

‘Are you coming with me?’ she asked. Inez shook her head. Nika wanted to thank her, wanted to tell her she knew Inez had selflessly taken a burden Nika had thoughtlessly given her. But she said nothing more and turned instead toward the cave mouth. She stepped cautiously across the slate ground, the rock and stone slippery with loose gravel, while Inez waited, watching her recede into the world.

Nika made her way uncertainly, unsure what she’d become after all this, if she was something old or something new. Borrowed. Blue. But there was a sense that it might not matter anyway, as the only woman who had seen her transform, who had watched her climb from the chrysalis, would die here in a time not long from now, and remain buried underground forever. When Nika turned to wave she was already gone.

She would carry the germ of her metamorphosis alone, and what others didn’t know barely seemed real, something she could forget too, a pebble she could toss on the water’s surface, skip the stone away from her, watch the ripples double, ricochet outwards and fade. She had what she came for. Answers. And that would have to be enough.

She was lighter now, returned and returning.

There wasn’t far to go, and the daylight was growing, swelling up to meet her. She walked carefully and didn’t look back. In only a few minutes she had walked away from everything it had seemed impossible to leave behind.

As Nika neared the cave’s mouth the sunlight slanted in, restoring colour to her in the brownness of the earth and the blueness of the sky. The jungle received her with every shade of green and with a torrent of bird noise, the breeze fresh on her skin. The brightness of the world was before her, here, now, undeniable. She emerged, breathed the air. Saw it all for the first time.

She stood silent, blinking.

The birds passed overhead. The ants crawled underfoot.

Finding a Way in the Dark: The Both/And of Feminist Revisionism

PREFACE

All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway.¹

Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*

In her essay ‘Notes From the Front Line’ (1983), Angela Carter writes that ‘most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.’² Although this pithy observation appears as a bracketed aside, it has become an oft-quoted statement in relation to almost any examination of Carter’s revisionist work.³ And yet, Carter’s metaphor is not unique, recalling Alicia Ostriker’s assertion that in revisiting texts ‘the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.’⁴

In the decades since Ostricker and Carter’s declarations, countless women authors have set out to redress the archetypes found in our most fundamental cultural texts – myths, legends, folklore, and fairy tales – and from them make new wine, if not smash the bottles entirely.⁵ Authors from varying cultural backgrounds have

¹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (London: Virago Press, 1990) pp. 5-6.

² Angela Carter, ‘Notes From the Front Line,’ in *On Gender and Writing*, Wandor, Michelene (ed.) (London: Pandora Press, 1983) p. 69.

³ Lorna Jowett comments that ‘almost all major analyses’ employ this quote most specifically in reference to Carter’s most famous work of revisionism, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) (Lorna Jowett, ‘Between the Paws of the Tender Wolf: Authorship, Adaptation and Audience,’ in *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*, Andermahr, Sonya & Lawrence Phillips (eds.) (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) p. 34).

⁴ Alicia Ostriker, ‘The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,’ *Signs*, Vol.8, No.1 (1982), p. 72.

⁵ Ostriker’s essay is often associated with the beginnings of a theory of feminist revisionism, as it outlines her notion of revisionism in the work of female poets through the ’60s, ’70s, and early ’80s. She also makes reference to a similar process of poetic revisionism that took place during the Romantic

tapped into the myths of their ancestries to reclaim female figures, from virgins and goddesses to hags and wicked witches, as symbols of empowerment, finding ways to reconfigure stories that are, quite often, fraught with sexual violence, familial concerns, and submission to patriarchal law. These authors have done so in ways that turn long-held beliefs about archetypes of accepted femininity on their heads.

In this thesis I take as example the work of Chicana feminist authors Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros and their approach to the cultural figure of La Llorona as my way into thinking through the reclamation of such figures.⁶ I am not Chicana myself, and so, from the outset I stress that I do not seek to appropriate these author's particular cultural practices, nor do I seek to specifically rewrite a La Llorona myth. Rather, I seek to consider the significance of this figure to a culture other than my own in the hopes that it will broaden my understanding of just how female archetypes can and do function in global literature more broadly. It would be easy enough for me – an Australian of Irish, European and South African heritage – to write another version of a German fairy tale or an Arthurian legend, or to deal with any of the pantheon of Greek figures available to me, from Penelope, to Persephone, to Medea. However, this task, though worthy, maintains a Eurocentrism that this thesis sets out to look beyond.⁷ Yet, choosing from the wealth of indigenous Australian and African

and Modernist periods, but with far less of the 'female self-projection and self-exploration' that exploded in the wake of second-wave feminism. Additionally, the origins of this revisionist theory can also be traced to Adrienne Rich's essay, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' in *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1972) pp. 18-30.

⁶ The '@' symbol has been widely adopted among Spanish speaking feminists to replace the gender specific 'o' ending of many words. Hence the masculine 'o' and the feminine 'a' are simultaneously represented in the '@'. Therefore, when I speak about Chicano/a culture in general I defer to Chican@. When speaking specifically about the endeavours of feminist authors within these groups, I speak of Chicanas.

⁷ In a recent special edition of *TEXT*, Belinda Calderone, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, and Nike Sulway argued that 'in spite of the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transnational impact of fairy-tale writing and research, the focus of much previous scholarly and critical work has often been the European traditions, including their influence on contemporary literature' (Belinda Calderone, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, & Nike Sulway, 'Introduction: The state of play in Australian fairy tale: Where to now?', *TEXT*, Special Issue 43 (2017) pp. 1-5). While Calderone et al. are interested in exploring what it might mean to consider a uniquely Australasian sense of fairy tale, I hope my

stories seems to me even more precarious than examining Chicana culture, complicit as my ancestry makes me in the colonised history of both continents. Instead, I look to Central America precisely because I can claim no affiliation to it other than a fascination and deep respect for its many and varied cultures and folktales, and a desire to understand more about them.

I first encountered the legend of La Llorona several years ago via the husky voice of Costa Rican singer Chavela Vargas in her rendition of the traditional Mexican tune, simply called 'La Llorona'.⁸ With my fledgling Spanish I listened to the lyrics, gleaned the suggestion of tragedy. With some further investigation I discovered there was much more to the story of La Llorona than the popular tune bearing her name suggests.⁹

At roughly the same time I found La Llorona I also found Angela Carter. How the work of such a writer had eluded me for most of my reading life I will never know. Suffice it to say that I found in her an echo of my own outlandish ideas, and a liberating knowledge that it was okay to write the way I enjoyed writing. As an emerging writer I had felt the need to construct 'literary fiction' in the style the mainstream literary journals seemed to favour, and discovering Carter was a

endeavor to consider the transnational impact of La Llorona can be seen as part of a decentralising process, away from exclusively European roots, to begin a dialogue between Australian and Chicana@ projects.

⁸ This is a traditional *canCIÓN ranchera*, or ranch song. Due to its nature as a *ranchera* it has no recognised original composer, and new verses have continued to be added over the years. Wikipedia lists at least thirty variant verses [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Llorona_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Llorona_(song)) It is such a recognisably 'Mexican' song that it often appears in films set in Mexico, such as the recent children's film *Coco* (2017), where it is sung by the character Imelda. Chavela Vargas sings a version in the film *Frida* (2002), starring Salma Hayek; and it is briefly heard being sung by Gloria De La Cruz in the opening scenes of *Spectre* (2015), a Bond film that opens during the Day of the Dead in Mexico City. Over the years, musicians such as Joan Baez and Lila Downs have also recorded the ballad.

⁹ The *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* suggests that the 'text of the song has no connection with the popular legend' ('Llorona', in *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, Maria Leach (ed.) Vol. 2 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1949-1950) p. 639). However, the lyric's recurrent imagery of death, rivers, weeping, and unrequited love strongly suggests otherwise. While the song does not recount a narrative version of La Llorona folklore, all these aspects undeniably connect the song and the story.

revelation. Her work, in its exploration of sex and violence and gender and folklore and magic, I felt, and still feel, legitimised my own. The sense of connection was only strengthened by the barely significant coincidence of a shared initial and surname, and the knowledge that she had lived in my hometown of Adelaide for a period of time in the 1980s when I was a toddler.

There was something about Carter's approach to rewriting myths and fairy tales that was almost purely playful, almost tongue-in-cheek. While she recast her heroines *as* heroines they were often subject to appalling violence and sexual assault, or were violent and sexual themselves, and their happy ending, their *empowerment*, was not always forthcoming. It came as no surprise, then, that she defined myth – from which she drew throughout her career – as 'consolatory nonsense.'¹⁰ With this assertion in her treatise on 'moral pornography', *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978), Carter was flagrantly rejecting the kind of 'earth mother goddess' feminism that so many of her contemporaries were adopting in the 1970s. She saw little use in reclaiming these figures as symbols of power. Yes, Carter played with their stories, rewriting and reshaping them, but she saw their totemic power as a 'luxurious self-deceit.'¹¹ This was why she was so happy to let the bottles explode. 'By making lavish use of the "false universals" of ancient mythology in her novels,' Robin Mookerjee proposes, Carter 'wishes to change their meaning.'¹² I felt a recognition in Carter's position, a shared scepticism that aligning myself with the goddesses would do very little to help me in any practical sense.

And yet, being as I am, a creature that is not one thing or the other, I also couldn't quite shake the notion that there *was* and *is* something very powerful in the

¹⁰ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 6.

¹¹ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 8.

¹² Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 184.

ancient stories we tell of women and, more importantly, in our ability to rewrite them anew, to unabashedly align ourselves with their mythos, subvert it, and use it as a source of empowerment.

What, then, could be the answer? Surely I was *either* aligned with the feminist revisionist projects of the women who sought to use these tales as a way to right wrongs, *or* I was a blasé cynic who found the whole thing to be ‘consolatory nonsense’. As I embarked upon my research for this project, seeking out the tales of La Llorona and the women who have used her as a symbol for change, alongside immersing myself in the work of Carter, I came to realise that my project was not one thing or the other. It was not a project of *either/or*, but a project of *both/and*. I asked myself, how might I write a work that incorporated both the art of feminist revisionism and an awareness of the ‘clever confidence trick’¹³ of doing so?

Dogs in the Dark has been the attempt to answer this question. Oscillating between an inherent faith in the power of fiction to shape cultural belief systems and the knowledge that what one writes can only do so much, this has been a labour of confusion, difficulty, despair, and, ultimately, love.

It would be naïve to suggest that, in writing *Dogs in the Dark*, I do anything new or revolutionary in the long history of feminist revisionist texts, or in La Llorona retellings. However, what I do hope is that this thesis does something new in considering what happens when we strive to create a work that is both/and, rather than either/or.

¹³ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 13.

INTRODUCTION

A trail of breadcrumbs. A house made of gingerbread. Perhaps, for many of us, this is our first brush with the diabolical notion of a woman who preys on children. In a Western tradition, the witch of ‘Hansel and Gretel’ is an exemplar of the child-killing, and child-eating, woman. She is an inversion of the feminine principle of the giving, nurturing maternal: a mother gone bad. In this story she lures children with irresistible baked sweets, only to try to bake the children themselves. In other fairy tales, including ‘The Juniper Tree’ and ‘The Rose Tree’, a mother figure kills and cooks a child, serving it up to the child’s unsuspecting father.¹ These terrible acts are frequently attributed to a *stepmother*, but, as Maria Tatar points out, this was often done to ‘sanitize’ the stories for children and, she asserts, ‘stepmothers... are almost always thinly disguised substitutes for biological mothers.’² Yet, in Mexico and the southern United States, La Llorona’s story comes with no smokescreen for genealogy. The woman who performs infanticide and, in some cases, cannibalism, is almost always positioned as the biological mother of her victims.

Stories like these are of transgressive women: ‘monster women’ because they act against the saintly role of mother, nurturer, selfless giver. Their transgressive acts are monstrous, inexplicable, because, as Judith Butler notes, we ‘only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility’.³ The acts these women perform do not meet such standards.

¹ Versions of these stories are classified in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index as Type 720, ‘Mother Slew Me, Father Ate Me’ tales, a refrain that can be found in the title of the collection of modern fairy tales edited by Kate Bernheimer, *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

² Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) pp. 143-44.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 22.

But these are, of course, women of fantasy. Myth, legend, folklore, and fairy tale. I use these terms interchangeably because archetypes of the evil mother proliferate in all of these modes of storytelling;⁴ they are, as Susan Bordo suggests, ‘reflective of deep cultural *anxieties* about women’s autonomy rather than the *realities* of its exercise’.⁵ In stories such as La Llorona’s, women’s autonomy leads to violence and destruction. When left to their own devices, these stories tell us, women will break the rules. Autonomy allows women to make and act on choices with outcomes that are unthinkable, horrific: monstrous.

La Llorona is a difficult woman to pin down. La Llorona is many. Her stories vary from tales of a beautiful young woman who seduces men to their deaths, to stories of a beneficent spirit who can empower and aid women in need. She is at once inextricably tied to Aztec mythology, while also an echo of European invasion.⁶ She appears in positive and negative guises, as both a creator and a destroyer of life. In *Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon*, Anita Endrezze calls her a ‘Mexican version of Kali’, the Hindu goddess whose complexity as a figure both destructive and generative mirrors the many facets of La Llorona.⁷

⁴ I do not intend to suggest that myth, legend, folklore and fairy tale are collapsible modes, or to ignore their distinct histories and functions. But, like Angela Carter herself, I use these terms ‘loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was... and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth’ (Angela Carter, ‘Introduction’, in *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales*, Angela Carter (ed.) (London: Virago Press, 2005), p. xi). For a nuanced discussion of the differences in these terms see the ‘Introduction’ in Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994) pp. 1-16.

⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) p. 95.

⁶ I refer to ‘Aztec’ mythology because this was the dominant group of Nahua, or indigenous, people at the time of the Spanish invasion. This complex mythology has its own roots in the beliefs of pre-existing Mesoamerican civilisations, but it was predominantly through the Aztec lens that the Spanish encountered significant deities, rituals, and beliefs that they then syncretised with Catholicism.

⁷ Anita Endrezze, *Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000) p. 7.

In his collection of Aztec myths and legends, *The Hungry Woman* (1984), John Bierhorst provides three versions of La Llorona's tale, including this brief but illustrative version, 'Forever Without Rest':

She was a woman to whom God had given children, but one day, in a moment of insanity, she threw them in the river. In that instant God ordered her punishment, and she heard a voice saying, "Why have you killed your innocent children? They were given to you to keep. Now you must search for them until the end of the world." And to this day her voice can be heard, often at night, starting about eight o'clock, crying, "Alas, my children!" This is the cry that is heard in the woods and that continues forever without rest.⁸

While this truncated version omits many other elements of La Llorona lore, it serves as a summary of its basic premise: La Llorona is a mother; she drowns her children; she is condemned to spend eternity weeping. Her name itself translates as 'the weeping woman', and her sobbing and crying, most often heard at night, is one of the most essential aspects to recognising her in her many forms. The reason for her weeping is invariably tied to the loss of her children. Sometimes this is portrayed as regret for having killed her children in the first place, while at other times it is out of despair for the curse this action has brought upon her, rather than the action itself.

A much more recent retelling refrains from insisting on La Llorona's actions as 'insane', instead offering a version that tries to account for the tragedy that befalls her, partly her own making, partly that of an unfaithful husband:

On the banks of the Sante Fe River, *la llorona* grieves. Before she became *la llorona*, her name was Maria. She loved and was scorned by a wealthy ranchero. When she found her husband with another woman, she threw their children into the river—perhaps because they had his blood, perhaps because she was already too much a ghost to touch him. Now, her weeping figure is tethered to the site of the tragedy. She reminds us of death's permanence, and its nearness.⁹

⁸ John Bierhorst, *The Hungry Woman: Myths and Legends of the Aztecs* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984) pp. 130-31.

⁹ Rebecca Valley, 'The Weeping Woman', *Fairy Tale Review*, 2 June 2017
<<https://fairytalereview.com/2017/06/02/the-weeping-woman/>> [accessed 23/8/2017].

While La Llorona stories have evolved over centuries, contemporary Mexicans and Chicana@s use them as a warning to young children about the dangers of wandering off alone, especially when in proximity to rivers and streams. Phillip H. Round recounts how inhabitants of California's Imperial Valley tell their children that she is 'the wailing woman, eater of children' who 'waits out there [in the dark] to gobble up kids who disobey their parents or stray too far.'¹⁰ In this way, she can be seen to function as a general 'bogeywoman' to scare children into good behaviour.¹¹ Increasingly, though, her story is used in new ways to highlight specific feminist, queer, post-colonial, socio-economic, and cultural concerns.

Yet this is only scratching the surface of La Llorona's complex mythology. The various other facets of her tale, as well as the revisionist work of Chicana authors to recast it, will be explored in the following chapters of this thesis. What is necessary to acknowledge from the outset is that what remains consistent in versions of Llorona's tale, even the versions in which she is not explicitly depicted as a mother, is that her stories continually supply us with ways in which to consider female bodies, and their cultural status, worth, and symbolism. In this thesis I argue that myths and legends of La Llorona as a child-killing and, in some instances, child-eating mother offer us ways to rethink myths of maternal bodies, and the imagery and symbolism associated with them. I do this by considering the ways in which maternal bodies are aligned with nature: with particular animals, landscapes and environments.

¹⁰ Phillip H. Round, *The Impossible Land: Story and Place in California's Imperial Valley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008) p. 177.

¹¹ In my own experiences travelling in Mexico I was not surprised to discover that the locals I spoke to about La Llorona responded by telling me they had been scared of her as a child, having been threatened with her story predominantly by a mother, or a mother figure such as an aunt. That these stories of women's monstrosity are often handed down *by* women is an ethnographically specific study outside of the bounds of this thesis.

La Llorona's connection to the 'feminine largess'¹² of rivers and waterways, the potent symbolism of the cave as womb, and the connection of women's bodies to perceived natural and animalistic traits, influence how environments and landscapes, both natural and constructed, are explored in my own novel. Angela Carter also uses environments and landscapes as proxies for gender in *The Passion of New Eve*, and it is through a close analysis of this novel in Chapter Three that I unpack the use of environments in my own.

As well as, and because of, the maternal body's alignment with nature, it is also closely aligned to the abject. The abject is that which worries at the boundaries of 'self' and 'other', 'subject' and 'object', and 'disturbs identity, system, order... does not respect borders, positions, rules.'¹³ Julia Kristeva outlines her consideration of the female body as abject in her influential work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Kristeva builds on the notions of subject and object as established by Freud, and further developed by Lacan, to define abjection as essentially located in those objects and experiences that compel us to consider the visceral and unsettling nature of our own corporeality. Abjection, then, is essentially tied to those bodily elements that disgust, repulse, and terrify because they remind us that beneath the outward layer of skin, beneath that encompassing organ, we are a mess of visceral pinks and reds. Abjection is a fear of the body turned inside out. The 'I' is the subject, the speaking and thinking self we identify as being. The object is, therefore, those people, animals, things, that sit outside of 'us'; 'other' things that we can identify as separate from us. The abject are those uncanny objects that are not at a far enough remove from our sense of self: they are the things that sit just outside our physical

¹² Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Book, 1995) p. 329.

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 4.

forms; often those that have come from within it. This is why Kristeva cites faeces, vomit, breast milk, blood, and semen as sources of abjection.¹⁴

According to Patricia MacCormack, Kristeva ‘locates all origins of abjection in maternity’, and the embodiment of the abject can be seen, in a psychoanalytical sense, in the child’s expulsion of the mother: in the moment in which the child must *abject* the mother in order to form its own sense of self, effectively ‘casting off’ the maternal body.¹⁵ While Kristeva’s concept of abjection is influential, social theorists like Imogen Tyler have argued that it fails to account for ‘what it might mean *to be* that maternal abject, to be the one whom repeatedly finds themselves the object of the other’s violent objectifying disgust.’¹⁶ I see the process of feminist revisionism as one that endeavours to embody precisely this position. If we understand the abject as concerning the borders of the body, the line between self and other, then the act of giving birth – the child’s expulsion *from* the mother – is the ultimate in abjection. This consideration, like the revisionist projects of feminist authors, recasts the mother as subject, but, moreover, it also recasts the child as abject: the uncanny ‘Other’ that definitively destroys the borders between self and other. This reversal plays out in *Dogs in the Dark* in Nika’s anxieties towards her own maternal self, and, finally, in her acts of infanticide and cannibalism, violently rejecting and abjecting her uncanny offspring.

Samantha Petony argues that the abject is expressed in aspects of humanity that are socially rejected as detestable: ‘Religious abhorrence, incest, women’s bodies, human sacrifice, bodily waste, death, cannibalism, murder, decay, and perversion are

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Patricia MacCormack, ‘Pleasure, Perversion and Death: Three Lines of Flight for the Viewing Body’, Thesis, Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research, Monash University, 2000.

¹⁶ Imogen Tyler, ‘Against abjection’, *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2009) pp. 77-98.

aspects of humanity that society considers abject.¹⁷ When viewed through Kristeva's lens of abjection, the maternal body becomes such a site of terror, and this can be seen to play out in folkloric texts and literature of varying cultures, specifically, for my purposes, in the figure of La Llorona.

By considering the maternal bodies of the stories on which this thesis centres – the maternal bodies of La Llorona tales, the maternal bodies of *The Passion of New Eve*, and the maternal bodies of *Dogs in the Dark* – I draw out an understanding of how they can be seen as embodying that abject state. Moreover, as well as exploring how the abject maternal body has been denigrated, I examine the ways in which that state of abjection might be reclaimed as a powerful liminal space to inhabit. It is in the oscillation between the rejection of labelling the maternal body abject at all, and the *jouissance*¹⁸ found in revelling in reclaiming the abject state as a place from which to enact and speak power, that I find the both/and of my own revisionist project.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY

Dogs in the Dark has been an experiment in the revisionism of opposing camps: one that embraces and reclaims myth, and one that positions itself as anti-mythic, seeking to do away with it entirely. Developing the novel has allowed me to imagine a process of dualistic writing and apply this to a creative output. In *Women Singing in the Snow*,

¹⁷ Samantha Pentony, 'How Kristeva's theory of abjection works in relation to the fairy tale and postcolonial novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*', *Deep South*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1996) pp. 1-6.

¹⁸ Kristeva's uses this term for, as Alice Jardine defines it, a 'pleasure which defies translation' (Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', trans. Blake, Harry & Alice Jardine, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981) pp. 13-35.n.6).

Tey Diana Rebolledo states that ‘by privileging purely theoretical discourses over praxis, we risk creating dialogic schisms about the validity of such praxis.’¹⁹ This thesis considers the praxis of revisionist authors *as* theoretical discourse and, as such, any theoretical outcomes of the novel itself remain inconclusive, but present a basis on which to continue to experiment with a both/and of revisionist fiction.

Dogs draws on the work of Anzaldúa, Cisneros, and Carter as a way of thinking through and into these questions of dualism. If we must recognise the dualism of La Llorona’s symbolism as a mother and killer, a creator/destroyer, then we must recognise the powerful dualism of mythic and anti-mythic revisionism. It is through close analysis of the work of Anzaldúa and Cisneros alongside Carter that I have considered how to approach La Llorona lore in a way that incorporates the both/and of my prevailing hypothesis. The framework for this investigation is to offer a case study for each of these critical fictional texts alongside my own writing.

To begin, however, it is useful to interrogate La Llorona folklore in detail, and therefore Chapter One of this thesis outlines who La Llorona is and what she stands for, looking at her folkloric and mythological beginnings. In discussing Kristeva’s theory of abjection and women’s bodies, as well as the nature/culture divide of feminine and masculine bodies, it is possible to see how La Llorona’s symbolism is tied up with her maternal body and its perceived natural, or abject, state. Feminist revisions of myth can be seen to embrace this ‘naturalness’, celebrating women’s bodies as superior to men’s because of their generative potential. But Monique Wittig warns that women:

Have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call “natural”, what is

¹⁹ Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995) p. 2.

supposed to exist before oppression. Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this “nature” within ourselves (a nature which is only an *idea*).²⁰

In perpetuating this idea, even in new forms, women writers risk, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, ‘still dream[ing] through men’s dreams’ by venerating the formula of gods and goddesses, masculine and feminine, conceived by patriarchal systems.²¹

Therefore, we must interrogate whether the process of a revisionism that maintains and glorifies women as equal to nature, equal to myth, is as progressive as it might, at first glance, appear. There are a number of authors who write versions of La Llorona in this vein.²² However, there is not room enough in this exegesis to closely analyse every poem, short story, or tale of La Llorona that I have encountered in my research. Therefore, I have chosen two short stories I see as exemplary of Chicana feminist revisions that focus on La Llorona as a ‘natural’ force: Gloria Anzaldúa’s ‘She Ate Horses’ (1990) and Sandra Cisneros’s ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ (1991). While the first chapter of this thesis offers a broader review of La Llorona tales and literature, Chapter Two offers a close reading of these two stories in order to demonstrate how these authors deploy her as a figure of empowerment for Chicana women.

Since its publication in 1991, Cisneros’s ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ has received much scholarly attention, and is often analysed in relation to its use of La Llorona symbolism.²³ It might seem that another examination of Cisneros’s short

²⁰ Monique Wittig, ‘One Is Not Born a Woman’, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Conboy, Katie, Medina, Nadia & Sarah Stanbury (eds.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 309-10.

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Borde, Constance & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010) p. 166.

²² Including Cherríe Moraga and Norma Alcarón who, like Anzaldúa, also contributed to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), the seminal volume on challenging Eurocentric feminism.

²³ ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ first appeared in the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). Cisneros’s collection has since had a full volume dedicated to the examination of both this story, and its companions, in *Sandra Cisneros’s Woman Hollering Creek*, Cecilia Donohue

story is superfluous; however, there are elements of the story's correlation between La Llorona and nature, as well as a consideration of the story's portrayal of La Llorona as a speaking subject, that have certainly been considered but not yet fully unpacked. Furthermore, the canonical place of Cisneros's story in the revisionist texts of Chicana feminists means that it is an essential text for any outsider approaching revisions of La Llorona's symbolism to consider. There are, as Domino Renee Perez notes, other revisionist texts that pre-date 'Woman Hollering Creek', such as Helena María Viramontes' 'The Cariboo Café' (1985) and Anzaldúa's 'She Ate Horses', but the enduring popularity of Cisneros's version suggests there is something about this particular work that resonates deeply with its audience.²⁴

Anzaldúa's 'She Ate Horses' is underscored by the animalistic and natural imagery of La Llorona lore. Yet existing analyses focus on the story's place in the queer writing of Chicana feminists, while overlooking the nuances of Anzaldúa's use of La Llorona imagery.²⁵ Even Perez's otherwise comprehensive thesis on La Llorona literature fails to mention this particular story altogether.²⁶ While there is a wealth of scholarship about Anzaldúa's seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), as well as existing analysis of La Llorona in many of her other essays, stories, and poems, the symbolism of La Llorona in 'She Ate Horses' has, thus far, escaped close examination. In this thesis, I interpret 'She Ate Horses' as an exploration of the *jouissance* found in embracing the feminine aspects of the animal and natural worlds.

(ed.) (New York: Rodolpi, 2010). Also see Domino Renee Perez's reading in *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) pp. 83-87.

²⁴ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, p. 83.

²⁵ Elspeth Probyn makes passing reference to the story in her analysis of the connections between queer imagery, girls, and horses in 'Girls and Girls and Girls and Horses: Queer Images of Singularity and Desire', *Tessera*, Vol. 15 (1993) and again in her book *Outside Belonging* (London: Routledge, 1996). Sylvia Martin makes reference to Probyn's nod to the story in 'Becoming-Violent: Desire in the Love Poetry of Mary Fullerton', *Hecate*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1997) but does not examine the story itself.

²⁶ Domino Renee Perez's work in La Llorona scholarship is foundational to my consideration of La Llorona in this thesis. Her *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008) remains the most extensive and comprehensive analysis of La Llorona in folklore and literature to date.

In my analysis of these two texts I find that La Llorona emerges as a figure who enables women to reclaim both their bodies and their voices joyfully.

By considering the revisionist texts of these Chicana feminist writers I have sought to highlight how stories of La Llorona have been redressed. Now depicted as a figure who compels women to speak out against injustice, whose natural and animal elements embody a positive reconfiguration of the feminine as powerful and potent, La Llorona stands for a myriad of subjectivities that demand to be heard. The creative and critical components of this thesis do not seek to speak for a Chicana subjectivity, nor would such a subjectivity need me to speak for it. Rather, in the act of depicting such a figure as La Llorona, this work endeavours to consider the powerful symbolic resonances and possibilities for a different, though interrelated, subjectivity. Rather than liberating a 'universal' female consciousness, this work hopes to comprehend a local paradigm by deferring to a model of Chicana discourse that already negotiates ways to liberate itself.

Chapter Three shifts focus away from these Chicana texts to look at Carter's opposing standpoint. The decision to closely analyse *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) is the result of a number of influences. Firstly, Carter approaches her revisionism from a white, Western viewpoint, and so her motivations, and outcomes, offer a contrast to the work of Chicana authors from a position that sits closer to my own. Secondly, *The Passion of New Eve* sets out to achieve its revision through, as Carter coined it, an 'anti-mythic' process. From this I use anti-mythic revisionism to refer to the kind of revisionism that shuns embracing notions of ancient and essential female power. It refuses the notion that a return to any proposed 'gynocracies' of a pre-

patriarchal past is liberating.²⁷ Instead, a process of anti-mythic revisionism looks to do away with these myths entirely and start again to build something new. As a Western author this is tricky territory to negotiate. It may seem all well and good for a woman from a position of privilege to seemingly throw away these symbols as unnecessary. Indeed, it may seem like a classist, elitist, even racist act, to equate the significance of Carter's use of mythic symbolism to its role in the revisionist projects of women of differing classes, ethnicities and sexualities. However, Carter knowingly approaches her revisionism from this position, by no means unaware of her own privilege, acknowledging that 'white women can't get out of our historic complicity in colonialism.'²⁸ It is precisely this self-awareness that attracts me to her work, and leads me to consider how this anti-mythic approach might inform a work that straddles cultural divides.²⁹

My analysis of *New Eve* focuses on the use of landscapes as proxies for gender, and how Carter both embraces and rejects their gendered symbolism. I primarily use the environments of the city, the desert, and the cave to draw comparisons to the use of gendered landscape in my own novel. In examining how women have been aligned with goddesses of the natural world this thesis considers

²⁷ Jane Caputi refers to Paula Gunn Allen's use of the word 'gynocracies' to describe "'woman-centered tribal societies in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources and female deities of the magnitude of the Christian God were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life'" (Jane Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) p. 8).

²⁸ Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line,' p. 73.

²⁹ The notion of 'woman' collapses women into one universal whole; not only does Carter redress myths of *women*, she also undoes women's myths of *woman*. In the effort to avoid collapsing the racial, social, economic, and sexual diversity of women into an essentialist notion of a universal 'woman', I also acknowledge the need to avoid collapsing all women into mothers. As Judith Butler argues: 'The effort to characterize a feminine specificity through recourse to maternity, whether biological or social, [has] produced a... factionalization and even a disavowal of feminism' (Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Butler, Judith & Joan W. Scott (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 15). I recognise that not all women are mothers, and I do not intend to suggest the maternal body is a universal specificity of femininity, but precisely that such a notion reinforces, and is reinforced by, mythological and folkloric archetypes of femininity.

how ‘woman has been aligned with the bodily and material, while the bodily and material has... been regarded as corrupting the purity of form, spirit, or soul.’³⁰ Carter’s portrayal of the goddess that we find in the cave, the chthonic Mother, exemplifies how the process of re-mystifying, of re-mythologising, a universal notion of mythic and maternal woman is fraught with pitfalls that quickly relapse into dualisms and binaries. Her refusal to reinforce even those ideas that strengthen the myth of ‘woman’ while, at times, seemingly reinforcing those that undermine *any* feminine power – such as Eve’s rape and domination by Zero discussed in Chapter Three – present us with a more boldly complex and multifaceted sense of what purpose archetypal symbols of gender really serve. This is not to say that there is inherent folly in reclaiming those symbols that empower women, but rather to say that if we accept one binary in reclaiming it we may well, albeit inadvertently, also accept and reinforce the other.

Taken side by side, the revisionist projects of Chicana feminism and the anti-mythic revisionism of *New Eve* lead me to a conception of the both/and approach of feminist revisionism. This both/and approach acknowledges that the act of *either* embracing *or* rejecting the mythic symbols of femininity does not adequately represent the full spectrum of women’s lived reality. At times these symbols act as burdens that push us down, no matter how appealing the powerful and rapturous guises they appear in may be; at other times their potency lends us ways to identify ourselves, locate ourselves, liberate ourselves. Instead of privileging one of these lines of thinking over the other, this thesis strives to conceive of a simultaneity of both/and.

³⁰ Rachel Jones, *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) p. 41.

CHAPTER ONE: ABJECT WHORES, IMPOSSIBLE VIRGINS AND LA LLORONA

The most common versions of the La Llorona tale usually contain a familiar set of elements. La Llorona is a beautiful young woman. Most often she is an indigenous woman, usually poor, and desperately in love with a man. This man is often Spanish, rich and powerful. He represents the invading forces of Europe, the contamination of indigenous ways, and the cruelty and greed of colonial Spain. But because the young woman is so beautiful he cannot resist becoming involved with her. They begin an affair and it continues long enough for her to bear him several children.

However, he eventually tires of her and either takes a new lover or returns to his European wife. Devastated, the woman goes wild with grief and anger: she bundles up her children and takes them down to the river. There, one by one, she plunges them beneath the surface, holding their bodies under until they cease to struggle. She does not stop until all her children are drowned, the revenge on her former lover complete. But a crime like infanticide cannot go unpunished, and so she is cursed for this deed. Often the story concludes with her throwing herself beneath the waters, committing suicide in grief and remorse.

Some versions of the tale more closely align to the colonial Catholic view of the world; thus, when La Llorona dies and tries to enter Heaven she is stopped at the gates by Saint Peter who asks her where her children are. She answers that she does not know, their bodies having drifted away with the river current. She is, therefore, sent back to the earthly realm to seek them out, wandering eternally until she can find them and seek admission to Paradise. In a ghostly form she haunts waterways,

preying on children, snatching them away for her own, and endlessly crying and wailing.¹ The noise of her weeping can be heard at night, terrifying and dangerous.

Just as La Llorona haunts the rivers and streams of Mexico and the southern U.S., her portrayal as desperate lover, cruel murderess, and punishing spirit haunts contemporary constructions of women's identities for Chicana feminist authors. This chapter begins by examining La Llorona's relationship to the two other most prominent figures that also preoccupy Chicana feminist revisionism: La Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe. As Jean Wyatt observes, it is in these three figures that 'Mexican social myths of gender crystallize with special force... haunt[ing] the sexual and maternal identities of contemporary Mexican and Chicana women.'² In order to better understand the influence of this trinity of women I also consider the role of the goddess Cihuacóatl and the spirits of the *cihuateteo* in pre-Columbian mythology, and their links to the formation of La Llorona's folklore. The splitting of the both/and of these deities' destructive and creative dualities by the invading forces directly results in the virgin/whore dichotomy of Guadalupe and La Llorona/La Malinche.

The Kristevan concept of abjection informs my reading of La Llorona's story, and illuminates how and why she has come to represent anxieties about the maternal body. The maternal body's 'debt to nature', perceived in La Llorona's links to natural environments and animalistic traits, demonstrates how the female body has come to symbolise the abject. This discussion establishes the way that embracing these very elements of the mythic and abject nature of woman has served the feminist agenda of

¹ It is this element of the tale – La Llorona's desire to replace her lost children, either motivated by her regret at killing them or because she must find them before she is able to rest – that renders La Llorona into a threatening bogeywoman. As Marina Warner argues in her analysis on such figures, these threatening spirits and ghouls of the nursery 'want children for themselves. They are covetous, and the implication is that they have lost a baby or cannot have one and feel the lack' (Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000) p. 26).

² Jean Wyatt, 'On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros's "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Woman Hollering Creek"', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1995), pp. 243-71.

reclaiming La Llorona's story as an empowering one, an argument that is essential to my reading of the work of Anzaldúa and Cisneros in Chapter Two. At the same time, this chapter also establishes a view of the problematic ways that continuing to imbue the feminine with mythic and natural symbolism risks perpetuating notions of women as inferior to men, a discussion I take into my final chapter when considering Carter's anti-mythic *New Eve*.

In considering the multifaceted nature of La Llorona folklore, however, this chapter examines a mix of pre- and post-colonial concerns about women's agency revealed in her story. As a complex illustration of a woman who is both the victim of her lover's patriarchal injustice and the perpetrator of a shocking transgression, her dual nature as victim and perpetrator positions her as a figure that is both/and. Silvia Toscano Villanueva argues that:

The cultural potency of La Llorona can be attributed to her intersectionality across historical time periods: pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary. She is continually reimagined and thus resurrected as a symbol of empowerment and a catalyst for transformation.³

I argue that it is precisely the both/and nature of La Llorona that situates her as a prime site from which to enact revisionist projects of empowerment and transformation and, in turn, what situates her as an exemplary figure to consider in a creative project that also seeks to function as both/and.

Like Toscano Villanueva, Cristina Bacchilega identifies a similar process of transformation and empowerment in her review of revisionist fairy tales, asserting that these stories serve to 'make visible... gendered patterns of complicity and resistance, differing socio-economic and historical dynamics of gender representations, the making and unmaking of a heterosexual project, and the varying

³ Silvia Toscano Villanueva, 'Chicano/a Art and Folklore', in *Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions, vol. I*, María Herrera-Sobek (ed.), p. 260.

impulse to enact fleshed knowledge in narrative.’⁴ The ways in which La Llorona’s story can offer fertile ground for enacting such transformations become clear by examining the origins and facets of her lore.

Bierhorst’s variation of the story, ‘Forever Without Rest’, quoted in the Introduction to this thesis, omits the motivation of an unfaithful lover for La Llorona’s act of murder, but includes other key elements of the tale: the children are drowned in a river, and the woman can forever be heard crying and calling for them at night. Specifics about time in Bierhorst’s version – that La Llorona’s weeping can be heard ‘starting about eight o’clock’ – demonstrate the way in which folkloric stories evolve depending on their teller.

Bierhorst argues that La Llorona is the ‘grim aspect of the earth goddess’, associating her with Malintzin/La Malinche – a key figure I discuss below⁵ – but also with the ability to lure men to danger with her voice and beauty. Significantly, he also argues that in a country where ‘the great male deities of Aztec lore have been dead for centuries’, the female La Llorona is alive and thriving in folkloric tradition. This attests to the undeniable power and resonance of her story and, as is demonstrated in her proliferation in revisionist texts, her importance to Mexican and Mexican-American women.⁶

In *Women Singing in the Snow*, Rebolledo explains why rewriting myths can be so empowering for women:

Women’s lives are particularly circumscribed by cultural values and norms that try to dictate how women should behave and who their role models should be. If, however, the existing mythology (as defined by patriarchy) is unable to fulfill the increasing demand for women as active, energetic, and positive figures, then women writers may choose myths and archetypes... that are different from the traditional ones. They may create new role models for

⁴ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2010) p. 140.

⁵ p. 255.

⁶ Bierhorst, *The Hungry Woman*, p. 12.

themselves or choose existing models but imbue them with different (sometimes radically different) traits and characteristics.⁷

La Llorona is a model who, when defined by patriarchy, has been used to denounce and censure women's agency and desire. When employed in contemporary contexts, La Llorona is, as Perez argues, 'a dynamic reconfiguration of the diversity of Chicano life and experience, reflecting regional, economic, social, sexual and political concerns.'⁸ The reconfigurations of the most common aspects of La Llorona folklore found in the work of Anzaldúa and Cisneros, and discussed further in Chapter Two, do indeed imbue her imagery with powerful and radically new meanings. Anzaldúa and Cisneros's reconfigurations include radically altered readings of La Llorona's perpetual weeping, her association with water, her role as a mother figure, and her animalistic traits.

La Llorona is traditionally linked to fundamentally feminine and natural principles. Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero argue that it is in her association with 'water, drownings, and the mysterious forces of the night, [that] La Llorona comes to represent the unpredictability of nature' and, therefore, femininity.⁹

Her most immediate connection to the forces of nature comes in her association with water.¹⁰ As a primordial life-giving force water represents the generative and fecund mother aspect of La Llorona. But water also represents her

⁷ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 49.

⁸ Domino Renee Perez, 'Lost in the Cinematic Landscape: Chicana as Lloronas in Contemporary Film', in *Contested Images: Women of Color in Popular Culture*, Alma M. Garcia (ed.) (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010) pp. 72-73.

⁹ Tey Diana Rebolledo & Eliana S. Rivero, 'Myths and Archetypes', in *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, Rebolledo, Tey Diana & Eliana Suárez Rivero (eds.) (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1993) p. 194.

¹⁰ See also a comparison of her story to the Hindu river goddess Ganga (Ganges) in: Indrani Mukherjee & Sanghita Sen, 'A Post-Colonial Critique of Gendered Water Myth from India through the Myth of the Llorona in Deepa Mehta's *Water: Siting the Hindu Widow in Transcultural Becoming*', in *Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth*, José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb (eds.) (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

threatening, consuming, and destructive side.¹¹ When she is portrayed as a beautiful apparition whose cries lure men to their deaths in rivers and lakes, she resembles the Greek sirens who also call men to drown. The English Jenny Greenteeth is a hideous hag who likewise pulls men and children to watery deaths. She is most like La Llorona in that she is also used as a bogeywoman to scare children into behaving.¹² As a lover's betrayal is most often the motivating feature of La Llorona's actions, she finds similarities in vilas, the jilted water spirits of Slavic lore.¹³ Like sirens and mermaids, vilas and river hags, La Llorona's association with water represents a feminised and, often, sexualised danger.¹⁴

This feminised danger also manifests in animal hybridity, specifically in La Llorona's case as a woman with the head of a horse or a donkey.¹⁵ Here she can be compared to kelpies, Scottish beings that appear as women with equine features, or fully formed horses that will swim out into the sea to drown any human foolish

¹¹ She has even been said to influence the natural forces of the waterways she haunts, responsible for drownings and deaths: 'The area haunted by La Llorona is prone to flash flooding that turns creeks into rivers and rivers into death traps in just minutes' (Cindy Day, 'GRANDMA SAYS: Weather Lore', *The Guardian*, 9 April 2018 <<http://www.theguardian.pe.ca/weather/grandma-says-weather-lore-199843/>> [accessed 1/5/2018]).

¹² Also known by other names, such as Peg Powler (Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Fairies in World Folklore and Mythology* (London: McFarland & Company Inc., 2013) p. 194).

¹³ Vilas, or vilis, are the spirits of jilted brides who seek revenge on men after their deaths. They are a type of rusalka – nymphs associated with water – and are often depicted as having been mortal women who were motivated to commit suicide because of unrequited love or betrayal (Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina from State to Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 191-93). They also famously appear as spirits of vengeance in Adam's ballet *Giselle* (1841).

¹⁴ Moreover, as Tamra Andrews observes, societies that 'revered water as a creative force tended to make their water spirits female' (Tamra Andrews, 'Water and Water Spirits', in *Dictionary of Nature Myths: Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. 220-21). See also: Astrida Neimanis, 'Water', in *Gender: Matter*, Stacy Alaimo (ed.) (Farmington Hills: Macmillan Reference, 2017) pp. 171-86.

¹⁵ Sarah Iles Johnston discusses the symbolism of the horse as an enduring chthonic and feminine symbol in *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (1990), arguing that: 'According to myth and cultic tradition, Medusa and Erinys (or Demeter-Erinys) each assumed the shape of a mare to become the consorts of Poseidon and subsequently bore him the foals Pegasus and Arion. At one time, Erinys and Medusa probably were chthonic goddesses with beneficent as well as maleficent sides, but from Homer on they represent the threatening aspects of the chthonic world – appropriate mates and mothers for horses' (Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) p. 180-81).

enough to try to ride them.¹⁶ Other aspects of her folklore appear in many other cultural contexts as well, most recognisably in the crying and wailing of Irish banshees and in the wealth of ‘woman in white’ myths that contain spectral women dressed in flowing white whose hauntings usually foretell of death, such as the German Weisse Frau.¹⁷

Her role as a child-killer bears echoes of the Greek child-murderesses Medea and Lamia.¹⁸ La Llorona has been seen as a ‘new-world Medea’, who seeks ‘revenge on the colonizers and the children they abandoned.’¹⁹ Similarly, Susan M. Bernardo, conflating La Malinche with La Llorona, aligns La Llorona with Medea because both women are abandoned by the men for whom they have betrayed their own people – Medea for Jason, La Malinche/La Llorona for Cortés.²⁰ Both La Llorona and Medea’s acts of infanticide are aimed at revenge on the men who have abandoned them and so this act becomes symbolic of violently breaking ties with established patriarchal norms. Robert Barakat proposes that this violation can be seen as an act that disrupts patriarchy because it is ‘an act against the man’,²¹ but at the same time, like Medea, it

¹⁶ Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Beasts and Monsters in Myth, Legend and Folklore* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016) p. 186.

¹⁷ Gloria Duarte explains how in this German tale, the Weisse Frau’s lover is a widower, but she must kill his children from this former union because she sees them as an obstacle to her marrying him. It is bad luck to see her ghost, as it is a portent of doom (Gloria Duarte, ‘La Llorona’s Ancestry: Crossing Cultural Boundaries’, in *Folklore: In All of Us, in All We Do*, Untiedt, Kenneth L. (ed.) (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006) p. 110). See also: Gertrude Jobes, s.v. ‘White’, in *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, Vol. 2 (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962) pp. 1676-78.

¹⁸ Having had several children by Zeus, Lamia incited the rage of Hera, who killed all of Lamia’s children. In her grief, Lamia went about snatching infants, which she tore to pieces and ate (Joseph Eddy Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) p.100). Lamia also appears in animal form, most famously in John Keats’s poem ‘Lamia’ as a ‘palpitating snake’; the only parts of her that suggest her original human form are her ‘woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete’ and her eyes that, like La Llorona’s, ‘weep, and weep.’

¹⁹ Round, *The Impossible Land*, p. 178.

²⁰ Susan M. Bernardo, ‘Abandoned or Murdered Children, Motifs S300-S399’, in *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, Garry, Jane, & Hasan El-Shamy (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2016) p. 405. I discuss the La Llorona/La Malinche connection in depth in shortly.

²¹ Robert A. Barakat, ‘Aztec Motifs in “La Llorona”’, *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1965) pp. 288-96.

can also be read as an act aimed at saving children from the cruelties of patriarchy.²² Yet, despite these similarities with various European myths and folklore, ignoring La Llorona's specific cultural origins, embedded – as I outline below – in a pre-Colonial pantheon of Aztec mythology, only serves to assimilate and devalue her particular cultural heritage and diminish her potential to signify a unique Chicana identity.

However, perhaps it is because of the familiar resonances of her legend across cultures that non-Chican@ artists, writers, and filmmakers adapt her story in a multitude of ways. Within broader U.S. culture the popularity of her tale has grown, and versions of her story have featured in U.S. commercial film and television.²³ Her function as a child-eater has become a prominent feature within renditions of her tale, most notably in the immensely popular Universal Studios Halloween Horror Nights. These annual month long events are designed to coincide with celebrations for Halloween and offer visitors an immersive experience as they walk through themed mazes, elaborately designed to resemble the sets of popular horror films and television shows. In 2011 and 2012 in Hollywood, and in 2013 in Orlando, the studios offered La Llorona themed mazes. Devoid of any link to a particular film or show,

²² Medea states that she will kill her children in order to prevent surrendering them 'to hands more savage than [her] own' (Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Raphael, Frederic & Kenneth McLeish (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994) p. 42).

²³ Perez specifically analyses the use of La Llorona motifs in the pilot episode of the television series *Supernatural* (2005) (Domino Renee Perez, 'The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2012) pp. 153-72), while elsewhere she has discussed the growing mainstream appeal of La Llorona's story (Domino Renee Perez, 'La Llorona: Hispanic folklore goes mainstream', *The Conversation*, 1 November 2014 <<https://theconversation.com/la-llorona-hispanic-folklore-goes-mainstream-33705>> [accessed 8/1/2015]). In *Reinventing the Latino Television Viewer: Language, Ideology, and Practice*, Christopher Chávez closely examines the representation of La Llorona in an episode of the television show *Grimm* ('La Llorona', Season 2, Episode 9 (2012)), providing an insightful discussion into 'the fine line between reflecting ethnic culture and appropriating it' in mass market media (Christopher Chávez, *Reinventing the Latino Television Viewer: Language, Ideology, and Practice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015) pp. 43-45). Robin Roberts offers a comparison of both these television portrayals (Robin Roberts, *Subversive Spirits: The Female Ghost in British and American Popular Culture* (Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2018) pp. 74-86). Orquidea Morales analyses the films *The Wailer: La Llorona* (2006) and *The Wailer 2* (2007) as problematic representations of Chicana@ culture (Orquidea Morales, 'Chicana Feminism and Horror: Fear La Llorona', *UFLR*, Vol. 17 (2010) pp. 1-9).

these mazes drew from the diverse body of La Llorona folklore to situate patrons in a generic representation of a Mexican village. Here, patrons were chased by ghostly women dressed in white, while the corpses of infants floated in rivers, and an enormous and grisly animatronic La Llorona devoured hapless children.²⁴ Significantly, this commodification of La Llorona, while serving to introduce her to a broader audience, also reinforces La Llorona as a monstrously abject threat, glossing over the nuances of her story in one generic conflation of horror. Because of the commercial dominance and reach of a company like Universal Studios, this exclusively grotesque depiction of La Llorona could, as Perez warns, ‘appropriate or represent her and/or her story to their benefit and our [Chican@, Mexican@, and Latin@] detriment.’²⁵

Bearing this in mind, it is imperative to consider how culturally specific mythic and religious figures affect the ways Chicana authors shape new and innovative interpretations of La Llorona lore. The limits of this thesis require me to exclude many deviations from, and amalgamations of, La Llorona lore from my analysis.²⁶ However, in order to conceptualise La Llorona’s full symbolic potential it is necessary to make clear her links to the Spanish conquest and Catholicism, as well as her pre-Columbian roots in Aztec mythology. In considering early pre- and post-conquest religious elements it becomes possible to see how and why the basic premise

²⁴ Brady MacDonald, ‘Universal Studios Hollywood unveils Halloween Horror Nights mazes’, *LA Times*, 31 July 2012, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/31/news/la-trb-halloween-haunt-2012-universal-studios-hollywood-07201231>> [accessed 12/5/2014]

²⁵ While I consider this charge of appropriation in relation to Universal Studios, Perez is referring specifically to the use of La Llorona in Michael Chabon’s novel *Summerland* (2002), which, due to his reputation and backing by a large multinational publishing house, ‘overshadow[s] other cultural productions’ (Perez, *There Was a Woman*, pp. 145-46).

²⁶ By this I mean tales that have evolved into horror film or television representations, which tend to blur La Llorona’s story into other urban legends for cinematic effect. I also refer to other folktales that share aspects of La Llorona’s story but that are much more regionally specific, diverging in ways that create new and distinct figures, such as La Matlalcihua from Oaxaca, La Mala Hora from Chiapas, or the Donkey Lady, with – as the name might suggest – the head of a donkey, from the Southern borderlands of the U.S.

of a betrayed woman who must weep for her children recurs so often in post-colonial, queer, and feminist versions of her story, particularly to illustrate La Llorona's continuing power to signify a marginalised 'Other'. For this thesis, I focus on the way feminine bodies and maternal subjects are represented in La Llorona stories because it is through this lens that I consider my own use of La Llorona lore in *Dogs*.

La Llorona sits at both extremes of the good/bad woman archetype: the virgin/whore dichotomy.²⁷ As a seductress and a killer she represents all that is seditious and evil in women; like witches and terrible (step)mothers she is abject and to be feared. But when viewed as an abandoned and betrayed indigenous woman who acts to save her children from a far worse fate than death, she is pitied like the suffering and self-denying Virgin Mother. Jack Zipes asserts that Western popular culture producers, such as Disney, continue to reinforce binaries of good and bad femininity.²⁸ In particular, these producers present us with wicked witches as the most recognisable of the 'bad' female archetype,²⁹ and he affirms that these representations are 'stereotypical products of the male gaze and mass-mediated manipulation of the images of woman that date back to the Christian church's demonization of women.'³⁰ He argues that the folkloric witch figures these versions are based on, much like the goddesses of Aztec mythology, traditionally appeared as capable of both good and

²⁷ Irene Lara argues that this dichotomy is represented in the Americas by the Virgin of Guadalupe as 'a spiritually pure mother' in opposition to La Malinche as a 'physically defiled concubine.' This is, as she states, a 'foundational theme in Chicana feminist thought' (Irene Lara, 'Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgin/Pagan Puta Dichotomy', in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1-2 (2008) pp. 99-127).

²⁸ Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 78.

²⁹ In more recent years there has been some revisionism by Disney of its own wicked witch archetype. *Maleficent* (2014), starring Angelina Jolie, is one such example, where we are shown the wicked witch's 'humanity' by being given a version of events that accounts for her later actions. Indeed, even in the original incarnation of Disney's Maleficent character, the animated *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), one of the good fairies, Fauna, explicitly states that Maleficent 'can't be all bad', and is perhaps simply unhappy.

³⁰ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, p. 78.

evil deeds.³¹ In recent history, La Llorona has also come to be presented as capable of both aspects. Domino Renee Perez explains: ‘In oral and written narratives, La Llorona emerges as a physical threat and a gender-coded allegory proscribing certain behaviors for women.’³² She is punished, Perez tells us, for her ‘feminized transgression,’ acting against the strict rules governing women’s roles as selfless mothers and nurturers, as well as defying patriarchal expectations that she should remain a quiet and stoic sufferer, Madonna-like, in the face of infidelity and desertion.³³ In focusing on her transgressions against the patriarchal structures in which she functions, Chicana writers find ways to rewrite La Llorona as a figure of empowerment.

LA MALINCHE AND ABJECTION

Chicana literature, as I have suggested, often draws on the trinity of women most prominently figured in Mexican culture: La Llorona, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and La Malinche. These three figures correspond respectively to the three roles that, Alicia Gaspar de Alba argues, are available to Chicana women: ‘*la madre, la virgin, y la puta*’, or the mother, the virgin, and the whore.³⁴ Examining La Llorona’s similarities

³¹ A fundamental example of this is the witch Baba Yaga who, as Zipes outlines, can be dangerous, but is rarely ‘malignant’, often even acting as a ‘benefactress’ to young women in trouble (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, pp. 72-73). The earliest traces of Baba Yaga identify her as a Slavic goddess of the underworld who ‘feeds the world, but is herself hungry’ (Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folklore* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004) pp. 16-17).

³² Domino Renee Perez, ‘Caminando con La Llorona: Traditional and Contemporary Narratives’, in *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, Cantú, Norma E. & Olga Nájera-Ramírez (eds.) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) p. 109.

³³ Perez, ‘Caminando con La Llorona’, p.109.

³⁴ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”: Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014) p. 73.

to La Malinche establishes the abject ways in which these two women have been viewed. The Virgin of Guadalupe, however, is the pure and impossible mother figure against which La Llorona's monstrous motherhood is amplified.

La Malinche, variously known as Malintzin, Doña Marina, Malinal or Malinalli, was an indigenous woman who was given, along with a group of other women, as a peace offering to the Spanish in early 1519.³⁵ When her gift for language was discovered, she was presented to the leader of the Spanish invading forces, Hernán Cortés, who used her as his interpreter and eventually also took her as his lover. Her translating work positioned her as a go-between for the Spanish and indigenous peoples, and her role was crucial to the success of the Spanish mission in the New World. As a result, the name Malinche, or the eponymous term *malinchista*,³⁶ has become an insult used against those accused of treachery, as she is seen as having turned on her own people to aid the invading forces, while her sexual relationship with Cortés also positions her as the exemplary whore.³⁷ It has been the project of various biographers to highlight the limited options available to La Malinche in her historical contexts, challenging the accepted doctrine of La Malinche as Cortés's 'whore', and a woman hell-bent on destroying her own people.³⁸

Significant to La Malinche's association with La Llorona is their shared role as mothers. La Malinche bore Cortés a son, Martín. When Cortés eventually abandoned her, Martín was taken from her to be raised in Spain, but he came to be seen as an origin story for the first mestizo: a child of the union of Spanish and

³⁵ Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) pp. 171-72.

³⁶ This term is most commonly used to describe someone who values the cultural and commercial products of other nations over those of Mexico.

³⁷ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 62.

³⁸ There has been much examination and revision of La Malinche's biography. For more see: Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

indigenous peoples. As with La Llorona's union with a man from outside her own class and race, La Malinche's similar transgression of race is key to why she became so reviled. Poet and essayist Cherríe Moraga argues that La Malinche is hated because she 'fucked the white man who conquered the Indian peoples of Mexico and destroyed their culture. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this "transgression."'”³⁹ La Llorona has been tarred with a similar brush; she is loathed and reviled for her relationship with a man who should be denied to her either because of his wealth or his race. The final similarity in their stories is that both women are eventually abandoned by their lovers.

Luis Leal argues that because the historical Malinche is only recorded from 1519 onwards, she is clearly not a precedent for La Llorona.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in the cultural imagination of Mexico, their stories have become intertwined and the resonances between their roles as both victim and perpetrator have merged. La Llorona's conflation with Malinche makes La Llorona both despised as a traitor to her people and her maternal role, but also, in revisionist texts, sympathised with as the 'raped indigenous woman' and mother to children 'born of violence.'⁴¹ La Llorona's bodily contamination can be seen as a consequence of her choice to have sexual relations with an outsider, or from the impurity inflicted *upon* her body by the sexual violence of the invading forces. The result of either transgression is to heighten the

³⁹ Cherríe Moraga, 'From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism', in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis (ed.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) p. 175.

⁴⁰ Luis Leal, 'The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy: The Evolution of a Myth', in *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, Romero, Rolando & Amanda Nolacea Harris (eds.) (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005) p. 135.

⁴¹ Debra A. Castillo, 'Coagulated Words: Gaspar de Alba's Malinche', in *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, Romero, Rolando & Amanda Nolacea Harris (eds.) (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005) p. 68.

abject nature of the ‘defiling, impure, uncontrollable materiality of the subject’s embodied existence.’⁴²

In their embodied existence as mothers both La Malinche and La Llorona become abjected as ‘Other’. Larissa M. Mercado-López contends that these legends of mestizo ‘maternal archetypes reveal how marginalization [of Latina women] is created through the process of othering.’⁴³ In his famous consideration of *mexicanidad* – Mexicanness – *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Mexican poet and diplomat Octavio Paz argues that it is La Malinche’s ‘abject passivity’ in the face of Cortés and his men that makes her so despised. Her passivity is different to the Virgin Mother’s: *she* ‘is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions.’⁴⁴ However, Malinche’s passivity, in Paz’s reasoning, is abject because ‘she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides... in her sex.’⁴⁵ Woman, according to Paz, is always vulnerable – ‘the misfortune of her “open” anatomy’⁴⁶ – and it is because she is perceived to have allowed a violation of this openness that ‘the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.’⁴⁷ But as Anzaldúa argues, for Chicana women ‘the worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer... Not me sold out my people but they me.’⁴⁸ For Chicana feminist writers, as Castillo argues, ‘figuring La Malinche as La Llorona

⁴² Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) p. 72.

⁴³ Larissa M. Mercado-López, ‘From Lost Woman to Third Space Mestiza Maternal Subject: La Llorona as a Metaphor of Transformation’, in *(Re)mapping the Latina/o Literary Landscape*, Herrera, Cristina & Larissa M. Mercado-López (eds.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p. 216.

⁴⁴ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (London: Penguin Press, 1967) p. 76.

⁴⁵ Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 77.

⁴⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) p. 22.

calls upon this composite feminine myth's abject and uncanny power' and presents new ways to rewrite representations of feminine and maternal bodies.⁴⁹

But it is not only in her conflation with La Malinche that we find this source of abjection; it is implicit in all La Llorona tales that figure her as the monstrous and/or devouring mother. Wendy Rogers asserts:

The abject is essentially corporeal and hence aligned with the feminine, the procreative, the maternal. Much of the power of abjection stems from a fear of the unknown, and a fascination with the possibilities inherent in ambiguity.⁵⁰

La Llorona fits this description twofold; she is corporeal in her maternal function, but also in her violent and visceral role as a child-killer and eater. But, at the same time, this dichotomy of function – creator/destroyer – also makes her a figure of ambiguous and shifting nature, a conjunction, as Castillo puts it, of the “nurturing” and “horror” evoked in Kristeva's reading of abjection. [La Llorona] is horrible because she should be maternal and nurturing; by the same token, what she nurtures is, precisely, horror itself.⁵¹ This, in turn, figures La Llorona as the monstrous feminine, a ‘woman as embodiment of negativity or threat, a predatory spectre.’⁵² This predatory threat is linked to the fear of women's autonomy: that in allowing them to become individual desiring subjects, an unruly individuated self is released that demands fulfilment. ‘The monster woman’, according to Toril Moi, ‘is the woman who refuses to be selfless, [who] acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell...’⁵³ One version of La Llorona's tale recounts that ‘she herself has killed the child and is somehow demented’, a simplified conception of a complicated aspect of her lore that leaves

⁴⁹ Castillo, ‘Coagulated Words’, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁰ Wendy Rogers, ‘Sources of abjection in Western responses to menopause’, in *Reinterpreting Menopause*, Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Jeanne Daly (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 230.

⁵¹ Castillo, ‘Coagulated Words’, pp. 67-68.

⁵² Perez, ‘Caminando con La Llorona’, p. 103.

⁵³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985) p. 58.

little room to consider the ramifications of such an act, or its motivations.⁵⁴ Instead, this abridged version simply equates such a deed with insanity, that most feminine condition that results from women's inability to control her reproductive self or her shocking desires.⁵⁵ Larissa M. Mercado-López distills La Llorona's symbolism down to the crux of the issue when she asserts that: 'La Llorona has come to symbolize the "problem" of maternal desire.'⁵⁶ La Llorona is always already escaping patriarchal prescribed femininity through her desire to act out in revenge, and this rebellion is what casts her as a monster, as much as the actual act of filicide or cannibalism. A woman with too much agency is a scary beast indeed.

In her study of the feminine body, Barbara Creed outlines how the image of the monstrous feminine is linked to patriarchal fears around the reproductive potential of female bodies. It is a 'woman's womb – as with her other reproductive organs – [that] signifies sexual difference and as such has the power to horrify.'⁵⁷ Mary Douglas's views on the body in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) are influential to how Kristeva theorises the abject in relation to menstrual blood, childbirth, breast milk and the sexual fluids of the female body. Douglas argues that the body's boundaries can stand for social structures and systems. In Douglas's view the body can:

represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious... We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Funk & Wagnalls, 'Llorona', p. 639.

⁵⁵ Hysteria, of course, being the most famous manifestation of a woman's inability to control her emotions and her womb (Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 53).

⁵⁶ Mercado-López, 'From Lost Woman to Third Space Mestiza', p. 216.

⁵⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 116.

For Douglas then, any breaches of the body's bounds, be they breast milk, sweat, blood or pus, endanger social meaning because they expose our bodies as well as our social formations as fragile. The abject threatens because 'bodily control is an expression of social control.'⁵⁹ Douglas further argues that 'spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or *tears* by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.'⁶⁰ If tears arise as an abject emission, then La Llorona's ceaseless weeping is an eternally abject act, her very name as 'weeping woman' conjuring up not only the sobs and cries of her sorrow, but also the visceral weeping of an unhealed wound.

Sarah Gamble argues that for a subject to function within the social and symbolic order, that subject 'must define itself as independent, and reject anything which threatens that sense of autonomous, unique selfhood',⁶¹ such as the threat of abjection. Gamble argues that abjection:

Testifies to the fact that such control is only ever partial. Because it draws attention to the precariousness of identity, the abject is associated with all that the subject perceives as being unclean... bodily wastes, and vomit, for example... which serve to remind the subject that it cannot escape basic biological drives over which it has no influence.⁶²

That this visceral, bodily truth, laid plain by the female body, 'must be repressed', Castillo asserts, demonstrates the way in which La Malinche and La Llorona are always already linked.⁶³

Turning to consider the Virgin of Guadalupe presents the conflicting end of the spectrum, a figure that, in her impossible dualism of virgin and mother, places women in a double bind: an 'ideal totality that no individual woman could possibly

⁵⁹ Deborah Lupton, *Risk*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 40.

⁶⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 122. My emphasis.

⁶¹ Sarah Gamble, 'A-Z of Key Themes and Major Figures', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, Gamble, Sarah (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 147.

⁶² Gamble, 'A-Z of Key Themes', p. 147.

⁶³ Castillo, 'Coagulated Words', p. 74.

embody.⁶⁴ Her virginity rejects bodily signifiers of the abject, as she is a figure whose sex remains eternally closed, eternally pure. The syncretic version of the Virgin, discussed below, that develops from the mixing of indigenous and Catholic beliefs, sits in opposition to the base and abject La Llorona/La Malinche. Springing from the devastation of pre-Columbian civilisation, La Llorona and La Malinche's incarnations of femininity demonstrate Kristeva's proposal that 'abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse.'⁶⁵ La Llorona/La Malinche arise from the ashes of a fallen empire as new sites of abjection, while the Virgin of Guadalupe arises as their impossible opposite.

THE VIRGIN/LILITH DICHOTOMY

The Virgin of Guadalupe has become the most recognisable symbol of Catholicism in Mexico, where she is essentially 'bigger than Jesus.'⁶⁶ Her popularity can be linked to the successful syncretism of The Virgin Mary and the Aztec Tonantzin, meaning 'our holy mother', and the fact that Guadalupe appears as a dark-skinned mestiza.⁶⁷

Guadalupe's origins are tied to the appearance of the Virgin Mary on a hill known to have been a place of worship for the pre-Columbian goddess. She is represented as wearing a turquoise mantle, believed to represent the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (She of

⁶⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6, No. 1-2 (1985), pp. 133-152

⁶⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.17.

⁶⁶ Luis D. León, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p.12.

⁶⁷ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 50.

the Jade Skirt), as well as being shrouded in the stars of Citlalinicue (Lady of Stars).⁶⁸ In Mexican and Chicana@ imagery she appears alone, without her son; her most indelible image portrays her standing shrouded in the cloak of Aztec mythology. Rebolledo argues that the significance of the ‘ancient symbols of Tonantzin [our mother]’⁶⁹ that can be found in her dress ineradicably align her to pre-Columbian beliefs. Her union with Aztec symbolism and her dark-skinned appearance present a mark of defiance and powerful autonomy against colonising forces, and a refusal to allow the erasure of pre-Columbian beliefs.

As Kristeva argues in ‘Stabat Mater’, the Virgin Mother’s humility before her own infant child can be read as a certain kind of masochism, or as Simone de Beauvoir put it, a feminine defeat.⁷⁰ The Biblical Virgin’s position towards her child is often complicated in Mexican and Chicana@ culture, in which she is at once seen to retain her passivity in the face of patriarchy but, conversely, also to hold power over her sacred son: because of the ‘respect he has for her, she only has to look at him for him to obey her commands.’⁷¹ Icons of the Virgin appear multiple times in *Dogs in the Dark* – in the abuela’s house, in Lyndall’s collection, in the jungle church, and in Riker’s shrine – to serve as reflections of, and contrasts to, the Virgin Mary of Nika’s own upbringing. The Virgin of Nika’s childhood is one that instils her with fear about motherhood and her own body, while the Virgin she encounters in Mexico is a figure that ‘reach[es] out to her.’⁷²

For Nika, the Virgin has become a symbol of the patriarchal construction of femininity that her own Catholic upbringing imposed on her. Nika, even as a child,

⁶⁸ Granziera, Patrizia, & Kroger, Joseph, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012) p. 232.

⁶⁹ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 53.

⁷⁰ Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, p. 141.

⁷¹ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 53.

⁷² *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 168.

recognises Lilith as the Virgin's opposite and is compelled to search for Lilith's story. She ultimately rejects Mary for Lilith, and it is through her identification with Lilith that Nika comes to also identify with La Llorona. She is both repelled and fascinated by her encounter with the Mexican tale, as she was in her first childhood encounter with Lilith. Nika rejects the Virgin again, this time casting off Guadalupe for La Llorona, most explicitly towards the conclusion of the novel when, in Inez's shrine, La Llorona is overtly presented as the Virgin's opposite. La Llorona covers her face, her stance constrained and closed, while the Virgin is seen with her 'arms... spread wide, inviting, palms out-turned.'⁷³ Despite the Virgin's imploring gesture, Nika ultimately chooses La Llorona/Lilith's path because she too rejects the patriarchal role of mother that has been foisted upon her. However, once she has killed and devoured her own child, compelled by the presence of La Llorona and Lilith, she ultimately rejects La Llorona/Lilith's symbolism as well, refusing the painting offered to her by Inez and questioning what good it might do to cover her face and consume herself in grief.⁷⁴ When she finally emerges from the cave at the novel's conclusion, she has discarded all myths of women, the good and the bad alike, concluding that she 'never wanted to be burdened with another woman's myth.'⁷⁵

Yet throughout *Dogs*, Lilith serves as a cultural touchstone for Nika, and a point of comparison to La Llorona. Lilith's influence, represented in the thrall Carver's painting holds over Nika, combines with La Llorona's story to propel Nika towards her act of abject violence. There is a further echo of myth in Carver's painting, as the central saturnine image of the headless child at the parent's lips overlaps Biblical with Greco-Roman mythology, deliberately recalling the story of

⁷³ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 152.

⁷⁴ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 222.

⁷⁵ *Dogs in the Dark*, pp. 220-21.

Saturn/Cronos by evoking the imagery found in Francisco de Goya's painting 'Saturn Devouring His Son' (c. 1819-1823).⁷⁶ This combination of images demonstrates how, in Nika's world, one cultural set of symbols can resonate with another, foregrounding the ease with which Nika readily accepts La Llorona's influence in her life and world.

Howard Schwartz states that there are 'two primary aspects' to the figure of Lilith as she appears in Jewish folk traditions: a beautiful seductress who lures men to their demise; and a 'child-destroying witch' who murders innocent babies.⁷⁷ But, like La Llorona — who functions as a bogeywoman, a warning, a threat — Lilith is also a figure of resistance against patriarchal norms. According to Judeo-Christian folklore, Lilith was the first wife of Adam but, after refusing to lie beneath him, she left Paradise and was replaced by Eve.⁷⁸ Lilith settled in a cave on the shores of the Red Sea, where she mated with monsters and spawned demons.⁷⁹ She is also known to kill and eat children, including her own.⁸⁰

In these two aspects of creator/destroyer there is again a clear echo of La Llorona's myth.⁸¹ Although Eve lacks the second link of filicide, she is also a destroyer of sorts, as it is her transgression that sees humanity banished from Paradise. Rebolledo also sees Lilith/Eve as an opposite to the Virgin Mary, noting that these Biblical figures have been 'syncretized into the Malinche/La Llorona figure.'⁸² Rebolledo sees both Eve and Lilith as 'seductress[es], temptress[es] of man's flesh

⁷⁶ Saturn/Cronos eats his children in an attempt to prevent the prophesy of his death at their hands from coming true (Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (New York: Mentor Books, 1962) pp. 87-88).

⁷⁷ Howard Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 8.

⁷⁸ Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Vintage, 1996) pp. 220-21.

⁷⁹ Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Sigmund Hurwitz, *Lilith the First Eve: Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine*, trans. Gela Jacobson (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1999) p.44.

⁸¹ Additionally, Lilith, like La Malinche, mothers a new race, although in this case Lilith 'gave birth to an elaborate Jewish demonology' (Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave*, p. 8).

⁸² Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 62.

and sexuality’ and symbolic of the ‘threatening power of knowledge.’⁸³ Viewed through this lens, La Malinche continues to be seen as ‘the cause of the original sin at Mexico’s birth’, positioning her as the Mexican Eve.⁸⁴ However, I argue that it is Lilith, rather than Eve, who most closely aligns to La Llorona because of their shared acts of infanticide and cannibalism.

Pilar Melero contends that ‘myths of motherhood, personified by the Virgin... la Malinche and la Llorona, dominate the contemporary Mexican imagination, locking women into the home and their reproductive roles.’⁸⁵ Yet these figures continue to resurface in Chicana feminist texts because, as Anzaldúa puts it, reconsidering, reshaping, and rewriting their stories presents Chican@s with ways to ‘unlearn the *puta/virgen* [whore/virgin] dichotomy.’⁸⁶ La Llorona’s murderous act demonstrates the ‘power of the abject feminine to disrupt patriarchy’ and contest socially and culturally constructed maternal roles.⁸⁷ In Chicana reconsiderations of La Llorona’s case, as author Cherríe Moraga argues, her act of filicide can be read as an act of defiance and resistance against patriarchy:

When La Llorona kills her children, she is killing a male-defined Mexican motherhood that robs us of our womanhood. This ancient myth reminds Mexican women that, culturally-speaking, there is no mother-woman to manifest who is defined by us outside of patriarchy. We have never had the power to do the defining. We wander not in search of our dead children, but our lost selves, our lost sexuality, our lost spirituality, our lost *sabiduría* [wisdom].⁸⁸

For many Chicana authors this ‘lost wisdom’ can be found, or is represented by, pre-Columbian goddesses. Examining the links between the mythic figures of pre-

⁸³ Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 62.

⁸⁴ Tether A. Campbell, ‘A Victimized Woman: La Malinche’ (2004) <http://www.eiu.edu/historia/Campbell.pdf> [accessed 31/2/2018]

⁸⁵ Pilar Melero, *Mythological Constructs of Mexican Femininity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p. 31.

⁸⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 84.

⁸⁷ Roberts, *Subversive Spirits*, p. 63.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Mercado-López, ‘From Lost Woman to Third Space Mestiza’, pp. 216-17.

Columbian civilisation and La Llorona exposes a dualism of life and death that was celebrated by the pre-existing people and subsequently demonised by Catholicism. The insistence of the Catholic church to split the feminine into opposing forces of light and dark, rather than to acknowledge their symbiotic nature as the Aztecs had, forced indigenous formations of the feminine to align with the virgin/whore dichotomy.⁸⁹ For Nika, having grown up with the symbols of the church, it is necessary to come to an understanding of her own identity that is disconnected from the overpowering imagery of the Virgin Mary, leading her, for better or worse, to embrace Lilith/La Llorona. But as Debra J. Blake argues, for Chicana authors, La Llorona does not simply function as an avenging ghoul, but can also draw on pre-Columbian roots to function as an ‘indigenous goddess offering solace and support.’⁹⁰ While I have already described some Aztec antecedents for the Virgin Mary, it is also necessary to consider similar pre-Columbian antecedents for La Llorona in order to fully understand the symbolic weight of her reclamation by Chicana feminist authors.

THE PRE-COLUMBIAN LA LLORONA

Some of the earliest versions of La Llorona’s story can be traced back to Aztec mythology of the 15th century, prior to the Spanish conquest.⁹¹ In these early versions

⁸⁹ This is not to suggest that pre-Columbian societies were free from gendered formations of women’s roles, behaviours and taboos in everyday life but that, as Irene Lara argues, in ‘interpreting primary documents according to an ancient Nahua lens that privileged complementarity and balance... “dual duality” and fluidity [then] we might imagine that Nahua ideals did not judge women according to a rigid virgin/whore dichotomy’ (Lara, ‘Goddess of the Américas’, pp 102-3).

⁹⁰ Debra J. Blake, *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) p. 144.

⁹¹ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, pp. 16-19.

she is often linked to multiple goddesses and spirits, most notably the goddess Cihuacóatl and the spirits of the *cihuateteo*.⁹²

Cihuacóatl functions as a representation of the both/and dichotomy because Cihuacóatl can be seen as both a creator and destroyer. She is said to have ground up bones from the land of the dead with blood from the penis of the god Quetzalcoatl in order to create the first humans. This association with creating human life out of human death positions her as a deity worshipped as both a fertility goddess and patron of midwives, as well as an emblem of death and decay.⁹³ In reclaiming La Llorona's links to pre-Columbian reverence for Cihuacóatl's dualism, writers are able to position La Llorona as a multifaceted figure, one who is neither exclusively good nor bad, but who is both creator and destroyer.

Most early documentation about the Aztec pantheon comes from the texts of Franciscan friars who recorded the beliefs and rituals they found practised in the 'New World'. Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (c.1545-1569) outlines many of the beliefs and rituals surrounding Cihuacóatl in depth, and from these recordings we can find elements of Cihuacóatl's myth that have been transposed into La Llorona's, including early suggestions as to how she evolved into a child-eater. Book VIII, ch.2, states: 'it came to pass that Cihuacóatl ate a small boy [as] he lay in his cradle.'⁹⁴ The image of the cradle is key to Cihuacóatl's symbolism; however, the cradle is shown to contain a sacrificial obsidian knife, rather than a baby.⁹⁵ Carbonell explains that this symbol replaces the offspring of Cihuacóatl's role as a goddess of

⁹² She is also sometimes linked to the goddesses Coatlicue and Chalchiuhtlicue. Robert Barakat suggests that the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue's explicit link to rivers, streams, storms, and seas makes her a far more likely predecessor for La Llorona than Cihuacóatl. Chalchiuhtlicue is also discussed in the *Florentine Codex* as being 'among the rain gods' and responsible for killing men in bodies of water and 'carr[ying] them to the depths.'

⁹³ Granziera & Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas*, pp. 180-83.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Leal, 'The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy', p. 136.

⁹⁵ Ana María Carbonell, *Reconstructing Motherhood: The Female Gothic and Transcultural Strategies in African American and Chicana Feminist Writings* (Santa Cruz: University of California, 1996) p. 55.

fertility with a symbol of war, ‘transmut[ing] her exclusively into an agent of destruction’, and reducing her to a solely ‘bad mother’ archetype.⁹⁶

It is also Cihuacóatl who foretells the arrival of the Spanish and the Aztec’s defeat at their hands.⁹⁷ In these stories she wanders the streets of the great Aztec city Tenochtitlan, weeping and crying ‘¡ay, mis hijos! [oh, my children!]’.⁹⁸ In these tellings, Cihuacóatl is a ‘dread phantom foreboding war,’⁹⁹ but her weeping and crying out have come to be associated with La Llorona’s weeping. Her cry of ‘my children’, understood in the Cihuacóatl myth to refer to the Aztec people and their impending demise, has transferred to La Llorona’s cries for her drowned offspring.

Codex descriptions of Cihuacóatl describe her as ‘appear[ing] in white, garbed in white, standing white, pure white,’¹⁰⁰ and these white robes have become synonymous with La Llorona, who is often depicted as appearing clothed in a long white dress, adding to her sinister and ghostly appearance.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the potent symbolism of the serpent was also attributed to Cihuacóatl, as her name means ‘woman snake.’¹⁰² The connection between the ‘woman snake’ and the serpentine symbolism of Lilith/Eve did not go unnoticed by the Catholic friars, as Sahagún observes: ‘Civacoatl [Cihuacóatl] means woman of the snake; they also call her Tonantzin, which is “our mother.” According to these two items it would seem that [the Aztecs] knew what happened between our mother Eve and the snake, who deceived her.’¹⁰³ Ultimately, the Spanish conflated Cihuacóatl with ‘evil’ and the

⁹⁶ Carbonell, *Reconstructing Motherhood*, p. 55.

⁹⁷ Granziera & Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas*, p. 183.

⁹⁸ Perez, ‘Caminando con La Llorona’, p. 103.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Blake, *Chicana Sexuality and Gender*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Leal, ‘The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy’, p. 136.

¹⁰¹ Her appearance shrouded in white harks back to her association with varying ‘woman in white’ tales, and to their foreboding presence and weeping.

¹⁰² She can also, like Lilith and the Greek sirens, be associated with birds, specifically the eagle, appearing ‘eagle-plumed’ (Granziera & Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas*, p. 182).

¹⁰³ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *A History of Ancient Mexico: Anthropological, Mythological, and Social*, trans. Fanny R. Bandelier (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1932) p. 26-27. Gloria Anzaldúa,

devil, asserting that the goddess ‘seems certain [to have been] Demon in the shape of a woman.’¹⁰⁴

As one of the major Aztec fertility goddesses, Cihuacóatl was also closely related to *cihuateteo*. *Cihuateteo* were the spirits of women who had died in childbirth, and they too were capable of bringing death and destruction.¹⁰⁵ Also known as ‘divine women’, they would haunt crossroads and prey on those who passed by, especially children.¹⁰⁶

Yet, despite their child-destroying potential, they were also revered; women who had died in childbirth were considered to hold the status of warriors, since childbirth was considered as valiant a battle as war. Debra J. Blake suggests that *cihuateteo* became associated with La Llorona in the post-conquest era not simply because they prey on children but also because their reason for doing so is linked to a kind of maternal failure. Because they are either unable to bring their child into the world (i.e. both mother and infant die in childbirth), or because in death they leave their infants behind, ‘they have not fulfilled the reproductive cycle [and, therefore,] they inflict the same fate on other women by killing infants and young children and sometimes pregnant women or new mothers.’¹⁰⁷ However, tales of La Llorona are almost always about her taking her revenge on children themselves, or on men. In

writing in the follow up edition to *This Bridge Called My Back*, titled *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), also makes use of this imagery, writing that she can ‘hear la Llorona/Cihuacoatl wailing. [The] picture of her coiled serpent body with the head of a woman, shedding its skin, regenerating itself reminds you of the snake story in Genesis. A hunger to know and build on your knowledge sweeps over you’, suggesting that all these women’s correlations with the snake provide a source of *conocimiento*, or ‘knowledge’ (Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘now let us shift... the path of *conocimiento*... inner work, public acts’, in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, Anzaldúa, Gloria & AnaLouise Keating (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2002) p.573).

¹⁰⁴ Sahagún, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁰⁵ Kerry Jimson, *Aztecs: Conquest and Glory*, exhibition catalogue, 9th April – 10th August 2014, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Vic.

¹⁰⁶ Molly H. Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015) p. 95. This haunting at crossroads bears resemblance to other mythical women and spirits, like women in white, who likewise haunt these junctures, where the divide between the spiritual and earthly world is manifested.

¹⁰⁷ Blake, *Chicana Sexuality and Gender*, p. 46.

traditional tales women are not usually portrayed as her target and, as I will show in Chapter Two, in Chicana revisions she is most often depicted as an ally to women. Here again, in her pre-Columbian roots to *cihuateteo* as to Cihuacóatl, the both/and of La Llorona is demonstrated in her role as revered mother and dangerous killer.

These links to pre-conquest mythology play a significant part in the reclamation of La Llorona as a decolonising agent; they inform her story in ways often foregrounded in Chicana revisions:

For Chicanas specifically, La Llorona is symbolic of historic and contemporary oppression of women by economic and patriarchal forces. By calling upon female Aztec precursors to La Llorona and reinstating her agency, Chicanas are recasting her outside of the boundaries of tragedy, where her actions become a representation of female resistance...¹⁰⁸

Because of her eventual conflation with figures like Malinche, and the parallels drawn between her and other European figures, it is crucial for Chicana revisionists who use her as a symbol for an indigenous identity that La Llorona's tale can be linked back to influences that are not of colonial descent. Sandra Cypess cites Friar Sahagún's documentation of Cihuacóatl stories, her weeping and crying for her children in the night, as proof that "the weeping mother" is not European alone.¹⁰⁹ Instead, she argues, over time the archetypal images of Eve, Mary, and Medea have been combined with maternal deities like Tonantzin and Cihuacóatl, syncretising them into La Malinche, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and La Llorona.¹¹⁰ In doing so, the potency of the original indigenous figures can be seen to be diffused, colonised and controlled by the invading forces, mitigating the powerful and fundamental influence of the feminine in daily ritual and social structuring. In the trinity of La Malinche,

¹⁰⁸ Perez, 'Caminando con La Llorona', p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ Sandra Messinger Cypess, "Mother" Malinche and Allegories of Gender, Ethnicity and National Identity in Mexico', in *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, Romero, Rolando & Amanda Nolacea Harris (eds.) (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005) p. 20.

¹¹⁰ Messinger Cypess, "Mother" Malinche and Allegories of Gender', p. 15.

Guadalupe, and La Llorona, as in their Aztec forebears, we see their procreative roles as essential to how we understand their cultural functions. For these figures, the maternal body is inextricable from the feminine one. At the same time, the connections between La Llorona and her Aztec counterparts heavily emphasise the relation of these female figures to nature and the natural world. The metaphor of ‘mother-earth’ is an example of the entrenched understanding that women, specifically in their procreative function, equal nature.

NATURE/CULTURE, WOMAN/MAN

Adriana Teodorescu maintains that ‘the contemporary Western construction of motherhood is still underpinned by a strong emphasis on the connection between women and nature.’¹¹¹ The ramifications of this perceived naturalness began to be articulated during the second wave feminism of the 1970s, and Sherry B. Ortner best expressed the concerns about conflating the feminine with the natural in her influential essay ‘Is female to male as nature is to culture?’ (1974). In it, she states:

Woman is being identified with – or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of – something that every culture devalues... as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is “nature” in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generically, “culture,” is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artefacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by

¹¹¹ Adriana Teodorescu, ‘The women-nature connection as a key element in the social construction of Western contemporary motherhood’, in *Women and Nature?: Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment*, Vakoch, Douglas A. & Sam Mckey (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2018) p. 78.

means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.¹¹²

Ortner's warning that associating the feminine with 'nature' could only serve to devalue it came at the same time as the formation of the concept of ecofeminism,¹¹³ which, though a relationship of ecological concerns to feminist concerns, also aligns the domination of women to that of nature by the same patriarchal forces, namely, by culture. However, in using these same binary structures to demarcate nature from culture and women from men, ecofeminists risk perpetuating the double bind that situates women as at odds from the transcendent realms of human consciousness.

Teodorescu neatly articulates this dilemma when she states:

If there are scholars that emphasize the renewed need of the mother-earth rhetoric... with an emphasis on woman as nature goddess... there are also scholars who contend that embracing the women-nature connection may lead to an idealized figure of nature, reifying the position that women are irrational and intended for reproductive purposes only...¹¹⁴

She goes on to argue that: 'envisioning nature in a positive light entails not only a naturalist, but also an idealized construction of motherhood.'¹¹⁵ Such a construction of the 'natural' does not allow for the messy reality of nature, for example animals that kill and/or eat their young. Ironically, it is precisely this actuality of nature that would, in this reasoning, also designate La Llorona's and Nika's violent acts as 'natural'. If we are to read the feminine body as more closely aligned with nature and with the nonhuman world, it is unsurprising to find so many monstrous women who are merged with animal forms, as La Llorona is when she is given animal features like the head of a horse. These gruesome and transgressive fusions only serve to heighten the

¹¹² Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?', in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist & Louise Lamphere (eds.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974) pp. 71-72.

¹¹³ This term was coined by Francois d'Eaubonne in her *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974). For an extensive discussion on ecofeminist history and philosophy see: *Literature and Ecofeminism: Intersectional and International Voices*, Vakoch, Douglas A. & Sam Mickey (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹⁴ Teodorescu, 'The women-nature connection', p. 77.

¹¹⁵ Teodorescu, 'The women-nature connection', p. 78.

horror of the monstrous feminine body. This merging of the animal with the female is also illustrated in *Dogs*, when we are finally faced with the nightmare vision of La Llorona as animal woman.¹¹⁶ Despite Pepe dismissing the idea of the horse-headed woman,¹¹⁷ patriarchal structures have already primed Nika to associate the animalistic with the female.¹¹⁸

In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich highlights a persistent need to counteract the desire to devalue women to a lesser position than ‘human’: ‘Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over. One of these is the apparently simple idea that women are as intrinsically human as men.’¹¹⁹ Marina Warner argues that the alignment of the ‘female with carnality, weakness and nature, with “womanishness” ... beats its persistent rhythm down the years,’ and, in the reiteration of the male being more closely aligned to ‘mind or reason... women usually fare the worse.’¹²⁰ The process of animalising, or naturalising, women’s bodies only reinforces a sub-human position that creates monsters out of women. But, as Julie Meiss has argued, one of the ways that contemporary writers have contested this:

is by recovering and celebrating the figure of the female monster, creating the female monster-hero. This figure interrogates the situation of the male predatory position as the cultural norm, and posits that the position of the male predator as source of aggression, activity and power is generated from a hegemonic perspective. This figure also revisits the conventional depiction of the inhuman female monster, discovering from within this figure positive models for female action and power.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 183.

¹¹⁷ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ This will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

¹¹⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) p. xv.

¹²⁰ Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, pp. 63-64.

¹²¹ Julie Meiss, ‘Another “Gendered Other”? The Female Monster-Hero’, in *Horri-fying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, Ruth Bienstock Anolik (ed.) (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007) pp. 243-35.

The monstrous feminine realigned as an empowering figure, then, serves to undermine notions of female passivity in the face of male aggression and domination. ‘On the one hand,’ Creed states, ‘those images which define woman as monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions work to reinforce the phallogentric notion that female sexuality is abject. On the other hand, the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity.’¹²²

Winfried Menninghaus calls this process ‘affirmative abjection’, where those groups and individuals who have been ‘othered’ both ‘condemn their own cultural abjection as a repressive function of patriarchal authority, while, on the other hand, provocatively affirming their abject existence as a socially unaccommodated way of life and source of pleasure.’¹²³ But in simply recasting monstrous women as monster-heroines the revisionist author risks reinscribing binaries that continue to devalue the feminine. Imogen Tyler argues that by using a Kristevan abject paradigm, women risk perpetuating ideas of the maternal/feminine body as horrific or abject. She argues that considerations of the ways abjection may be used transgressively or subversively fail to consider the danger in continuing to identify the feminine with the abject.¹²⁴ In embracing ‘affirmative abjection’ women celebrate their base ‘nature’ but risk continuing to be excluded from cultural signification, perpetuating their position as inferior to men.

Again we return to the double bind, the revisionist project that at once seeks to defy archetypes but only by reproducing them first. This is why, as Ana María Carbonell asserts, La Llorona repeatedly ‘emerges as *both* a figure of maternal

¹²² Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, p. 151.

¹²³ Here, namely, Menninghaus speaks of homosexuals, but the same process of ‘affirmative abjection’ has been used by marginalised groups of all descriptions, including women, people of colour, and people with disabilities (Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Eiland, Howard & Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) p. 389).

¹²⁴ Tyler, ‘Against abjection’, pp. 77-98.

betrayal *and* maternal resistance.¹²⁵ It is the purpose of a both/and revisionist approach to construct this impasse as a dualism, rather than a double bind. Moreover, as I discuss further in Chapter Three, while revisionist authors use this nature/woman connection as a way into reclaiming an authoritative power denied to them by patriarchy, it is precisely this double bind that Carter's anti-mythic project of *New Eve* so vehemently rejects.

SPACE/TIME, WOMAN/MAN

Kristeva's model of the abject also provides a framework for considering the nature/culture divide in relation to time and space. The time of history – 'teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression and arrival'¹²⁶ – is presented as masculine, structured by culture and the logic of civilisation. When considered in relation to nature versus culture debates, the dichotomy of Mother Nature/Father Time appears no accident. Kristeva argues that 'when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the [female] space generating and forming the human species than of time.'¹²⁷

However, Kristeva also outlines a feminine conception of time, which is significant if we consider time as masculine and, by extension, cultural. In gaining access to the cultural constructs of temporal logic, women insist on acceptance into cultural signification. Yet, Kristeva argues that a feminine conception of time must

¹²⁵ Ana María Carbonell, 'From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue In Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros', *Melus*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999) pp. 53-74.

¹²⁶ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 17.

¹²⁷ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', pp. 13-35.

also be different from a masculine one. She posits cyclical and monumental time as temporalities of repetition and eternity that link to the maternity of the feminine body. While cyclical time can encompass ideas of gestation, biology, and the natural cycles of repetition, such as menstruation and birth, monumental time is fixed in eternity, which Kristeva links to the mythic, to perpetual genealogies of the cult of the maternal, and to myths of resurrection as exemplified in the dormition, or assumption, of the Virgin Mary.¹²⁸ These feminine aspects, she argues, do not make either conception of time ‘fundamentally incompatible with “masculine” values’, but they do expose a rupture in masculine and feminine formations of time and space.¹²⁹ In the maternal body both notions of generating time are also a generating space: the womb. It is a place of repetition and eternity, a space in which cyclical and monumental time coalesce. Kristeva argues:

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature... On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word "temporality" hardly fits: All-encompassing and infinite...¹³⁰

And yet, there is also a time linked to the abject where temporality itself both collapses and explodes: ‘a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.’¹³¹ If ‘abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be,’¹³² then the time of abjection

¹²⁸ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p. 17. For a full analysis of the dormition story of Mary, see the enlightening chapter ‘The Assumption’ in Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

¹²⁹ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p. 17.

¹³¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 9.

¹³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 10.

preserves this ‘immemorial violence’. If *Dogs* follows a linear/patriarchal construction of time, in that we follow Nika’s travels across Mexico chronologically, Nika’s body itself is fluid in time, repeatedly slipping into rapid bursts of gestation that accelerate her pregnancy, though whether or not the world around her also shifts with the same speed is left unclear. However, she begins her journey during the Days of the Dead, the 1st and 2nd of November, and arrives in the jungle sometime close to Christmas, as is signalled by the decorations on sale in the markets.¹³³ This shifting of worldly time, as well as the shifting of bodily time, situates ideas of women’s time in the novel as something that is both rapidly and violently cyclical *as well as* monumental — in other words, abject. Nika moves in a rapid variant of linear time, her cyclical (gestational) time is pushed forward in fleeting bursts, in time that collapses in on itself, in instants of *abject* time. At the same moment, La Llorona’s story – her perpetual mythology, her eternal weeping – enforces the presence of monumental, mythical time. As Nika’s own story begins to align with La Llorona’s, cyclical and monumental time converge: a repetition of a monumental time that explodes in the abject moment of birth. Nika takes La Llorona’s story to its final, abject ending, devouring her own offspring in a repetition of a mythical act, and like those acts of Lilith and Lamia, even Cronos, before her.¹³⁴ If, as Barbara Creed argues, ‘the place of the abject is where meaning collapses,’¹³⁵ then it is in abject time that meaning, like myth, collides and explodes. In coming together, the both/and of cyclical and monumental time enacts the abject. This collision and explosion, this both/and, is present in the feminist revisionism of Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra

¹³³ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 156.

¹³⁴ Sometimes himself represented as Father Time, or ‘chrono’logical, linear time – though this is often thought to be a later conflation between the Titan Cronos and the more generic personification of time, Chronos.

¹³⁵ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 65.

Cisneros, as well as the anti-mythic revisionism of Angela Carter. Both approaches, as I discuss further in Chapter Two and Three, employ the abject in order to work through perceptions of the feminine, and the maternal, body.

Carbonell suggests that by examining the work of Chicana feminist authors we can find a ‘genealogy of La Llorona’ from her legendary roots to her representations in literature, that foregrounds her as a resistant, culturally specific maternal figure.’¹³⁶ La Llorona, like La Malinche, has come to stand for a kind of anti-Marian identity that pushes back against the passivity of Guadalupe. Cisneros sees Mexico as ‘the land of the great mother, of Guadalupe’, but she also sees it as a country where men’s violence against women is rarely punished, asserting that ‘if you get raped... that’s very little crime in a country of impunity.’¹³⁷ The Virgin as guiding symbol teaches women to suffer patriarchal violence as their lot, while La Llorona has been used to threaten women with the monstrous consequences of disobedience, of autonomy. Paz argues that, for Mexicans, the ‘image of the *mala mujer* – the “bad woman” – is almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity. She is not passive like the “self-denying” mother.’¹³⁸ But Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez argues that ‘rather than shunning the “menace” of the abject... Anzaldúa ... embrace[s] it... going openly to meet the figure of the mother who waits at the far side of the abject.’¹³⁹

In her poem ‘The Postmodern Llorona’, Anzaldúa reimagines La Llorona in the contemporary world, where she has ‘shed her ancient mythical white dress/for white jeans and a white sweatshirt/with the words SERPENT WOMAN/in fluorescent

¹³⁶ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, pp.53-74.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Shereen Lee, ‘An Interview with Sandra Cisneros’, *Ploughshares*, 29 April 2018 <<http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/an-interview-with-sandra-cisneros>> [accessed 5/5/2018]

¹³⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 31.

¹³⁹ Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, ‘Mothering the Self’, in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (ed.) (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) p. 248.

lime green.’¹⁴⁰ La Llorona has become an independent woman who attends university and chooses not to have children in the first place, becoming the kind of woman ‘you will only hear... screaming/at Take Back the Night Rallies.’¹⁴¹ Yet this modern incarnation still holds to her Aztec roots because ‘[a]ttached to her key ring is a pen knife/and a tiny cradle’, symbolic of the cradle and obsidian blade associated with the goddess Cihuacóatl.¹⁴² Here Anzaldúa also uses the fluidity of time to suggest how La Llorona, inhabiting the monumental time of her enduring mythology while also recurring in contemporary guises in new historical moments, rouses the modern Chicana to break free of her culturally prescribed roles.

In turning to examine ‘She Ate Horses’ and ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, the next chapter explores how Anzaldúa and Cisneros’s short stories ‘call not for a disavowal of these “mothers”, but rather a reconsideration of their legacy’ that embraces the myth of La Llorona and, as I argue, establishes a key component of the both/and of feminist revisionism.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘The Postmodern Llorona’, in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 280.

¹⁴¹ Anzaldúa, ‘The Postmodern Llorona’, pp. 280-81.

¹⁴² Anzaldúa, ‘The Postmodern Llorona’, p. 280.

¹⁴³ Alexandra Fitts, ‘Sandra Cisneros’s Modern Malinche: A Reconsideration of Feminine Archetypes in *Women Hollering Creek*’, *The International Fiction Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1-2 (2002) pp. 11-22.

CHAPTER TWO: GLORIA ANZALDÚA, SANDRA CISNEROS AND CHICANA REVISIONISM

Chicana feminist re-imaginings of La Llorona destabilise dominant strictures on women's roles and behaviours, and 'construct a progressive alternative, and radical Chicana subjectivity.'¹ Indeed, as Rosan A. Jordan asserts: '*Women's* folklore tells us things that social strictures or psychological repression prevent women from otherwise saying – things at variance with the official ideal of the culture.'² She posits folklore as a lens through which 'Mexican-American woman actually view their culturally assigned roles and how they respond to cultural pressures... symbolically if not in individual actions.'³ Two of the most significant Chicana authors to undertake this task, as I have noted in the Introduction, are Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros. In this chapter I consider how Anzaldúa's representation of the 'animal nature' of La Llorona and Cisneros's conception of La Llorona as a speaking subject are significant to the ways they rewrite her symbolism, as well as to the ways she is depicted in *Dogs*. Moreover, I also argue that both these representations engender acts of *jouissance*, reveling in the corporeal ways La Llorona is evoked as a powerful and liberating symbol. My reading of this kind of *jouissance* is to see it as a place of both/and, embracing the horror and also the ecstatic liberation of the abject.⁴

¹ C. Alejandra Elenes, *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Popular Culture and Pedagogy* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011) p. 3.

² Rosan A. Jordan, 'The Vaginal Serpent and Other Themes from Mexican-American Women's Lore', in *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, Jordan, Rosan A. & Susan J. Kalčik (eds.) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) p. 27. My emphasis.

³ Jordan, 'The Vaginal Serpent', p. 27.

⁴ *Jouissance* here bears resonances to Kate Bernheimer's consideration of 'rapture' in relation to fairy tales as a kind of 'visceral rapture' that simultaneously 'sickens and heightens' (Kate Bernheimer, 'This Rapturous Form', in *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2006) p. 81). My emphasis.

Anzaldúa's revisionist mythmaking is foundational to her extensive body of writing, but her most influential work undoubtedly remains her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a collection of essays, prose and poetry that reflects on her own cultural identity. In it, Anzaldúa explains that the role of the 'mestiza'⁵ consciousness... [is] to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in her flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.⁶ Anzaldúa posits the mestiza as 'a consciousness of the Borderlands': a consciousness from which it is possible to imagine the breaking down of binaries such as race and gender.⁷ This 'massive uprooting of dualistic thinking' is more than merely an act of redressing representations of femininity; it is also one that 'could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.'⁸

This project of breaking down binaries carries throughout Anzaldúa's work,⁹ but, as I argue in Chapter Three, it is less radical than the approach Carter takes in her *New Eve*. As is evidenced in my examination of 'She Ate Horses', Anzaldúa still uses myth to imbue the feminine with a power that comes from an alignment with the natural, reclaiming female archetypes that tap into a *jouissance* of abjection, rather than rejecting them altogether. This also manifests elsewhere in her work in her approach to La Llorona as a figure of empowerment and resistance. According to Anzaldúa, La Llorona is 'the central figure in Mexican mythology that empowered [her] to yell out, to scream out, to speak out, to break out of silence.'¹⁰ In her poem

⁵ Mestiza here refers to children of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood, and their descendants.

⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 80.

⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 77.

⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 80.

⁹ This is most evident in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, but also underscores the influential collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), which she edited with Cherrie Moraga, as well as its follow up, twenty years later, in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), edited with AnaLouise Keating.

¹⁰ Quoted in 'Doing Gigs: Speaking, Writing, and Change, An Interview with Debbie Blake and Carmen Abrego (1994)', in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, AnaLouise Keating (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 229. Voice is a concept that will be discussed in more depth within this chapter.

‘Llorona Coyolxauhqui’, for example, she conjures up La Llorona as a powerful
abject force:

On my shoulder rides a horse’s head
my teeth are fangs
I am the horse with fangs
My mother calls her lost and exiled child
a call to the vocation of artist
La Llorona wailing, beckoning, encouraging the artist to rail
against injustices. She calls me to act.¹¹

Here the speaker can be seen as La Llorona herself, the ‘horse with fangs’.¹²

However, simultaneously, the speaker is also called upon to act *by* La Llorona; she
waits as an external influence, someone who beckons to the artist who speaks. In this
instance we can interpret that the speaker is also Anzaldúa herself, the artist poet who
is ‘encourag[ed]... to rail against injustices’ and to act.¹³

Here we see Anzaldúa’s work of duality at play. The female speaker takes on
a dual identity, or, more specifically, a series of dual identities. The poet is both
subject and speaker, woman and myth, woman and animal, La Llorona and Gloria
Anzaldúa. This dual nature is central to the image of the animal woman and the fear
of what she represents: the fluctuating, threatening, ‘inhuman’ feminine and its
manifestation in the physical. Anzaldúa embraces these multiple dualities, and
embraces La Llorona as a symbol of rejecting the ‘injustices’ of demonising these
dualities. By evoking La Llorona as a maternal figure alongside the imagery of the
fanged horse, Anzaldúa conjures both the fearful aspects of La Llorona as a devouring
threat alongside the nurturing aspect of the encouraging and empowering mother.
Through La Llorona, Anzaldúa rallies the artist to embrace both her potential for
creation and destruction, her both/and, as opposed to a constraining either/or.

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘Llorona Coyolxauhqui’, in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, p. 295.

¹² Anzaldúa, ‘Llorona Coyolxauhqui’ p. 295.

¹³ Anzaldúa, ‘Llorona Coyolxauhqui’ p. 295.

This poem is a call to arms for Chicana women and artists, but it also offers a way into imagining Nika's journey as one of complimentary contrasts, the journey of a creator and a destroyer in one. While this journey plays out in the physical world of the story through Nika's actions, her position as a metaphor for these dualities is also inherent in the narrative. Like Anzaldúa, in order to convey these simultaneous dualities I also employ the guiding symbol of La Llorona: a figure who is fundamentally neither good nor bad, who is at once both perpetrator and victim. However, while I use this poem as a way into thinking through the both/and of La Llorona, it is Anzaldúa's short story 'She Ate Horses' on which I focus my analysis because it is in this story that the power of La Llorona as animal woman is most keenly felt. In 'She Ate Horses', La Llorona acts as a metaphor for the repressed animal wildness of Prieta, the story's protagonist, and serves once again, as she does in 'Llorona Coyolxauhqui', as a guide.

'SHE ATE HORSES'

'She Ate Horses' opens on the beach of Padre Island, South Texas. Prieta's girlfriend, Llosí, has brought Prieta here because it is the place where they once made their commitment vows to each other. However, the trip compels Prieta to make a decision about whether or not to end her relationship with Llosí. The story shifts between Prieta's memories and visions of horses, and the ways they manifest to guide Prieta's decisions.

The setting of the story already suggests an affinity to tales of La Llorona as it takes place by the sea; water, as I have demonstrated, is an element irrevocably tied to

her symbolism, while the sea, as de Beauvoir argues ‘is one of the most universally widespread maternal symbols.’¹⁴ In her book *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés elaborates on the symbols that connect not only La Llorona’s legend to rivers and streams, but also those that connect ideas of feminine creative and pro-creative processes as well; rivers and waterways symbolise ‘a form of feminine largess that arouses, excites, makes passionate.’¹⁵ Indeed, the ocean acts as an erotic force throughout ‘She Ate Horses’. In the opening passage, Prieta pushes her extremities into the ‘wet sand’, feeling the ‘tug of the sea, the gentle suck.’¹⁶ As she walks across the sand, reflecting on her first sexual encounter with Llosí, Prieta feels sweat trickling ‘between her breasts... [H]er pubic hair, esos pelos de elote, was saturated. She scratched and her fingers came away wet.’¹⁷ The waves, as a passionate and erotic force ‘coming in, going out,’¹⁸ mirror the ‘tightening, loosening’¹⁹ sensation of Prieta reaching orgasm with Llosí. However, it is also this passionate force that Prieta tries to fight, wanting to ‘flatten it, to numb it, deaden it; to hold the animal, reflex, back.’²⁰ It is this animal self that Prieta finds symbolised in her surroundings, and it is also this animal self that Prieta, at the beginning of the story, wishes to push away. And yet, like La Llorona, Prieta’s connection to this watery ‘largess’ is unbreakable: her ‘feet were buried in the sand and they had roots.’²¹

It is not only the environmental setting that links us to La Llorona, but also, significantly, the geographical placement of the story in south Texas. Padre Island sits

¹⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* pp. 167-68.

¹⁵ Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, p. 329.

¹⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, Allen, Jeffner (ed.) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) p. 371.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 373.

¹⁸ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 371.

¹⁹ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 373.

²⁰ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 373.

²¹ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 371.

in an area that has been at the juncture of multiple land disputes since the arrival of the Spanish, belonging over time to Spain, France, Mexico and, ultimately, the United States. Prieta muses that:

Padre [Island] was beginning to resemble Coney Island. Crossing Laguna Madre to South Padre on the Queen Isabella Causeway, they had seen huge chain hotels and condominiums; cabin cruisers, luxury beach hotels, golf courses... The travel agents call Padre Island a “vacation *frontier*.” Once these shores were empty. Now Padre was a town full of Mexicans, Germans, Austrians, Anglos. But no horses.²²

Here Anzaldúa recalls the lands of the Spanish conquest, and the irony of the travel agents marketing it as ‘frontier’ land. At the same time, however, she also shows that Prieta imagines this place as once empty of human settlement, envisioning a pristine wilderness and, in doing so, is guilty of erasing the Native American inhabitants from its shores. Yet Prieta catches herself, wondering if ‘that idyllic paradise really [had] existed, or was it too a fantasy?’²³

Anzaldúa’s allusion to colonisation here recalls La Llorona as the displaced and abandoned indigenous woman, and so links this narrative again to tales that situate her story at a time of cataclysmic cultural rupturing. Anzaldúa expresses this rupture as an abjectly physical one, seeing La Llorona as ‘a wound’:

My symbol for la herida de colonialism [the wound of colonialism] and the trauma of the conquest is la Llorona. Sometimes I feel a deep grief for indigenous people, for the earth, for whatever has been wounded, and I feel like crying. So that brings to mind la Llorona because she’s wailing for the lost children, for her own woundedness.²⁴

I have argued here that the environmental and geographical symbolism that opens ‘She Ate Horses’ may signal to the informed reader that Anzaldúa is drawing a connection to the folklore of La Llorona; however, it is not until the closing pages of

²² Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 374. My emphasis.

²³ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 374.

²⁴ Quoted in Irene Lara, ‘Daughter of Coatlicue: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa’, in *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, Keating, AnaLouise (ed.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 55.

the story that this connection is made explicit by reference to La Llorona herself, and so it takes some analysis of Anzaldúa's use of symbolism to effectively identify the ways in which La Llorona's influence is present throughout. This is keenly felt not simply in Anzaldúa's choice of setting, but also in the significant use of the figure of the horse.

As Prieta considers her future with Llosí she is prompted to remember an incident from her childhood. She recalls how her family owned horses, and that she developed a fear of them when she was a small girl after being thrown from one's back. She recalls the exhilaration of the creature's 'muscles rubbing against her legs, the smell of horse flesh, the harsh breathing, the spray of spittle', and recalls just 'beginning to revel' in this animal wildness when she is thrown.²⁵ The result of this trauma, we can conclude, is to rupture this developing joy so that Prieta pushes away her animal 'reflex' of excitement, distrusting the will to let herself go.

When her father finds her on the ground he tells her that she has chosen to ride '*un caballo mañoso*' - 'a tricky horse' - that 'takes revenge on humans for previous floggings.'²⁶ He cautions her that she must '*nunca, nunca sueltas* [never, never loose] the reins. Never, never let it have its head. Always keep a tight rein, always stay in control.'²⁷ That Prieta recalls her father's words so precisely suggests that this is advice she has continued to apply to her passions in adult life, not simply advice applied to her horse-riding technique. Tellingly, it also offers another allusion to La Llorona's influence in Prieta's story. That the horse wishes to punish humans for its mistreatment conjures up the revenge element of La Llorona's myth. Her betrayal by her lover and, in her La Malinche form, her rejection by her own people provoke La

²⁵ Anzaldúa, 'She Ate Horses', p. 372.

²⁶ Anzaldúa, 'She Ate Horses', p. 372.

²⁷ Anzaldúa, 'She Ate Horses', p. 372.

Llorona to her violent act of retaliation, and continue to motivate her attacks on adults and children. Moreover, that Prieta's father uses the phrase 'never let it have its head' also points to La Llorona as the horse-headed woman who is denied her humanity by a patriarchal force, a force symbolised by Prieta's own father.

Anzaldúa's version of La Llorona holds with the horse-headed version of the woman that we meet in *Dogs*. When Nika is on the lagoon with Pepe and the other tourists, it is the first time readers are introduced to a version of the mythic woman with animal features; yet Nika herself is already culturally primed to associate the animalistic with the female. Despite Pepe refuting Carlos's idea of the horse-headed woman, the iconic image of the half-woman, half-animal form is hard for Nika to disregard. Her foundation in Judeo-Christian and Classical myth has already established in Nika's cultural imagination a correlation between women and animals, and a ready acceptance of their hybridity. In the first image of Lilith that Nika encounters as a child, John Collier's *Lilith* (1887), Lilith is shown entwined in a loving embrace with the serpent. Lilith herself is still in a woman's form, but her link to the animalistic is explicitly foregrounded. Elsewhere in visual imagery both Lilith and Eve are presented *as* snakes, while the most indelible snake woman is Medusa.²⁸ These women-animal hybrids reflect another aspect of the abject woman/nature amalgamation, as the horrific and transgressive nature of fusion refuses 'categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine,'²⁹ troubling the foundation of binary thinking that separates human from animal, man from woman, culture from nature. These mythic combinations of the female and the animal are 'disconcerting because they suggest that one of the organizational grids

²⁸ Lamias, mermaids, and gorgons are other creatures famously combined with the snake, while harpies and sirens are depicted as half-bird, half-women (Johnston, *Restless Dead*, p. 163).

²⁹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 43.

that culture has imposed on the world is liable to flux.³⁰ Nika's fear of the 'girl-spider' she once witnessed in a horror movie as a child adds to the formative nature of this concept as irrefutable truth.³¹ Women are animals, and yet it is this physical impossibility paired with its metaphorical inevitability that makes the resulting form a source of abjection, and a source of anxiety for Nika. The child she carries inside her only adds to the fear that she is losing control of the human part of herself, giving over to the intrinsically animal in her fecund maternal body, a body that carries on with actions and movements towards the nurturing of the child within her that she cannot consciously control. This inner-worldly while simultaneously out-of-body experience brings her closer to what Jane M. Ussher calls the 'base nature' of the female form.³² Yet, while Nika resists this 'base' animal side, scared of its power and force, Prieta, despite having repressed this urge since childhood, is coming to understand that she longs to free it. Prieta has already subverted the patriarchal law through her homosexuality, yet she still holds something back. She acknowledges that while this animal side is 'angry and raging' it is also 'hopeful and loving, yes loving, a force that could no longer be shut up in a drawer.'³³

Llosí also wants Prieta to free herself of her restraints, calling her a 'brown woman afraid of the animal inside, of losing control.'³⁴ For Llosí, Prieta's inability to let go betrays the battle they must constantly fight as both women of colour and lesbians. Anzaldúa notes how, as they walk along the beach together, heads swivel 'towards them, check[ing] out Llosí's butch haircut, the dark hair on Prieta's legs and

³⁰ Johnston, *Restless Dead*, p. 171.

³¹ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 189.

³² Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*, (New York: Routledge, 2005) p. 2.

³³ Anzaldúa, 'She Ate Horses', p. 375.

³⁴ Anzaldúa, 'She Ate Horses', p. 380.

underarms... labell[ing] them *de las otras*, lezzies, *marimachas*.³⁵ Their bodies expose them as the ‘others’ (*las otras*) through the body hair Prieta lets grow and the masculine haircut Llosí adopts. The significance of body hair as a link to the animal parts of themselves is also hinted at elsewhere in the story, as in the ‘fur on [Prieta’s] nape’, and her wet pubic hair.³⁶

Llosí becomes furious with Prieta’s inability to act and leaves, abandoning Prieta on the beach as night begins to fall. She contemplates suicide and the ease with which she might slip into the ocean unnoticed. Yet she dismisses the thought, not daring to ‘give herself to the sea, she for whom giving herself was nearly impossible.’³⁷ She recognises herself only as a ‘woman who feared horses, who had betrayed the animal.’³⁸ She digs herself a hole in the sand and crawls in to fall asleep. As she sleeps, she dreams that she mounts a horse and that she, ‘the woman who feared horses’, is able to ride ‘smoothly on its back.’³⁹ When she wakes Prieta runs from the sea back towards the sand dunes, and it is at this moment, the moment when Prieta turns her back on nature and the animal, trying to run away from them both, that La Llorona reveals herself fully to Prieta:

It was then that she saw the horse-headed woman, slick neck arched, nostrils flaring. It had human arms and human skin that looked both frail and strong. She stopped in her tracks, veered off and ran on... the horse-faced woman was following her. She ran harder. It was like trying to escape the sound of the breath of the sea.⁴⁰

Despite Prieta’s initial fear, she recognises that the ‘horse woman was *la llorona* and it was in her body, in her mind, and at war.’⁴¹ Prieta admits to fearing the animal

³⁵ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 376.

³⁶ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 373.

³⁷ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 385.

³⁸ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 385.

³⁹ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 386.

⁴⁰ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 386.

⁴¹ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 386.

inside her that La Llorona represents, but she also wants to ‘lead the animal out, get it away from its tether.’⁴² In La Llorona’s manifestation in a form that is both ‘frail and strong’ she permits Prieta to recognise and accept the dualities of her own femininity.

By the story’s conclusion Prieta intuitively knows that Llosí has returned to the beach and is waiting for her in the car. We do not know for sure if Prieta will definitively end her relationship with Llosí now, but we do know that, in facing her animal self, Prieta has found a new freedom and a new sense of certainty: ‘There at the edge of the sea [Prieta] gave up her taming powers. It would start here. She would eat horses, she would let horses eat her.’⁴³ That the story concludes with Prieta realising she must heed the animal part of herself shows how her experience with La Llorona has changed her for the better. In the story’s final paragraphs Prieta sees herself ‘astride the *llorona*-faced mare,’ feels ‘the power vibrating from the mare into her body’⁴⁴, and accepts that she must liberate herself from the restraints imposed upon her by patriarchal belief systems, instilled in her from her father’s very first warnings against the ‘tricky horse’ of femininity.

For Nika, meeting with the horse-headed woman functions in two ways. Firstly, it confirms her preconceptions about women as animals. If the scene by the river is viewed as part of a dream, it suggests that this kind of thinking is so deeply embedded in Nika’s mode of thinking that it surfaces in her subconscious, and that patriarchal structures have already primed Nika to associate the animalistic with the female. If, however, the scene is taken literally and Nika does indeed come face to face with the ‘chestnut brown suede of [La Llorona’s] mouth... her perfect sheer black eyes: her enormous horse’s head’, it perpetuates the image of the monstrous and

⁴² Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 387.

⁴³ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 388.

⁴⁴ Anzaldúa, ‘She Ate Horses’, p. 387.

bestial woman.⁴⁵ In either regard, the animal/woman form is not rejected, but rather it is reinforced: Nika ‘expect[s] nothing less.’⁴⁶ However, there is also a subversion in using this image here, and this subversion occurs in the closing line of the chapter, where ‘despite her appearance, her bestial form, the sound [La Llorona] made was unmistakable. It was a woman’s cry.’⁴⁷ It is clear to both Nika and the reader that no amount of metamorphosis, no merging with the equine, will eliminate the speaking subject of woman. The reclaiming of Nika’s own voice is also key, as multiple times during the novel it is stifled or muted, interrupted or spoken over. When she is threatened by her neighbour in Mexico City he speaks over her, denying her the opportunity to express herself. When, later, she is attacked by Bruer she wants to ‘speak, to scream, but her voice failed her, she could only manage short pathetic chokes, she couldn’t even gasp out “no”.’⁴⁸ The reclamation of Nika’s voice is central to the closing pages of the novel, in which it is ‘given back to her in echo.’⁴⁹ The essential act of finding her voice once again, of ‘speaking out’, signifies Nika’s recovery of her own autonomy as a speaking subject.

The significance of the ‘Other’s’ need to speak is underlined in revisions of La Llorona lore: ‘Like *la Llorona*,’ Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, ‘the Indian woman’s only means of protest was wailing.’⁵⁰ La Llorona defies patriarchal constructions by perpetually demanding to be heard. Her very name symbolises her perceived transgression of passive femininity because she will not be silenced and continues to eternally cry out. The use of voice, the ability to speak, has been a central

⁴⁵ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 183.

⁴⁶ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 183.

⁴⁷ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 112.

⁴⁹ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 223.

⁵⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 21.

theme throughout the history of feminist thought.⁵¹ The fact that it plays out again and again in the resistance writing of feminist artists shows that it is the desire to *speak for oneself* that reoccurs. In being linked to nature, the feminine is placed outside of the world of linguistic semantics, or what Kristeva calls the symbolic. Instead, the animal feminine is relegated to the world of semiotics, in Kristevan terms associated with the rhythmic sounds, vocalisations, and echolalia infants make during the pre-Oedipal stage of development, before they learn to use formal language. The animal maternity of the mother binds her to this world of semiotic discourse.⁵² By speaking out, the feminine can be seen to be functioning in the logical, cultural, masculine and primary mode of communication – in *language*. La Llorona’s wailing does not entirely formulate language; instead it is, perhaps, more closely aligned with the non-verbal echolalia of pre-verbal discourse. Yet this makes it precisely a point of both/and, as although La Llorona wails out like an animal, she also calls out with human words for her children.

Women’s voices have long presented a threat to patriarchal forces, and La Llorona’s ‘speaking out’ aligns her with other women of mythology who ‘lure men to their deaths by means of the voice,’ chief among these figures being the Greek sirens.⁵³ It is this ‘speaking out’ that presents danger and brings men to ruin, and from this we conclude that listening to what women have to say can only threaten the established patriarchal law.

⁵¹ In their seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that ‘in patriarchal culture, female speech and female “presumption” – that is angry revolt against male domination – are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic’ (Gilbert & Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 35).

⁵² Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*, pp. 49-50.

⁵³ Robert A. Barakat, ‘Wailing Women of Folklore’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 82, No. 325 (1969) pp. 270-272.

Language, and its integral role in women's signification, has long been the subject of discussion by feminist theorists. Luce Irigaray stressed the importance of developing a 'woman's' voice when she coined the term *parler-femme* ('speaking (as) woman') in her text *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), while Hélène Cixous coined the term *écriture féminine* in her influential essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), in which she also argues that women's writing retains a link to the maternal, to that 'good mother's milk'; figuratively speaking, woman 'writes in white ink'.⁵⁴ The importance of reclaiming feminine voices, as well as feminine writing, becomes, also, the work of these fictional texts. As illustrated below, in Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek' La Llorona's wailing cry is transformed into an outburst of *jouissance*, and a place from which to enact rebellion.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Cohen, Keith & Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976) pp. 875-93.

⁵⁵ Wendy B. Faris has suggested that, in regards to genre, magical realism can be seen to most closely approach the *parler-femme* or *écriture féminine* of the female speaking subject that Irigaray and Cixous speak of. Specifically, Faris points out that because the hybrid nature of magical realism results in what could be described as an ability to function both at the level of the 'natural' (spiritual/magical = feminine), and the 'cultural' (language/realism = masculine), magical realism belongs 'to a sex that is, in Irigaray's words, "not one"' (Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) p. 170). Several scholars, including Valerie Henitiuk, have noted that despite Angela Carter's rejection of the term magical realism as applied to her own work, there are undeniable elements of magical realism at play in her stories. This consideration of genre is significant to note because, as Henitiuk argues, works of magical realism are often erroneously seen as 'representations of a primitive, magical Indian mentality co-existing alongside European rationality' (Henitiuk, 'Step into My Parlour', p. 418). Carter herself defied classing her work as magical realist, arguing, as her biographer Edmund Gordon puts it, 'that the phrase was meaningless when applied to any writing "in which something out of the way happens", rather than being used in the specific context of Latin American literature' (Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016) p. 392). But this may have been a somewhat disingenuous statement, as Gordon also notes, to draw 'attention away from the true nature of her debt', namely Borges (Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter*, p. 392). Henitiuk argues that magical realism is a genre precisely employed to fight back against this kind of 'noble savage' mentality because 'Latin American authors' use of magic realism rejects the view that the native myths and worldview are somehow homogeneous and unchanging, revealing that they are in fact only constructed that way in the Western mind' (Henitiuk, 'Step into My Parlour', p. 418). Significantly, she asserts that: 'Carter's use of the genre also invalidates such condescending attitudes, replacing the Indian/European dichotomy with a binary opposition of female/male, which she then proceeds to undermine' (Henitiuk, 'Step into My Parlour', p. 418).

‘WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK’

Alongside *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) is her best-known work. Unlike Anzaldúa’s ‘She Ate Horses’, Cisneros’s title story has been the subject of a wealth of scholarship in relation to revisionist portrayals of La Llorona. In examining ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ anew, Cisneros’s version is revealed, like Anzaldúa’s, to reclaim La Llorona as a source of empowerment specifically through her connection to the natural world and the speaking feminine subject.

‘Woman Hollering Creek’ opens, briefly, from a masculine perspective, that of the protagonist’s father. In the fleeting moment readers perceive the world through his eyes it becomes clear that in ‘giving away’ his daughter Cleófilas to her new husband, he already foresees her unhappiness. Quickly the point of view shifts to Cleófilas herself; having moved from Mexico to the United States after her marriage, she recalls her father’s parting promise: ‘*I will never abandon you.*’⁵⁶

Just as her father had predicted, Cleófilas is disappointed with her new married life over the border, and already matrimonial love has soured. Cleófilas’s dreams of her new life are quickly shattered when her husband becomes abusive. When he hits her for the first time she is shocked to discover that she is incapable of action or retaliation. Instead she is ‘stunned... *speechless*, motionless, numb’, and, as the beatings become more regular, she continues to find herself powerless to respond or speak out.⁵⁷ Most significantly, during these attacks, ‘she [doesn’t] break into tears’,⁵⁸ while her husband, afterwards, is ashamed of his actions, asking her for

⁵⁶ Sandra Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Random House, 1992) p. 43.

⁵⁷ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 48. My emphasis.

⁵⁸ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 47.

forgiveness and ‘weep[ing] like a child’ so that Cleófilas must console him like a mother would by stroking his hair.⁵⁹ As Alexandra Fitts argues, the only cries of anguish to be heard in Cisneros’s story are those of Cleófilas’s abusive husband, while the female characters do not weep.⁶⁰ Yet Cleófilas must find some way to give voice to injustice in order to find the agency to overthrow it. In her silence and beneficence, Cleófilas only perpetuates the archetype of the nurturing mother, patient and suffering. Moreover, her silence and inability to weep place her in direct opposition to La Llorona’s disruptive cries; Cleófilas offers forgiveness rather than revenge for her lover’s betrayals.

When she becomes a parent herself to the young Juan Pedrito she reflects that, while romantic love may ‘sour’, ‘a parent’s love for a child, a child’s for its parents, is another thing entirely.’⁶¹ From the outset, then, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ establishes the maternal protagonist as one full of love, rather than revenge or anger as in many traditional La Llorona tales, and this further indicates to us that Cisneros’s approach to the Weeping Woman will be one of positive empowerment.

Behind Cleófilas’s new house in Texas is an *arroyo*: a dry creek bed that is intermittently filled with water depending on the heaviness of rains. This *arroyo* is called La Gritona, meaning ‘Woman Hollering’, and Cleófilas is intrigued to know how the creek got its name: ‘Pain or rage, Cleófilas wondered when she drove over the bridge for the first time as a newlywed... *La Gritona*, he had said, and she had laughed. Such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after.’⁶² Cleófilas has grown up in Mexico watching *telenovelas* – soap operas – that have offered her a glimpse of a romantic and passionate life: of happily ever after. She

⁵⁹ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 48.

⁶⁰ Fitts, ‘Sandra Cisneros’s Modern Malinche’, pp. 11-22.

⁶¹ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 43.

⁶² Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 47.

anticipates that in leaving Mexico for the U.S. she too will be able to live such a life, to 'wear outfits like the women on the *tele*... [a]nd have a lovely house' and make her friends back home jealous.⁶³ Sonia Salvidar-Hull notes that the *telenovelas* so beloved by Cleófilas reveal the ways in which she is 'oppress[ed] and exploit[ed] within a trans/national domestic sphere that is saturated with media images that plot women's destinies according to the designs of time-honoured patriarchal formations.'⁶⁴

Cleófilas has been trained to expect only domestic happiness and, therefore, she sees the creek, at first, as a strange contradiction, a place that represents prettiness and happiness, but that carries a paradoxical name.

In her new home, Cleófilas lives between two spinster women. Her neighbour's names are potent: Soledad, meaning solitude, and Dolores, meaning pain or sorrow. Both these women have had men and children in their lives but they are now either dead, like Dolores's sons and husband, or simply gone, as in the case of Soledad's husband. Cleófilas wonders if they know why the *arroyo* is named La Gritona, but they are too consumed with their lost men to pay the topic any attention: 'too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back.'⁶⁵ These women are stuck in their solitude and sorrow because they are trapped in the memories of the men who have left them, and so they are disconnected from the *arroyo*'s true meaning. Their obsessions with the masculine have severed any knowledge they once may have had; 'they might've known once', Cleófilas muses, 'but they did not know now.'⁶⁶ Instead, the women warn her to stay away from it, telling her that it is bad luck, and that she mustn't go there after dark or

⁶³ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 45.

⁶⁴ Sonia Saldivar-Hull, 'Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1999) pp. 251-62.

⁶⁵ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 47.

⁶⁶ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 47.

she'll 'get sick and the baby too.'⁶⁷ The women's interpretation of the *arroyo* feeds into the cultural signals of control that Cleófilas has spent her life obeying. It adds to the ways in which her love of *telenovelas*, her acceptance of her husband's abuse, as well as traditional versions of 'infanticide by disobedient "wailing women" who are punished for rejecting motherhood' all 'join to coerce Cleófilas into accepting patriarchal arrangements.'⁶⁸

And yet she already knows more than Dolores or Soledad, as she questions whether or not the *arroyo* might, indeed, be named after La Llorona: 'Perhaps La Llorona is the one they named the creek after, she thinks, remembering all the stories she learned as a child.'⁶⁹ Despite the women's warnings, she is drawn to the creek bed, sensing in it something other than the danger she has been warned of. She finds it charming and 'lovely',⁷⁰ and when it is full from the rains she senses it is an 'alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own.'⁷¹ It is this 'voice', the importance of speaking out and for oneself that she admires, having herself been left 'speechless' by her husband's domestic abuse.⁷² The reclaiming of this voice will, by the story's conclusion, become paramount.

Cleófilas is drawn to the *arroyo*, and takes Juan Pedrito down to sit along its edge. Here she listens to the sounds of the water and Juan's innocent laughter, and 'wonders if something as quiet as this drives a woman to the darkness under the trees.'⁷³ Carbonell suggests that the element of water in La Llorona tales can be interpreted in two ways, as a disruptive force in stories where water provides the

⁶⁷ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 51.

⁶⁸ Saldivar-Hull, 'Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms', p. 258.

⁶⁹ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 51.

⁷⁰ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 46.

⁷¹ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 51.

⁷² Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 48.

⁷³ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 51.

means for her to kill her children, or as a symbol of rebirth in tales where La Llorona stands as a symbol for maternal resistance.⁷⁴ Perez contends that Cleófilas eventually comes to understand just what might drive a woman to drown her children, but that ‘La Llorona’s presence in her life does not inspire her to do the same.’⁷⁵ Rather, her presence becomes one of comfort, as much as resistance and inspiration, in the realisation that Cleófilas is not the only woman to have been fooled by the grand promises of romance. Feeling betrayed and unhappy is a legitimate emotional response to her circumstances; at the same time, the inspiration she takes from this knowledge is to act in a way that will free her from her husband without the tragic consequences of La Llorona’s story.

When she discovers she is pregnant with a second child, Cleófilas decides to act, insisting that her husband take her to the hospital for a check-up. He resists, concerned that his abuse will be revealed by the bruises on her body, but she assures him that she will simply say ‘she fell down the front steps or slipped when she was out in the backyard.’⁷⁶ But Cleófilas is already devising a way to extricate herself from her situation.

When she does attend her appointment, the narrative point of view shifts again and we are privy to one side of a telephone conversation between a doctor named Graciela and her friend Felice. Graciela tells Felice that, when preparing to perform a sonogram on Cleófilas, she discovers the bruises. Cleófilas readily admits to Graciela that her husband is the cause and that she wants to leave him and return to her family in Mexico. Graciela explains that Cleófilas ‘just start[ed] crying on me.’⁷⁷ This is significant because it demonstrates that, like La Llorona, the act of weeping, of crying

⁷⁴ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, p. 61

⁷⁵ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, p. 87.

⁷⁶ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 53.

⁷⁷ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 54.

out, offers a woman a way to communicate and be heard. Naming is here, again, a significant indicator to both the reader and Cleófilas, as Graciela and Felice's names mean, respectively, 'grace' and 'joy', in opposition to Soledad and Dolores. The two women can be seen as further counterpoints to Soledad and Dolores as Graciela and Felice are actively engaged in employment in the world outside the home, free of constraining memories or devotion to men in their domestic lives. These supportive women subvert versions of La Llorona's tale where, in her role as a child killer, she works against other women and functions as a threat to their offspring. Instead, Cisneros's version provides an 'alternative narrative in which women work together.'⁷⁸

Graciela is eager to help Cleófilas return home, but, understanding her tenuous position in the United States as a Mexican woman, she knows there is no recourse to contact the authorities for assistance. Instead, Graciela arranges for Felice to give Cleófilas a ride to the bus station. The story shifts once more, back to the perspective of Cleófilas, as Felice comes to her aid, picking her and Juan Pedrito up from outside a local store. Cleófilas is amazed by Felice, who seems free and strong and who drives a pickup truck:

A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband's, she said she didn't have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it.⁷⁹

Cleófilas is stunned by Felice's independence, and when they drive across the *arroyo* she is further amazed when Felice lets out 'a yell as loud as any mariachi.'⁸⁰ Felice tells Cleófilas that every time she crosses the bridge she is compelled to yell out, 'because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues* [well], I holler... Makes

⁷⁸ Carbonell, 'From Llorona to Gritona', p. 68.

⁷⁹ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 55.

⁸⁰ Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', p. 55.

you want to holler like Tarzan, right?’⁸¹ That Felice associates the name with an exultation of joy and *jouissance*, or a battle call, rather than with the ‘pain or rage’ Cleófilas instinctively associates with a woman’s cry demonstrates the women’s differing approaches to negotiating their lives within patriarchal society. Additionally, unlike Soledad and Dolores, Felice has already considered the name of the *arroyo* and its meaning. While Soledad and Dolores have lost interest in what the *arroyo* might symbolise because of their obsession with their lost men, Felice, detached from any male influence, actively engages with it, interpreting it and responding to it joyfully.

In this story Cleófilas is aligned to La Llorona in her nurturing form, more closely resembling the creator goddesses discussed in the previous chapter. Cleófilas believes in ‘loving, always loving no matter what, because *that* is the most important thing... to suffer for love is good’: a worldview taught to her by the beloved heroines of her *telenovelas*.⁸² However, by the story’s conclusion, Cleófilas has realised that such grand loving has not been wrong, simply misplaced. In devoting herself to the idea of romantic love her role as maternal nurturer has suffered. In finally rejecting her traitorous husband, Cleófilas is able to reclaim a positive and fulfilling love as a mother, sister, and daughter.

As they drive away, Cleófilas listens to Felice laughing before realising that the sound is actually coming from her, her own voice the source of the joy, ‘gurgling out of her... a long ribbon of laughter, like water.’⁸³ Carbonell reads this as Cleófilas ‘internalizing’ La Llorona’s voice and, in doing so, becoming one with her in a way that forces Cleófilas to ‘recognize patriarchy and to struggle against it instead of accepting its aggression and falling victim to its violence.’⁸⁴ In finally finding a voice

⁸¹ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 55.

⁸² Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, pp. 44-45.

⁸³ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 56.

⁸⁴ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, p. 66.

that is aligned with the protesting outcries of La Llorona, the breaking of Cleófilas's silence enacts a new and positive correlation to La Llorona lore.

Although Cleófilas's decision to return across the border to her patriarchal family unit, to the 'chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints', could be read as a failure, the fact that she has escaped a cycle of violence makes it clear that a battle has been won.⁸⁵ As Saldívar-Hull notes, in associating the 'hollering' creek with a cry of joy, a cry that denotes a transgressive *jouissance* instead of La Llorona's wailing, Cisneros enacts a feminist revision of the figure of La Llorona.⁸⁶ She becomes a woman capable of delight, and of expression beyond 'pain or rage'.⁸⁷ More significantly, Cleófilas shares the story of Felice's unexpected and untamed outcry with the male members of her family on her return to Mexico. She wonders aloud in awe and admiration, rather than in embarrassment or horror, 'what kind of talk was that coming from a woman?'⁸⁸ In taking this story back to her patriarchal family – in sharing with them the possibility of Felice's style of womanhood – Cleófilas passes on a new idea of femininity and 'becomes a producer of meaning rather than merely a consumer of dominant ideology.'⁸⁹ Additionally, in Cleófilas's knowledge that her father will always be there for her should she need him, Cisneros also reminds us that there are healthy male/female relationships within the familial home. These are the kind of relationships of mutual respect Cleófilas and her paternal family will instil in Juan Pedrito as he grows up, again breaking the cycle of violence and abuse the child would otherwise have been exposed to and, potentially, perpetuated in his own adulthood.

⁸⁵ Cisneros, 'Women Hollering Creek', p. 43.

⁸⁶ Saldívar-Hull, 'Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms', p. 259.

⁸⁷ Cisneros, 'Women Hollering Creek', p. 56.

⁸⁸ Cisneros, 'Women Hollering Creek', p. 55.

⁸⁹ Saldívar-Hull, 'Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms', p. 258.

Significantly, this turns Cleófilas from a muted voice into a “speaking subject”.⁹⁰ In recounting the story of her escape to her family she gains, like La Llorona’s *arroyo*, ‘a voice all [her] own.’⁹¹ As Castillo has noted in regards to La Malinche’s story, the hollering woman’s cries exemplify ‘the potentiality of a woman who escapes the confines of the home and allows herself to speak.’⁹² ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ constructs a La Llorona figure who defies victimhood by having the agency to leave an abusive situation and, in doing so, unsettles her story by preventing ‘the destruction of the maternal self in the first place.’⁹³ Carbonell concludes that Cleófilas’s identification with the Hollering Woman:

Helps her to find the necessary strength and ability to move herself and her children out of a life-threatening situation, suggesting that the indigenous origins of the figure can provide important strategies of resistance for contemporary Chicana and Mexican women.⁹⁴

Like Anzaldúa, Cisneros powerfully reimagines the indigenous archetype of La Llorona as one that allows women to break cycles of violence and oppression, rather than perpetuate them. It is crucial that Cleófilas should find this example in her own cultural symbols, liberated not by a white saviour’s guidance, or symbolism from the society she finds herself in, but by returning to her own cultural signifiers. By finding a cultural precedent to act, to speak out, Chicana revisions demonstrate that La Llorona can be symbolically positioned in a way that refuses the passivity of the Virgin and instead serves to embolden contemporary rebellion. These stories illustrate how ‘La Llorona can be mobilized to construct powerful and resilient heroines’ for Chicana women.⁹⁵ Yet, in doing this, Anzaldúa and Cisneros invoke the mythic as an

⁹⁰ Saldivar-Hull, ‘Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms’, p. 258.

⁹¹ Cisneros, ‘Woman Hollering Creek’, p. 51.

⁹² Castillo, ‘Coagulated Words’, p. 69.

⁹³ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, p. 65.

⁹⁴ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, p. 67.

⁹⁵ Carbonell, ‘From Llorona to Gritona’, p. 71.

inviolable part of women's formation of agency. It is not until Prieta and Cleófilas recognise and reconnect with mythic versions of women that they are capable of enacting change.

Yet it is precisely this need to invoke mythical women as figures that rescue or liberate that, in turning to look at *New Eve*, I argue Carter rejects. In the final chapter of this thesis, I shift my examination from the revisionist projects of Chicana feminism to the anti-mythic project of Carter's *New Eve* in order to consider how Carter's approach differs to those found in 'She Ate Horses' and 'Woman Hollering Creek'. While Carter still employs the mythic and natural symbolism of the feminine, she claims that the novel, first and foremost, serves a satiric function. Most significantly, in analysing the novel from this angle, I come to an understanding of how both these approaches inform my own, and the limits and possibilities of a both/and feminist revisionism.

CHAPTER THREE: ANGELA CARTER AND THE ANTI-MYTHIC *NEW EVE*¹

The Passion of New Eve signals a turning point in Angela Carter's development as a feminist, and feminine, writer. It begins a movement away from her earlier fictions and from what Carter herself called her early approach to writing as a 'male impersonator' and into a 'politically self-conscious woman-writer.'² The politics of *New Eve*, Carter's self-professed anti-mythic novel, can be read as a push back against exactly the kind of revisionist projects that were emerging around her in the milieu of second wave feminism. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I turn my focus to Carter's oppositional approach to the mythic. While Anzaldúa and Cisneros use folklore to recast La Llorona as a symbol of feminine empowerment, *New Eve* functions in many ways as a caution against investing too much in the reclamation of the female mythic. Of course, it must be noted that Carter's position as a white English woman places her in a position of privilege denied to writers like Anzaldúa and Cisneros, and so the task may not appear as urgent or necessary for a writer like Carter. But this also suggests why I should examine Carter's work alongside Anzaldúa's and Cisneros's, since I am more closely aligned culturally to Carter. These differences only serve to further inform the necessity of unpicking the function of such revisionism in light of transnational concerns.

Carter lived and worked across the globe, including in Australia and the United States, but it was her time spent in Japan as a young woman that exposed her

¹ An early version of this chapter appeared as 'The Chthonic Castrating Mother: Female Monstrosity and the Myth of the Cave in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*', in *Lilith Rising: Perspectives on Evil and the Feminine*, Cathleen Allyn Conway (ed.) (Freeland: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016) pp. 51-60.

² Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008) p. 2.

to an ‘othering’ tied not only to her position as a woman, but also to her position as the racial ‘Other’. Of her time in Japan she writes:

It was a painful and enlightening experience to be regarded as a coloured person, for example; to be defined as a Caucasian before I was defined as a woman, and learning the hard way that most people on this planet are *not* Caucasian and have no reason to either love or respect Caucasians.³

Carter’s experiences abroad influenced how she viewed myth, coming to see it as a vehicle for the spread of ‘false universals.’⁴ Whereas Anzaldúa and Cisneros draw on the potent restorative powers of myth, *New Eve* can be seen to ridicule myth.

Moreover, Carter lampoons the very process of reclaiming myth, seeing it as a solidification of the notions that attribute women with a natural generative fecundity. Additionally, her mockery of the matriarchal cult of Mother that Evelyn encounters in Beulah satirises a ‘belief in mother right and in “prehistory” when women created civilization.’⁵ Such a belief, as Wittig argues, is ‘symmetrical with the biologizing interpretation of history produced up to now by the class of men.’⁶ Carter’s *New Eve* seeks to find empowerment in dismantling the entire system of masculine and feminine symbolism to be found in myth.

Carter famously stated that she considered herself to be ‘in the demythologising business.’⁷ However, this is not to say that Carter’s anti-mythic process is itself beyond reproach. As I argue in this chapter, Carter’s process has also been accused of reinscribing patriarchal binaries. But regardless of their differing approaches, Carter, like Anzaldúa and Cisneros, believes in the importance of the stories women tell – of women’s fiction – to construct new ways of thinking:

It is enormously important for women to write fiction *as* women – it is part of the slow process of decolonising our language and our basic habits of

³ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 72.

⁴ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 6.

⁵ Wittig, ‘One is Not Born A Woman’, p. 310.

⁶ Wittig, ‘One is Not Born A Woman’, p. 310.

⁷ Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 71.

thought... it is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed.⁸

This chapter examines *New Eve* as work that succeeds in presenting a new way of thinking through anti-mythic revisionism, even if Carter's novel does not fully eradicate binary thinking.

In this chapter, I compare *New Eve* with *Dogs in the Dark* in order to consider the role of the natural world in the conception of femininity apparent in my own work. I do this by primarily looking at the symbolism of three major environments that appear in both texts: the city, the desert, and the cave. *New Eve* follows the picaresque wanderings of Evelyn, an Englishman recently arrived in the United States, whose travels reveal aspects of the surrounding environments that resonate with the construction and transformation of Evelyn's gender from male to female. In the most basic sense, *New Eve* charts a transition from male to female as a 'depiction of woman's structural position within patriarchy: becoming a woman requires... a literal castration.'⁹

Eve/lyn's journey serves as a parallel to Nika's own wanderings in Mexico, and the links between nature and gendered bodies in Carter's novel resonate with those found in *Dogs*. As I have mentioned above, Carter's use of landscapes does not fully eradicate their gendered binary symbolism. Rather, she presents contrasting versions of landscapes that often hold aspects of the masculine and the feminine in parity. The city can be read as in flux, oscillating between opposites, while the cave is

⁸ Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line', p. 75.

⁹ Jean Wyatt, 'The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and 'Peter and the Wolf'', in *Angela Carter: Contemporary Critical Essays*, Easton, Alison (ed.) (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) pp. 58-83. Scott Dimovitz argues that this transition can be read as a backwards progression of Freudian, Kleinian, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, 'invert[ing] the temporal trajectory, leading to nothing less than a complete subversion of male subjectivity' (Scott Dimovitz, 'Angela Carter's Narrative Chiasmus: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*,' *Genre*, Vol. 42, No. 1-2 (2009) p. 100).

presented as both a locus of masculine technology and feminine mythology. In this way, landscapes in *New Eve* become both masculine and feminine in turn, doing away with strictly ‘natural’ conceptions of the feminine, and strictly ‘cultural’ conceptions of the masculine. Ultimately, I read *New Eve* as an attempt to undermine the symbolism of myth.

THE CITY

At the beginning of *New Eve*, the male Evelyn bids farewell to his homeland and boards a flight to New York. On his last night in London, he takes ‘some girl or other’ to the movies, where he watches a film starring the object of his childhood fantasies, Tristessa de St Ange, a figure who, for the male Evelyn, signifies the epitome of perfect femininity in her suffering.¹⁰ New York is a city on the cusp of collapse, a stinking warren of ‘rank, disordered streets’, riddled with giant rats and sharp-shooting female militants.¹¹ These ‘angry women’ wear armbands that represent the *vagina dentata*, depicting bared teeth inside the female gender symbol , ♀, a symbol that Evelyn finds graffitied across the city walls.¹² This symbol of castration foregrounds Evelyn’s own impending emasculation at the hands of these same militants.

Ostensibly the most masculine of landscapes, this cityscape is, or *should be*, synonymous with culture — with order, cleanliness, and reason — rather than with

¹⁰ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 2014) pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Carter, *New Eve*, pp. 7-8.

¹² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 9.

‘alchemical... chaos and dissolution.’¹³ New York, Evelyn tells us, is:

Built on a grid like the harmonious cities of the Chinese Empire, planned, like those cities, in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason, the city had been given numbers and not names out of a respect for pure function... designed in clean, abstract lines, discrete blocks, geometric intersections... *A city of visible reason*.¹⁴

In considering Ortner’s proposition of spaces associated with ‘culture’ and ‘reasoning’ as essentially more closely aligned with masculinised traits, New York *should* represent the male. However, Anna Kérchy argues that Carter’s New York, in its descent into chaos, its reclamation by ‘mythical femininity’ through the graffitied symbol of the *vagina dentata*, is not a ‘masculine metropolis.’¹⁵ She continues that New York’s dark, dangerous interior, and the fact that its most recognisable icon is the Biblical forbidden fruit, the Big Apple, all point to its position as a feminine space.¹⁶ It is also in the city that Evelyn meets Leilah, a woman who will, by the end of the novel, be revealed as the Biblical Lilith. Leilah’s presence in the city further feminises the space as, when she becomes pregnant and suffers a hemorrhage from a botched abortion, she ‘violently embrac[es] the surrounding space with the darkness of her blood stains.’¹⁷ This maternal blood that produces no offspring deteriorates New York, reducing it further down the scale of reason through contamination by an abject, female waste fluid. It is also fitting that Lilith, as the woman who preceded Eve in Judeo-Christian lore, should precede Eve(lyn) here in a bastardised version of Paradise.

However, while New York can be seen as a symbol of the masculine in its very existence as a city, and while Kérchy theorises it as feminine, New York, like

¹³ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 12. My emphasis.

¹⁵ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 7.

Mexico City, can be seen as *both* masculine *and* feminine. Scott Dimovitz reads New York as in *transition* from male to female via a painful and grotesque bodily assault: via castration.¹⁸ This is also the same violent disfiguring Evelyn will shortly encounter in a very literal sense in the desert.

Kérchy concedes that Carter's seemingly feminine version of New York functions as a 'patriarchal paradox' because 'New York inflicts pain primarily on women.'¹⁹ In a similar vein, in my own work, Nika's experiences in Mexico City take on elements of threatening masculinity. Nika's experience of the city is unsettling; she's 'too scared to go out at night to eat, too frightened by the city's immensity, its crowds and unfamiliarity.'²⁰ When she does let her guard down upon returning from the pyramids, feeling more at ease in the crowded streets at night, she is brought back to the masculine threat of the city in an encounter with her neighbour, who intimidates and menaces her at her apartment doorway, suggesting she should take him upstairs with her. She is unsure how to extricate herself from the interaction, afraid that she might upset or offend him, replacing his lust with anger, and it is only through a literally abject action — her vomiting right in front of him — that she is able to escape.

But the city offers spaces of cultural/masculine worth that are not threatening to Nika. The art galleries and museums she visits are spaces of 'culture' as well as safe spaces, unlike the streets. In these places she is also accompanied by Torres, the woman who fascinates and astounds Nika with her self-assurance and mastery of the world at large. Torres' presence shifts the masculine centrality of cultural spaces, feminising them through her powerful control of galleries and archives, where she is

¹⁸ Dimovitz, 'Angela Carter's Narrative Chiasmus', p. 105.

¹⁹ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 7.

²⁰ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 49.

both an expert and a gatekeeper of knowledge. In these repositories of culture Nika sees Torres, whose very name translates to ‘towers’, as a figure of ‘commanding authority’ who is both ‘sure and confident’ of her position of power, but who is also comfortable with offering Nika feminine camaraderie, ‘grabb[ing Nika] by the shoulders, giggling as she pulled her back a few more steps... Torres pushed her face into Nika’s shoulder to stifle her laughter. Nika giggled too, delighted.’²¹ Moreover, the art that compels in these spaces is that made by women — Kahlo, Varo, Carver, Riker²² — while the art of Bruer, with its masculine gaze of the female form, repulses both women in equal measure. Torres, like these revered women artists, not only integrates herself into cultural space but demands her place, a position that Nika has not yet claimed for herself.

In *New Eve*, however, Evelyn is already part of the masculine symbolism of the city. As a result, he escapes the kinds of gendered intimidations Nika experiences, instead perpetrating them on others. He inflicts his most base and violent desires on Leilah: he ties her to the bed and deserts her for hours on end; he beats and degrades her.²³ Yet he also loves to watch her beautify herself in her apartment’s cracked mirror because:

She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah... she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection.²⁴

The space of the mirror here can be considered in relation to Michel Foucault’s theory of heterotopia. As he outlines in his essay, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and

²¹ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 59.

²² Kahlo and Varo are, of course, real artists, while Carver and Riker are my own inventions.

²³ Carter, *New Eve*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 24.

Heterotopias', heterotopias are places 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.'²⁵ Using the example of the mirror, he explains that it is a heterotopia because the mirror itself, as an object, exists in reality, while simultaneously 'exert[ing] a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.'²⁶ The mirror represents the dichotomy of self and self-representation: 'From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.'²⁷ Therefore, heterotopias are *abject* spaces that can unsettle our boundaries of self, like the moment we see ourselves in the mirror and consider how we occupy the space both *here* and *there*. Leilah is mesmerised by her own reflection, by the otherness of the familiar form inside the heterotopic looking glass. She exists both here and there. This abject, dualistic state foreshadows what will soon befall Evelyn, as his physical transformation into a woman projects him into a bodily opposition, into self and other simultaneously.

THE DESERT AND THE CAVE

According to Dimovitz, the desert, to which Evelyn runs in order to escape Leilah, 'signifies the beginning of the division of the subject from its imaginary image of unification, corresponding to the Lacanian mirror stage.'²⁸ In a Freudian sense, this division results in the formation of the male psyche, in the separation from the subject's 'imaginary' unification with the mother. However, Carter reverses this

²⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,' *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, trans. Jay Miskowicz (1984) p. 6.

²⁶ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 4.

²⁷ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 4.

²⁸ Dimovitz, 'Narrative Chiasmus', p. 106.

process and it is the male Evelyn who traverses the desert landscape of division in movement *towards* the mother, and towards the feminine psyche. Evelyn has already experienced the Lacanian mirror stage of which Dimovitz speaks, through the mediation of Leilah's own obsession with the mirror. As he drives through the desert, he does not realise that his journey away from Leilah is merely speeding him 'towards the very enigma [he] had left behind – the dark room, *the mirror*, the woman.'²⁹

Similarly, Nika's journey to the desert also brings her to this confrontation, but she is brought face to face with a reflected image of herself. Bruer's statue, with its face transplanted to its womb, signifies to Nika her own bodily condition.

Sarah Gamble asserts that Carter presents the desert, and indeed all the landscapes within *New Eve*, 'as more symbolic condition than place.'³⁰ The desert into which Evelyn wanders is 'an abode of enforced sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the post-menopausal part of the earth.'³¹ It is a landscape repeatedly described in terms that set it in opposition to life-giving bodies of water; it is 'an ocean of sand', 'an inverted ocean', where sand dunes rise like breakers.³² It is full of 'primordial light', suggesting an embryonic starting place, like the 'amniotic' waters Eve will later encounter by the sea-cave.³³ Moreover, all the way out in the middle of the inhospitable desert, Evelyn finds a dying albatross, a seabird, far removed from its ocean home.³⁴

Despite its position within the natural world, the desert is not a place often associated with the life-giving abundance of more feminine landscapes, but neither is

²⁹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 35. My emphasis.

³⁰ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p. 123.

³¹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 36.

³² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 78.

³³ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 34.

³⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 40.

it a specifically masculine realm. Evelyn calls it an ‘architectless town’, suggesting an absence of the controlling, ‘reasonable’ influence of culture.³⁵ In the desert, Nika encounters an abundance of life: fire ants, scorpions, spiders, and snakes. The chthonic symbolism of these creatures, associated with death, femininity and the underworld, situates the desert as a place with feminine aspects. This is further reinforced when Nika experiences supernatural aid at the desert crossroads: the space most associated with the female spirits of the *cihuateteo*. Here Nika finds guidance, rather than danger, reversing the terror of the female symbolism. By contrast, the desert for Evelyn represents danger, and it is not long before he is captured by an all-female army and taken to the underground city of Beulah.

The entrance to Beulah is signposted by a stone monument, ‘twenty or thirty feet tall’, representing a giant penis in a ‘state of massive tumescence.’³⁶ However, this symbol is broken in two, with the top half lying in the sand. It marks the entrance to the underground empire of Mother, but also to the cave-womb in which Evelyn will undergo his physical transformation. Carter leads her protagonist down to the cave twice in her novel, and this first descent takes him into the ludicrous and absurd underworld of the godhead Mother, beginning Evelyn’s experiences with the ‘inward parts of the earth.’³⁷

Mother is an amalgam of varied goddess archetypes, and the personification of ‘self-fulfilling’ fertility.³⁸ A grotesquely altered matriarch that represents not only the Terrible Mother, but also the embodiment of a Freudian castratrix, she stands as an allegory for a doubly dangerous, threatening female force. She is described as having a giant head and limbs, being ‘breasted like a sow’, with extra breasts painstakingly

³⁵ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 39.

³⁶ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 44.

³⁷ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 43.

³⁸ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 56.

grafted on her torso.³⁹ Mother declares that she is ‘the Great Parricide... the Castratrix of the Phallogentric Universe.’⁴⁰ She is waging a war to usher in the new matriarchy, but rather than creating a feminist utopia, Mother has instead conjured up a dystopia: a repetition of patriarchal violence and destruction. While Carter sets up the notion of the cave and underworld as specifically female spaces, she does so in such a way that the hyperbole and flourish of her language, and the exaggerated nature of her characters, lampoons the idea of the chthonic Earth Mother, rather than embracing or promoting it.

In Beulah, Evelyn is unwillingly subjected to Mother’s surgical knife, at first castrated, and then tenderly re-created with the genitals, breasts, and appearance of a woman. Now ‘she’ undergoes a re-programming to adjust to her new gender, enduring countless hours of footage spanning the entirety of female representation, including images of the Virgin and Child and old Hollywood movies.⁴¹ As the new Eve, the diminutive of her former self, she is given a perfectly functioning womb, which Mother intends to impregnate with sperm collected from Evelyn before his re-gendering procedure. Evelyn becomes Eve, in the likeness of the perfect woman: a ‘*Playboy* centre fold’, and the former Evelyn’s own ‘masturbatory’ fantasy.⁴² New Eve is now the literal embodiment of the castrated man and a ‘lyrical abstraction of femininity.’⁴³

Beulah ‘is a place where contrarities are equally true.’⁴⁴ Carter borrows the namesake for Mother’s underground world from William Blake’s epic poem, *Milton*, and Evelyn quotes from it verbatim. In his description of Beulah, Blake envisions a

³⁹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 64.

⁴¹ Carter, *New Eve*, pp. 68-69.

⁴² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 71.

⁴³ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 44.

place that is not simply a “‘feminine’ realm’ but, moreover, a land with an ‘ideal of gender equality.’⁴⁵ Because ‘contrarities are equally true’ they would appear to cancel out sexual difference, ostensibly creating a world where binaries merge. In her depiction of Beulah, Carter shows how this utopian ideal fails when the patriarchal role is merely replaced with a matriarch. As Irigaray cautions, ‘To put a woman in a Socratic position amounts to assigning the mastery of discourse to her. Putting her in the traditional position of the “masculine subject”⁴⁶ — a reversal that would result in a sameness — is an exchange of matriarchy for patriarchy.

Moreover, such a reversal perpetuates a logic that continues to privilege an ideal subject over an inferior object and maintain a discourse of sexual difference that must define one *against* the other.⁴⁷ The matriarchy of Beulah exemplifies the limits of such a reversal, and, through Mother, Carter ridicules a mere repetition of patriarchy through maternal myth. It is the newly transformed Eve who suggests that perhaps it is possible that ‘contrarities exist together’⁴⁸, and by the novel’s close, Carter has offered us a glimpse of how to ‘escape the bad magic of mythologies’⁴⁹, without simply implying that this can be done through the transformation of gender.

Some critics of Carter’s work, specifically of her recurring use of sexual violence, have questioned the extent to which Carter’s fictions may ‘fall back into reinscribing patriarchal attitudes.’⁵⁰ However, it seems there is also another reading here. Carter does not simply lampoon the notion of the castrating chthonic Mother, nor does she reinscribe it. Rather, she acknowledges the female metaphor of the cave

⁴⁵ Magnus Ankarsjö, *William Blake and Gender* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006) p. 29.

⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) p. 156.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Irigaray*, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) p. 18.

⁵⁰ Robert Clark quoted in Scott Dimovitz, “‘I Was the Subject of the Sentence Written on the Mirror’”: Angela Carter’s Short Fiction and the Unwriting of the Psychoanalytic Subject,” *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2010) pp. 1-19.

while simultaneously rejecting the ‘consolatory nonsense’ of chthonic goddesses. While Carter derides the kind of feminism – Mother’s feminism – that might seek to bolster its status through notions of archaic Mother Earth cults, she does not completely reject the powerful feminine significance of the cave as womb. Carter is explicit in asserting that Mother’s ‘magic’ is artificially constructed. It is through technology and surgery that Mother has altered her body into its mythical form: ‘In Beulah’, Evelyn tells us, ‘myth is a made thing, not a found thing.’⁵¹ Irigaray argues that, ‘The womb has been played with, made metaphor and mockery of by men.’⁵² In her monstrous and entirely artificially constructed form, Mother has also made a mockery of the womb; she has commandeered and mangled its symbolism, and this would appear to be the same accusation Carter levels at the ‘glamorous’ appeal of the ‘guerrilla underground’ feminism of many of her contemporaries.⁵³ Mother, she tells us, is ‘the abstraction of a natural principle.’⁵⁴ Carter views embracing such notions as perilous, recalling Marina Warner’s caution that ‘hark[ing] back to the fantasy of the archaic, all-encompassing mother of creation... may be ultimately the most dangerous and intractable patriarchal myth of all, responsible for the long history of inequity argued from biology.’⁵⁵

After Eve’s transformation at the hands of Mother, she escapes Beulah but is shortly captured again, this time by the antithesis of Mother, the misogynistic ‘monomaniac’, Zero.⁵⁶ Zero rules over a harem of wives living in the desert, all mindlessly devoted to him, convinced that they are kept young and healthy only

⁵¹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 53.

⁵² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) p. 263.

⁵³ Sage, *Angela Carter*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, p. 60.

⁵⁶ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 96.

through their sexual encounters with him. Zero, though sexually voracious, is sterile. He fails to impregnate any of his wives, who all long to bear his children, and he blames his sterility on the ‘witch’ Tristessa, who he believes has ‘magicked the genius out of [his] jissom.’⁵⁷ In the barren desert, as the truncated column that signposts Beulah suggests, even the most sexually virile figure is incapable of reproduction.

Zero ‘adore[s] the desert because he hate[s] humanity’ and, hidden in its vastness, he is free to treat his wives as he pleases.⁵⁸ He believes women are ‘fashioned of a different soul substance from men, a more primitive, animal stuff, and so [do] not need the paraphernalia of civilised society such as cutlery, meat, soap, shoes etc.’⁵⁹ As his newest bride, Eve is subjected to rape and violence. Not only, then, is a woman’s structural position within patriarchy dependent on her castration – in this case Evelyn’s literal castration – but, even more troubling, is Eve’s initiation into her new gender through sexual violence. Eve views Zero’s attacks as ‘as savage an apprenticeship in womanhood as could have been devised... the mediation of Zero turned [her] into a woman.’⁶⁰ Rachel Carroll takes issue with Eve’s ‘mediation’ to womanhood through sexual violence, warning that it ‘serves to reinforce the construction of woman as victims.’⁶¹ However, Carter’s intent is more subversive than this, less about Eve’s need to construct a female psyche than it is about Eve/lyn recognising his former male self’s role as ‘violator at the moment of [her] own violation.’⁶² Now that Eve is both violator and violated, her rape can be seen as

⁵⁷ Carter, *New Eve*, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁸ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 82.

⁵⁹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 104.

⁶¹ Carroll, ‘Violent Operations’, p. 14.

⁶² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 98.

‘demythologising issues of patriarchal power that serve to reinforce the binary of male aggressor and female victim.’⁶³

In *Dogs in the Dark* Nika is threatened by Bruer’s rape; however, she foils his attempt, fighting back in a refusal to become his victim. When threatened by her neighbour in Mexico City Nika is unable to act or respond, and it takes an involuntary, abject reaction in order for her to extricate herself from this situation. However, in the desert, Nika finds the power to actively and consciously resist, even if only physically: ‘her voice may have failed, but her legs, her arms, the rest of her, was fighting, fighting hard. She was barely conscious of her body’s efforts.’⁶⁴ While Nika’s body reacts, her voice is dormant, and the importance of the signifier of language to both suppress and engender empowerment is again brought to the forefront, as it is in representations of La Llorona myths and in Eve’s additional experiences with Zero in the desert.

Zero further degrades his wives by denying them speech and insisting that they communicate in squawks, squeaks, mews, and other animal noises. In this way, Eve reveals, ‘he regulated our understanding of him and also our understanding of ourselves in relation to him.’⁶⁵ In her ‘Laugh of the Medusa’, Cixous speaks of the patriarchal construct of language, while, in Kristevan terms, the very corporeality of the female form already places woman outside of the world of linguistic semantics, and instead sets her within the world of semiotics.⁶⁶ Here then, we see Zero further remove his women from the world of the symbolic, from culture and language.

⁶³ Charley Baker, “‘Nobody’s Meat’: Revisiting Rape and Sexual Trauma Through Angela Carter”, in *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, Onega, Susana & Jean-Michel Ganteau (eds.) (New York: Rodopi, 2007) p. 70.

⁶⁴ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 112.

⁶⁵ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 93.

⁶⁶ Birgit Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) pp. 49-50.

Zero succeeds in tracking Tristessa to her hideout in a glass tower in the desert. He plans to rape and kill Tristessa – a paragon of both Zero and Evelyn’s fantasy of femininity – but before he can, Tristessa is exposed as a man in drag.⁶⁷ Tristessa is caught in the act of portraying the very ideal of his own masculinised fantasy of the ‘exquisitely’ suffering and passive woman.⁶⁸ Tristessa has turned himself into the ‘only woman he could have loved,’⁶⁹ who is ‘as beautiful as only things that don’t exist can be.’⁷⁰ By signifying the iconography of the female body through all the ‘appurtenances of femininity’⁷¹ in his clothing, makeup and performativity minus the abject reality of female genitalia, Tristessa becomes a fetishised version of femininity with all the ‘abhorrent reminders of [women’s] fecund corporeality’ removed.⁷² When Tristessa’s duplicity is revealed he admits that ‘[he] was seduced by the notion of a woman’s being, which is negativity. Passivity...’; like the glass tower itself, Tristessa views femininity as ‘a pane the sun shines through.’⁷³ Tristessa conceives of femininity as a portal through which masculinity can amplify and exalt its own conception of idealised womanhood: femininity is negativity, it is nothing, Tristessa tells us, unless it is being looked at through a masculine lens.

⁶⁷ I do not read Tristessa here as a representation of a trans identity, predominantly because this does not seem to have been Carter’s intent. Rather, Tristessa is a moral for the ultimate male construction of ‘perfect’ feminine suffering. For alternative readings and discussion of *New Eve* in relation to transgender studies see: Heather L. Johnson, ‘Unexpected geometries: transgressive symbolism and the transsexual subject in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*’, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, in Bristow, Joseph & Trev Lynn Broughton (eds.) (London: Longman, 1997); Claire Westall, ‘His almost vanished voice’: Gendering and Transgendering Bodily Signification and the Voice in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*’, in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices*, Kim, Rina & Claire Westall (eds.) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Roberta Rubenstein, ‘Intersexions: Gender Metamorphosis in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* and Lois Gould’s *A Sea-Change*’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1993) pp. 103-18; Rachel Carroll, ‘“Violent Operations”’: revisiting the transgendered body in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2011) pp. 241-55.

⁶⁸ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 125.

⁷⁰ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 128.

⁷² Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, p. 3.

⁷³ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 134.

Tristessa's tower, like the snapped penis of Beulah, stands for a representation of women that is mediated through masculine symbolism. In Beulah, the snapped penis suggests that women can only become fully powerful by first violently annihilating masculine symbolism. In Mother's realm it is only the destruction of the phallus that will restore women to a gynocentricity previously lost to them. Likewise, when Tristessa is revealed, the masquerade of the tower can no longer stand. It is inevitable that it will fall, and the tower is set into a security protocol that begins spinning it on a subfloor turntable until it whirls itself from its foundations, shattering to the ground below. This destruction of the tower, like that of the obelisk at Beulah, might suggest that Carter's destabilising of binary thinking is built on the destruction of totemic phallic power. But it also reveals Carter's subversive intentions by 'signaling the collapse of the cultural formula of the victimization of women.'⁷⁴ These wrecked phallic symbols are bound up with Carter's project to do away with the symbols of masculine power used to oppress women as much as with her rejection of women's insistence on reusing these same symbols and, therefore, reinforcing them. Carter uses the same subversion of the imagery of the womb in the final stages of Evelyn's journey as, when Zero and his wives are killed by the collapse of the glass tower and Tristessa is murdered, Eve is propelled towards her final confrontation with the maternal in the fecund and womb-like imagery of the sea and the cave.

THE SEA AND THE CAVE

⁷⁴ Eliza Claudia Filimon, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013) p. 44.

While Mother is presented in the first instance as the tangible incarnation of the chthonic earth mother, and of what dwells in the underground feminine lair, Eve's second, and last, journey through the cave provides a counter-tract to her experiences in Beulah and a lens through which to consider Nika's final actions in *Dogs*.

By the close of *New Eve*, Mother and her disciples have helped to transform the United States into a war-torn wasteland. Eve is reunited with Leilah, but Leilah now admits that her real name is Lilith and that she 'called [her]self Leilah in the city in order to conceal the nature of [her] symbolism.'⁷⁵ Lilith also admits to being the daughter of Mother, who has realised that she could not 'make time stand still', and so has given up her cause and her role as a goddess and retreated to a cave by the sea. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter makes clear that the womb is most potently evoked in the landscapes of the sea and the cave, arguing that 'the unguessable reaches of the sea are a symbol of [the womb], and so are caves, those dark sequestered places where initiation and revelation take place.'⁷⁶ By taking refuge here, Mother has returned to the organic version of the womb she herself tried to construct in Beulah.

Lilith explains that Mother has failed because 'historicity overtook myth... and rendered it obsolete. Mother tried to take history into her own hands but it was too slippery to hold... historicity rendered myth unnecessary.'⁷⁷ Here Carter proposes that the actuality of the historical moment we live in negates the need to rewrite history through a reclamation of an ancient Mother-goddess; 'when there was a consensus agreement on the nature of the symbolic manifestations of the spirit,' Lilith continues, 'no doubt Divine Virgins, Sacred Harlots and Virgin Mothers served a

⁷⁵ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 170.

⁷⁶ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 124.

⁷⁷ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 169.

useful function; but the gods are all dead, there's a good deal of redundancy in the spirit world.'⁷⁸

Likewise, in the cave, Nika comes face to face with the redundancy of myth. Here Nika realises that she has spent her life 'burdened with another woman's myth'⁷⁹: the myths of Virgin Mothers and Terrible Mothers, Mary, La Llorona, and Lilith/Eve alike. Rather than empowering Nika, these myths have only served to deny her a speaking subjectivity; in recognising that she is not a myth, that the painting does not hold her likeness or reflect her, she is able to do away with their symbolism. And, indeed, her ultimate act of abjection, infanticide and cannibalism, does away altogether with the symbol of the child, with which the feminine remains in conflict in the myths of maternal monstrosity. In Carter's work, Eve muses 'should we do that with all the symbols... put them away, for a while, until the times have created a fresh iconography?'⁸⁰ By the close of *Dogs*, Nika is done with symbols, violently abjecting them in order to construct her own meaning, her signifying voice redoubled, 'given back to her in echo.'⁸¹

Evelyn's first descent into the underworld of Beulah places him in an artificial womb, a construction of militant feminism, a clinical place of technology that is cold, plastic, and 'shocking[ly] clean'.⁸² *Eve's* second journey into the cave signifies the 'primordial mother, the actual, biological mother.'⁸³ This cave is organic, described as having 'walls of meat' covered in a bloody slime, which pulse with a 'visceral', 'rhythmic' beat.⁸⁴ This, then, is the cave made literal womb. Now that the

⁷⁸ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 171.

⁷⁹ *Dogs in the Dark*, pp. 220-21.

⁸⁰ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 170.

⁸¹ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 223.

⁸² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 47.

⁸³ Dimovitz, 'Narrative Chiasmus', pp. 83-111.

⁸⁴ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 180.

construction of myth has been discarded, Eve is able to navigate ‘the concrete regression of [the] cave. Eve returns to her mother.’⁸⁵ But, in Nika’s case, the cave is neither clinical nor visceral. It is a place of red dust and silence despite its womb-like symbolism. It is nature in its most ambivalent aspect, neither one thing nor the other.

It is important to note a distinction in Carter’s use of the word mother in this final section of *New Eve*. Here, Carter does not use a capital ‘M’: she is not speaking of Mother the godhead any longer. In her analysis, Gamble notes that during this second journey ‘Eve gets the impression that time itself is running in reverse, so that the world into which [Eve] re-emerges [re-births] is one free of myths, symbols and stereotypes.’⁸⁶ In overturning such symbols and stereotypes, Carter is not simply neutralising Earth Goddess myths; rather, she undoes myths of maternity that forever bind the feminine to the reproductive, myths that, ironically, reinforce notions that reduce women to biological functions rather than liberating them from the idealised notion of woman *as* mother.⁸⁷ At the same time, in rejecting prescribed reproductive functions or maternity altogether, women destroy myths of motherhood: ‘The goddess is dead,’ Carter declares, ‘[a]nd, with the imaginary construct of the goddess, dies the notion of eternity... [w]e are confronted with mortality, as if for the first time.’⁸⁸ The monumental and cyclical time of the womb is shattered, and in its place is transience, the knowledge that ‘we must learn to live in this world... because it is the only world that we will ever know.’⁸⁹ In the same way, Nika re-emerges from the cave to a world that is stripped of myth, walking away from ‘everything it had seemed impossible to leave behind’ toward a new conception of life, death, and transformation.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 176.

⁸⁶ Gamble, *Angela Carter*, p. 129.

⁸⁷ Jones, *Irigaray*, p. 17.

⁸⁸ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 127.

⁸⁹ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 127.

⁹⁰ *Dogs in the Dark*, p. 224.

In the closing stages of *New Eve*, Mother is nowhere in sight; she cannot be found in this cave. She has ‘voluntarily resigned from... the gross godhead of [her] arcane theology,’⁹¹ and what is left in the cave is all that came before the myths of Good Mother/Terrible Mother: now Eve is at the ‘beginning of the beginning.’⁹² ‘Welcome to anteriority, Eve,’ she tells herself.⁹³

Nick Bentley notes that the character of Mother, ‘provides grist to the mill of those critics... who are dubious of Carter’s feminist credentials, as [Mother] appears to be an ironic manifestation of some elements within radical feminism as it was developing in the 1970s.’⁹⁴ Mother not only appears as an ironic manifestation, she *is* an ironic manifestation. Yet, this merely points to Carter’s anti-mythic vision rather than to an anti-feminist standpoint. Nicole Ward Jouve adds that, in rejecting the godhead Mother, *New Eve* is a counter-tract to much of the French and second wave feminism of the seventies.⁹⁵ But that does not make it an *anti-feminist* novel. Carter describes the ‘official past’ – historicity – as a ‘vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based.’⁹⁶ For Carter, the chthonic castrating Mother represents another lie, this time one told *by* women *to* women. It is untying women from these lies – from the mythic binds of nature, of the animal, of the abject – that sits at the heart of her anti-mythic novel.

Ultimately, then, *New Eve* is an ‘investigation of cultural “truths”’, and the myths that perpetuate a feminine evil that lurks below the surface. Gamble states that

⁹¹ Carter, *New Eve*, pp. 170-77.

⁹² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 163.

⁹³ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 163.

⁹⁴ Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 101.

⁹⁵ Ward Jouve, Nicole, ‘Mother is a Figure of Speech...’, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, Sage, Lorna (ed.) (London: Virago, 1995) pp. 162-163.

⁹⁶ Carter, ‘Notes From the Front Line’, p. 74.

Eve's second descent into the cave is 'a journey away from [the godhead] Mother and the consolations of mythology, for what she brings back into the world is the knowledge that Mother' – as a chthonic monster, as a 'Phallogentric castratrix' – is no more than "a figure of speech".⁹⁷

Eve's last 'mythological journey through the labyrinth' is a 'psychological journey back to the womb'⁹⁸, a place where Eve, in the end, feels she has both 'come home' and 'not come home', where, in the absence of her mother, she finds the 'small echo of [her own] voice.'⁹⁹ Here Carter restores, or at least begins to restore in small measure, voice to new Eve as speaking subject, as woman. Likewise Nika, whose mute protest against patriarchal threat in Mexico City could only be figured as a bodily abjection, as vomit, and who could not speak out against Bruer's sexual violence, is given voice when she finally emerges from the cave. This time what flows from her mouth is her own voice, her own language and power to signify for and of herself.

Kérchy suggests that *New Eve* may not read as a 'fully triumphant' feminist text.¹⁰⁰ However, the essential reason this may be so is because, in order to address and subvert patriarchal structures, Carter furiously reminds us of what these structures are. At times the lengths to which she goes to highlight the existence of stereotypes merely seems like stereotyping. As Kérchy notes, because Eve becomes progressively 'more violently interpellated as a feminine *subject*, she is constantly entrapped in narratives of victimization.'¹⁰¹ That is, the more a woman becomes a woman, the more a woman speaks her story – for we must remember that this story works in past

⁹⁷ Gamble, *Angela Carter*, p. 128.

⁹⁸ Rubenstein, 'Intersexions', p. 106.

⁹⁹ Carter, *New Eve*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Kérchy, *Body Texts*, p. 3. My emphasis.

tense; it is the female Eve who recounts the story retrospectively – the more she must suffer for the transformation and, importantly, the transgression of *speaking as woman*. For this she is abused, raped, and degraded.

But Ward Jouve argues that the very fact that Carter's writing asserts that these stereotypes persist is what makes her writing so strongly feminist. She contends that Carter's 'antics and self-deflating rhetoric, exposes... the fabrication process: never promotes the illusion.'¹⁰² Indeed, I read Carter's work here not because I myself believe to have created a 'fully triumphant' feminist text, but because in working through Carter's endeavours to dismantle myth I have found the framework for an experimentation that mixes Carter's anti-mythic approach with the feminist revisionism of some of her contemporaries.

CONCLUSION: SPECULATIONS TOWARDS A FUTURE OF BOTH/AND

This thesis is an endeavour to write and think into a creative praxis of a both/and feminist revisionism. As such, its findings are an opening, exploring a new way of thinking into feminist revisionism, rather than subscribing a definitive set of boundaries and procedures for doing so. This thesis scrutinises the enduring binaries that complicate feminist reclamations of mythic gynocentricity, questioning what might happen if myth is discarded altogether from our construction of femininity. At the same time, it acknowledges that building a set of degendered symbols and ciphers

¹⁰² Ward Jouve, 'Mother is a Figure of Speech...', p. 148.

again from the ground up is, while a worthy endeavour, difficult to achieve, occupied as we are in disentangling ourselves from what has come before.

The transcultural significance of these divergent projects has highlighted that their similarities do not collapse difference. Yet neither do their differences negate the similarities of their shared objectives. While these processes have unique significances to a particular Eurocentric discourse and a particular Chicana discourse, they illuminate shared concerns and considerations. This objective, at heart, is the liberation of the feminine from the mythic, be that in rewriting the signifiers of the feminine mythic, or in attempting to do away with them altogether. Although the success of my own endeavour in this field remains open to consideration, I hope this thesis has, at least, opened a discussion into the potential of a new model of feminist revisionism.

The folklore of La Llorona and the work of Anzaldúa and Cisneros that inform this thesis demonstrate a very specific practice of feminist revisionism intertwined with a position from within Chicana feminism. While I can claim no right to this subjectivity, nor, I hope, have I suggested to, the task of looking beyond Eurocentric feminism towards a transnational consideration of women's experiences and subjectivities is absolutely crucial. Anzaldúa and Cisneros's works exemplify the importance of mythic and folkloric signifiers to a particular historical, cultural, political, and racial perspective. I have considered their writings as demonstrating a common ancestry of oppression through maternal stereotyping, naturalisation, and monstrosity, but also as works that serve to reject a universal and collapsed 'myth of Woman'.¹ Yet, as I have also argued, regardless of the nuanced ways La Llorona lore reflects particular socio-political moments, people, and places, a consideration of La

¹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 14.

Llorona lore also points to universally recurring constructions of women's mythic symbolism. This thesis has considered the myth of woman in its many guises, and the ways in which this myth has been reshaped and retold, not only by patriarchal forces, but also by women themselves.

Although *Dogs in the Dark* ultimately owes a great debt to Carter's work, and *New Eve* in particular, my hope is that *Dogs* sits as a distinctly different piece of fiction altogether, and that my analysis of Carter's anti-mythic revisionism outlines a case study for my own intentions. In examining *New Eve* I have considered an alternative vision for the mythic feminine, a vision where the mythic is dismantled and 'put away', at least, as Carter suggests, until 'the times have created a fresh iconography.'² This time must be enacted by those of us writing now, and it must be the work of women writers going forward to construct a new iconography from the ground up, rather than on top of the bleeding corpse of patriarchy, or over the sacred grounds of past mythologies. We must find new soil, lay out new groundwork, and build new foundations. But this is the *at least*. Ideally, we might walk away from the worksite altogether. How we might achieve such a radical departure is a continuing experiment, and one this thesis can only work towards.

This thesis proposes that *Dogs in the Dark*, like *New Eve*, can be read as falling short of these intentions, but that in attempting to reach them *Dogs* adds to a way of envisioning an anti-mythic process. Nika's journey can be seen to reinscribe binaries where I have hoped to present dualisms, and, moreover, in the endeavour to reconcile oppositional forces at all I have, inevitably, been locked into a re-evaluation that necessitates the use of myth. This is the double bind of the process itself. Furthermore, Nika's story also presents the limits of a transnational consideration of

² Carter, *New Eve*, p. 170.

myth, in that the weight of Judeo-Christian signification hangs heavy on La Llorona's shoulders. That said, even if Nika cannot comprehend the significance of La Llorona as a figure who can release women of colour from a distinct paradigm of social, racial and economic oppression, she can understand her as a symbol of power and resistance, even if this resistance has 'monstrous' consequences.

According to Caputi, 'The reclaiming of this [mythic] past and the reworking of its symbols comprise a political, emotional, spiritual, and psychical vision that not only describes but also generates a resistant, nonpatriarchal consciousness and an alternative path of *becoming* for both women and men.'³ To this I would add that, in a historical moment that is reconsidering the dualistic ways in which we consider gender, how useful is it to a future project of gender fluidity and inclusiveness to continue to negotiate in this way? *New Eve* begins to tackle this in the figure of Eve/lyn, suggesting that what we really need is a new conception of that prototype of woman: a new foundational concept of both/and to begin with. But again, this idea presents us with yet another conception bound to the mythic.

In my examination of these texts my scope does not incorporate queer theoretical concerns, although, as I have suggested, it is a lens through which these texts also offer undeniable insight.⁴ Going forward, this might present a path towards

³ Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters*, p. 10.

⁴ For more discussion on La Llorona, as well as the revisionist work of Anzaldúa, in this context see: Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcáb, 'Gloria Anzaldúa and the Meaning of Queer', in *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, AnaLouise Keating & Gloria González-López (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Alicia Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Cecilia Aragon, 'Representation of Sexual and Queer Identities in Chicana/o-Latina/o Children's Literature', in *Voices of Resistance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Chican@ Children's Literature*, Laura Alamillo, Larissa M. Mercado-Lopez & Cristina Herrera (eds.) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

more deliberation than I have had the capacity to discuss here. Some questions we might feasibly ask are: would a reconciliation of mythic dualisms allow us to recognise a historical and continuing precedent for the negation of feminine/masculine? How would such a concept challenge or replicate the abject other, or the divide of nature/culture, object/subject? In engaging with these ideas, this thesis has explored the divergent application of fundamental constructions of gender, and their representations as monstrous, and mythic, in revisionist texts.

Dogs in the Dark has been a testing ground for these ideas and for experimenting with the revisionism of these opposing camps. As such, the theoretical outcomes of the novel remain embryonic, but present a basis on which to continue to experiment with the both/and of feminist revisionist fiction.

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