

Developing Practice-led Feminist Mythology of the Third Generation

and a novel:

The Material and the Divine

Lauren Butterworth

Bachelor of Creative Arts (Honours) Flinders University

School of Humanities and Creative Arts

Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law

Flinders University

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Summary

This thesis explores feminist revisionist approaches to overcoming gender binaries and subverting cultural myths of the feminine through a creative product, *The Material and the Divine*, and accompanying critical exegesis. I position this response within Julia Kristeva's 'third generation' of feminism as outlined in her essay, 'Women's Time'. This position gives women access to the Symbolic Order beyond the patriarchal myth of 'woman' by recognising their active (as opposed to passive) desire. Consequently, this thesis brings the core concerns of French Feminism — female subjectivity through the body and the sacred — into a contemporary context to demonstrate the continued relevance of their theories in creative practice. My work aligns the French Feminist concept of bisexuality with a Jungian feminist approach to the unconscious. Jungian theory offers an alternative to the masculine imaginary as within Jungian psychology entry to the Symbolic is not reliant on the phallus. In addition, his concept of the anima and animus, along with his assertion that the feminine must be culturally acknowledged, provides a framework through which to imagine a fictional gynocentric alternative to patriarchal histories. My aim is to create a feminist revisionist text of the third generation, which deconstructs patriarchal binaries by returning woman to the body and to the sacred.

My novel uses a pattern of reincarnation as a framework through which to examine resonances in the repression of active desire of women in three historical settings: Victorian London, Late Reformation Alsace, and Renaissance Florence. The novel seeks to highlight the role of patriarchal institutions in the relegation of the feminine in both the individual and cultural psyche. This is examined through the repression of desire, as manifested in the Angel/Monster dichotomy. Reincarnation offers a framework through which to explore and extend this repression; it is internalised by each woman based on her experiences and, with each 'rebirth',

emerges through the unconscious as unrecognised impulses, neuroses and complexes.

The exegetical component of this thesis offers a textual analysis of my own novel, *The Material and the Divine*, alongside Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen*. I first discuss these two texts in relation to feminine approaches to time and space. This draws on Kristeva's notion of cyclical and monumental time as the feminine alternative to masculine linear time. I examine how the temporal fluidity of the marginal female subject can be used to subvert and escape restrictive female spaces. Secondly, I examine the maternal body as a site of conflict. This includes how female characters respond to cultural expectations regarding reproduction, and the mother as a symbol of inherited myths of female inferiority. I then discuss how characters negotiate their identities and bodies by writing through the masculine and feminine pen. Feminist revisionist fiction aims to transform cultural understandings of 'woman' through revisiting cultural, mythological, or religious images, and consequently, my final discussion deconstructs the cultural myths of the virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric/medium.

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.....

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The Material and the Divine

Lauren Butterworth

Ticehurst House Asylum, East Sussex

24 December 1882

Emma cannot remember such a winter as this. And not just for the nightmare of all that has happened since that evening one month ago. But the snow. There's never been such snow. She looks at it falling in the dark beyond the iron stanchions in her windows. The wind is loud, howling through the eaves as though it knows it is Christmastime and the patients will want a spectacle. She can hear them downstairs; the band playing something she can't make out and distant chatter that livens the night. Perhaps she should go down, she thinks. It is no use wallowing. It's not what Sophie would want.

She pulls out a wad of folded paper, hidden safely in her bosom since Edward and Gissing deposited her on the doorstep of this dreadful place two nights ago.

'Truly,' Edward had said from the carriage as Gissing escorted her across the gravel drive, 'I am sorry.'

She'd looked up at that white mansion and shivered. They'd not even given her the chance to recover from her spell of — what would they call it? Mania? Delusion? But he *had* appeared to her then, the terrifying apparition of that man. The floor was littered with the proof.

They'd sent her here regardless.

She unfolds the paper. *Dear Mamma*, the letter begins. *Please you mustnt cry because I am better now I do not choke or coff and it is what you wanted for me anyhow. I hope that you will be cheerful and listen to the good doctor. I love you very much. Sophie.*

A message from her dead daughter. A month ago she'd never have believed that she could fall to the trance and transcribe such a thing. It is beyond bafflement. She

folds the paper, places it back into her bosom, pulls up her hair, and wipes the smudges from her cheeks. She'll descend after all. It is Christmas, and Lord knows how long she'll be in this awful place.

She emerges into the hall as the lights dim. The band is packing up but the room is cheerful, festoons of paper flowers and coloured wreaths, an array of candles flickering low. A nurse brings a tray of tea to the sitters who have pulled chairs to the fireside. Heads turn.

'Mrs Blount,' says Mrs Potts, a thick matron with fists like mallets and eyes like meat-hooks. 'You shouldn't be out of bed so soon. Get upstairs.' The rust of her voice grates. She's from somewhere north, a tiny village no doubt. Butchering since childhood; you can see it in women like her. Emma runs her hand down the back of her head. She remembers the scissors and the tug of her tresses, vanishing like candle snuff at the behest of Pott's thick fingers.

'Come now, Potts,' a man says, wandering towards them. 'The excitement's over now, it's just a bit of tea and conversation. No harm in that.' He smiles at her and lifts a cup to his lips.

Potts shuffles off disgruntled.

'I'm Doctor Barrett,' he says. 'I've heard many things about you from Doctor Gissing.'

'Oh. Then you must already think me awful.'

He laughs. 'Quite the contrary. Won't you come and sit?'

Guarded, she follows. There's a strange assortment of people in the room. Short hair, most of them, so that from the back it's difficult to tell the men from the women. Skinny, too, like lost things, drifting about the room. Despite the cold, she chooses a seat against the wall. To her surprise, Barrett sits beside her.

‘Time for a story,’ says a man at the fireside. ‘A ghost story! I’ve got a new one right here, by one Miss Riddell. Looks a ripper.’

‘No, no, we’ll be having none of that,’ says Potts, snatching the sheaf from his hand.

‘Oh come on, it’s Christmas!’

‘Let them have their fun, Potts,’ says Barrett.

‘Ghost stories? With this crowd?’

‘Nothing wrong with a bit of tradition. Makes the place homely.’

She drops them reluctantly into the man’s lap and folds her arms.

The crowd shuffle as they lean in.

‘It’s a perfect night. Hear that wind howl?’

They nod.

He clears his throat. ‘Some people do not believe in ghosts. For that matter, some people do not believe in anything,’ he begins.

Emma’s stomach tightens. She wishes she didn’t believe. Not in the vengeful ones. The angry ones. That particular ghost.

Barrett leans in. ‘I hear you’ve had your own encounter with apparitions,’ he says quietly, so as not to disturb the sitters.

She looks down. Picks at the fingers of her gloves.

‘Was it Doctor Mendhelson’s recommendation that you deny these apparitions?’

He sips his tea. ‘I do hope you will tell me about what you see. I’d be very interested.’

‘Why?’ she asks, finally. ‘I trusted your sort before and ended up here.’

‘Gissing?’

Emma nods.

‘I understand your hesitation. I don’t expect you to trust me, but I may be the only one here who can help you.’

She runs her fingers through the tufts of shorn hair, like spring grass, and considers his eyes. There is something earnest in them. They are soft, wide. They tell her he is safe.

Besides, she thinks, she hardly has anything more to lose.

She folds her hands on her lap. ‘Do you ever feel foreign to yourself, Doctor? As though you don’t belong in your own skin?’

Barrett tilts his head. ‘How do you mean?’

Emma sits back. ‘Recently, I’ve felt like a stranger to myself. There’s something ... lacking. Unfinished.’ She pauses. ‘And then there is ... a peculiar familiarity that arises at times. A tiny remembrance of something I think I once knew but have since forgotten. A dream half remembered.’

He leans forward. ‘Familiar?’

‘Don’t mistake me, doctor, I do not talk of *déjà vu*. It’s more than that. It’s how I came to be here. I discovered a thread of myself, a tiny sliver of my real self, my hidden self, and I began to unravel it. And that was when he appeared.’

‘He?’

‘The apparition.’

Highgate, North London

20 November 1882

The house in Highgate drew me in. Two big windows with orchids in the cornices and white on the sill stared like eyes. The afternoon was winter dark though it was only October. Smut settled on the tops of the fence posts and fog rolled up from the Heath. I arrived with little expectation. I had read a short newspaper advertisement, ‘A circle of new friends. All welcome’. Edward was always quick to dismiss such notices when they came across his lap on a Saturday morning. ‘They’ve taken to photographing ghosts now’, he said, laughing, just the week before. ‘They’ve some poor maid in a shift under poor light. Take us for fools, they do.’

I knocked softly at first, then again, louder, owing perhaps to the nervous jitter of my wrist. I had turned to leave when, finally, a stick of a girl appeared.

‘You’re here for the sitting?’ the maid asked, taking my coat.

I nodded and was ushered from the fog into the little parlour. The smell clouded my nose so I sneezed. Cigars and cigarettes, even for the ladies, sent plumes like ribbons into the near dark. Flower heads were scattered upon the table, the petals wilted and brown, and the fire burned low in the grate. The curtains were pulled so the softest hint of dying afternoon hugged the tasselled fringes. There were polite introductions, but I cannot recall now the names of the other sitters. Just the one, Susannah. Miss Emmett, as I was introduced to her then.

I must have pulled at the fingertips of my gloves a thousand times that evening—a nervous habit of mine. They were worn through by the time I arrived home and had to be thrown away. But that is neither here nor there. The facts are these. I cannot say I was an entirely rational woman before I sat at that dark table. But who among us can say they are? We are all prone to flights of fancy. That we

might awake to find dead children alive and well, waiting at the breakfast table. But from time to time some of us experience things so very far from our ordinary encounters that we cannot help but begin to wonder: what if the veil between life and death is not so thick?

We sat around the table, solid oak, with our palms placed lightly on the surface. The medium, Mr Hawkins, began proceedings with a hymn — we are not diabolists as some would claim. I could make out faint wisps of scented smoke trailing from an incense stick and glowing embers of the dying fire. It cast the room in red, the perfect light, they said, to see phenomena.

This was a new circle, formed of a few curious friends. Susannah and her brother, John, had met the medium in Camden and offered him their parlour. As such, we were told not to expect the great theatricals of more famous mediums. Besides, Mr Hawkins had said, one should ever be wary of spectacle.

It started with a light rap upon the wood. I was shocked, of course. I could see each hand was still upon the table, felt no movement at my feet.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr Hawkins.

I shivered.

I did not take much mind of it then, but as I have reflected on that moment so many times since, it has struck me the way Susannah looked over my shoulder, just to my left. Her head tilted, eyes narrowed—not malicious, but curious. Our eyes met and she smiled, just a little, and looked away. That moment, that smile, I remember well.

It was then the evening turned. I still cannot be sure what occurred; I had begun to see things since Sophie passed. Strange things. One dreadful night, I awoke to the sound of a breath. Edward had taken to sleeping in the study and his absence had left the room both cold and quiet. The breath came again. I held my own, ears pricked. I

told myself I was dreaming. It was nothing more than a grieving mother's fancy. But then I felt something brush my hand. A tickle ran up my arm and all the hairs sprang on end. I chill ran through me.

That same chill swept through me then.

Mr Hawkins asked if the spirit was willing to answer questions; it replied with three quick raps. *Yes*. It was impossible to place the sound. Knowing what I do now of Mr Hawkins, though, I cannot say for sure it came from the table.

A gentleman asked if the spirit was connected to anyone in the room.

Three knocks responded. There was a hush as the sitters wondered who might know it.

'Is it me?' they asked, one after the other. To each came a single rap: *no*.

'Are you male?'

One knock.

'How old were you when you died?'

Six raps, like a heartbeat.

Gasps. 'A child!'

I licked salt from my lips as the room became cloudy.

'I wonder if her mother is present.'

My legs trembled beneath the table.

'Child, is your mother in the room?'

One rap. Two. Three.

A breeze, cold and icy, wound up under my skirt. I felt a pull, a tug, like a little hand.

'Is your mother Emma Blount?' It was Susannah who asked. Her eyes found me in the dark.

One rap echoed louder than any before it. Then a second, perfectly timed with the thump of my heartbeat. And, finally, a third.

The Witches' Tower, Bergheim, Alsace

St Agnes' Day, 21 January, 1623

The sound is loud, hollow. Mathilde casts her eyes down. Her wrists are swollen. Blood must be bursting just below the skin. She stretches and hears the bone click. As she flexes, the veins press up like little rivers. She turns her wrists again until they crack.

Pop.

They took her in the night. Four dark creatures, drab in moth-rotten cloaks. Smelling of piss and ale, they marched her in iron to the tower. The Devil's consort, Mathilde. *Hexe*. She rolls the word in her tongue. *Hexe*. It's the kind of word that slithers. That echoes. Father Thomas looks at her strangely. She slumps unmoving, mumbling the single syllable to herself again and again. She cares not for the man in the wide brimmed hat with the rosary beads that clink softly in his palm. He pulls a stool closer. Still, she does not move.

'Mathilde,' he says kindly. Her gaze rests rigidly on the wall. It is stone, with ancient webbing of some long dead spider deep in each crevice. Wooden beams cross the ceiling. Light enters through two narrow slits, neither of which face the sun. Mathilde has not slept. She can still hear the clash and clank of boots and iron. She rubs her wrists. She's glad to be out of shackles, even though this new rope burns.

'Mathilde,' Father Thomas says again. He folds his hands.

'Do you think,' Mathilde begins, examining the red rope burns against the tan, 'that when they burn me, after my skin has blackened and fallen away, they'll still crack?'

'Pardon me?'

‘When my flesh is floating on the smoke, do you think, Father, my wrists will crack when there is nothing left of me but bone?’

Father Thomas coughs. He smooths down his black tunic and looks to the ground. ‘Mathilde, I understand you may have certain questions regarding...’

‘My execution?’ she finishes.

He shakes his head. ‘Mathilde, you’ve not yet had a trial. We cannot say for certain—’

‘Cannot say for certain that I will not die here? Or under that trap door, perhaps? Far down, with the worms and rats with hollow stomachs and heads full of fleas?’

‘Mathilde, please.’

‘I don’t think they will,’ she says. She presses her finger against a freckle.

‘Perhaps if you confess, the bailiff will simply have you expelled.’

‘No, Father. My wrists. I do not think the bones would crack without all the skin and muscle.’

‘Mathilde, *please*.’

She revolves the hand and her eyes meet his as it pops.

‘Mathilde!’ Father Thomas snaps. He pauses. Breathes deeply.

‘Father, they will have me in iron again once you are gone. Would you have me ignore the chance to stretch?’

He sighs. ‘Of course, not. But no more talk of bones.’

‘And of what would you have me talk?’

‘Your crimes,’ he says easily. ‘The sooner you confess, the sooner we can have you out of this dark tower.’ He looks up to the ceiling, to the winch where the strappado ropes dangle. He shivers.

‘So God can forgive me?’

‘Yes. And those you’ve injured.’

She smiles weakly. She turns to look through the narrow slit at the sunlight. The top of a hedge runs along the narrow dirt track. She can make out rows of vines stretching up the hill, stark and dusted with frost. From somewhere comes a cock's crow. It is done, she knows. It is over.

‘How did the Devil come to you? In what form did he present himself?’

As Father Thomas waits so patiently for her reply, Mathilde turns wrists once more, *crack*.

Vosges Mountains, Alsace

22 April 1622

We arrived the day of the first soldiers. The ones that held themselves high and marched as though they knew the Lord would never touch them with his dark wrath. Not like the sorry men you see now, trudging from the mountains with boots so frayed the mud gets in and they've blisters for days. We were passing through the woods to the village when we saw them coming up over the hill. The Vosges shimmered at their backs. Arms full of moss and parsley, Anna had pressed her lips to my ear. 'Shh.'

We looked down past a sea of laddered vines to the iron heads in two long rows. They seemed to march forever, the trail of them winding around the hill.

'So many mouths.' Anna clutched the parsley so tight I could smell the green of it smudging against her fingers. They could never hear us over the clang of swords and tread of boots, but we hid like they could. We stooped behind a boulder as a hare appeared from the undergrowth. It approached us, curious. Sniffed, perched high on its hind legs. Not like a woodland hare at all. Anna touched the split in her lip. She saw them as signs, hares. Portents worth noting. It scuttled over her feet and dug at her heels. It was so strange we hardly noticed the two men approach. They'd come up alongside the tree line; we heard them just in time to hush. They untied their belts and lowered their breeches. Two streams hissed and I bit my lip till they were done. I'd never felt that kind of scared. They seemed so big, so powerful, so terrifying and real. When they were back down at the road we let our breath catch our hearts. Still the hare watched us.

I was quick. Grabbed its neck and twisted. The crunch echoed. I stuffed it in my bag and we watched the soldiers march till sundown, dust trailing as they passed one hill and the next. When it settled, we followed.

We arrived as we did in all villages—hungry, with a dog nose hint of how to find our feet. But this wasn't any village. It was home. A man approached us by the gate. He swaggered, like cavalry. 'Soldier's whores.' There was drink on his tongue, applewine, just fermented. Bald with black dusted fingertips, a blacksmith or cooper. The kind of man who hits things for his bread. 'Look at them both.'

'You missed us, Erik?' Anna asked.

Startled, he squinted. 'Oh,' he said, 'it's you.'

The priest was easy to spot despite his cassock. Father Thomas. Indoor skin, limp shoulders, liquid eyes. 'Erik, please,' he said. 'A bit of Christian kindness.' A small crowd gathered around us.

'Anna and Mathilde,' the priest said. 'Welcome home.'

The congregation must have been heading for church.

'They'll draw them soldiers in. They're close enough already, it's not an hour's walk to the cantonment.' Erik placed his arm around a woman's shoulder. It was Catherine, heavy with child. I smiled at her.

'Erik, please. Soldiers pass by here every day. These two women are no more likely to bring them into the village than any other.'

He scoffed.

The priest's face soured as he turned to us. 'I trust you've heard?'

Whispers seeped like ice in sun. 'Sylvie's girls?' I heard our grandmother's name murmured in the clump. Heads tilted toward us. We looked at one another and nodded. 'It's why we've returned.'

'And just in time. She's not long for this world. She shouldn't be alone.'

‘Let us by then and we’ll go,’ said Anna.

Then I saw a man with the face of a boy I once knew standing behind Catherine. He pressed through the crowd and when he emerged my skin bristled. Michel Müller. He had changed, filling his beanpole frame with muscle. His hair had darkened and where it had curled tight it now waved. But the way he smiled secretly at me was just the same.

He nodded to us. ‘Anna, Mathilde,’ he said, politely. ‘I shall come by the cottage later; there are some matters with the lease.’

Father Thomas tilted his head disapprovingly.

‘And to pay my respects, of course. Your grandmother is a good tenant. I hope she recovers well.’

Father Thomas clasped his hands and made to speak, but an old woman broke into the circle. She drooped under a mountain of shawls.

‘Devil’s girls.’ Her cane clacked on the stones as she approached. At full height she hardly reached our collarbones and her cheeks caved where she’d lost her teeth. I felt sorry for her, for a moment. ‘I’m not fooled.’ She bent a finger at Anna. Pressed it into the split on her lip. ‘See,’ she scowled. ‘Devil’s mark.’ I didn’t share Anna’s affliction, though at times I felt I did. It was the one feature that distinguished us.

‘Elsbeth,’ Father Thomas said gently. He tried to pull her back, but she came to me instead.

Her foulness slapped me. I recoiled, though I hardly meant to. It only invited her closer. ‘You think you’re pretty now, girl, but you’re bleak inside, like your grandmother. You look just like her.’

Michel stepped forward. ‘Come, Elsbeth.’ She hobbled on pigeon feet. As he walked her through the crowd he looked back, as though he too was remembering. Wood smoke, crushed apple, bare leaves and trembling.

‘It’s true. They are Sylvie’s girls.’ Erik still had his arm over Catherine’s shoulder.

‘Gossip is a dangerous habit,’ said the priest. ‘I’ll remind you all not to indulge it.’ He held his hands together. ‘I’m so sorry girls.’ He looked over the congregation like a disappointed schoolmaster. ‘Go to the cottage; see to your grandmother.’ He smiled and looked up. ‘Our Heavenly Father will await you at our next service.’

I hadn’t let myself feel the grief just yet, though we knew it was coming. Sometimes endings unfold so clearly, there’s nothing to be done any different. This was such an ending. Anna had dreamt it, and when she told me it only confirmed what I’d already sensed. Now it was beginning to feel real: those looks and all their sorrow. Limp glances—poor little pets—all of them avoiding us. All of them waiting.

Anna’s hand brushed mine. I felt her calm like milk.

‘Come, let us to church. We must reflect on these troubling times.’ Though Father Thomas had a face that seemed benign, I remembered something of a dog’s snarl. And as he smiled one last time before leading his sheep to their vaulted pasture, I saw the glimmer of it, sharp and cold as frost-snap.

On the track just beyond the town gate I saw a figure running. Nearly knocked us flat when he barrelled into us.

‘Matti!’ Anna cried.

‘My darlings.’ He threw himself at us and picked me up so I lost all my air.

Matti had never left the village where we grew up. As a boy he’d appear like a scrappy pup to eat and bed with us, growing big under Mamé’s affections. The brother we never had. Then he’d disappear again, a vagrant lured by some far off scent.

‘Look at you,’ said Anna, rumpling his hair. He smoothed it back when she finally let him go. Matti was the only man who could make her smile.

His face grew grave. ‘Did you see the soldiers?’

‘Of course,’ said Anna.

‘Best watch yourselves.’ He grimaced. ‘Beds will run out in Saint-Hippolyte and Rorschwihr and they’ll trickle down to us.’

‘We don’t have a bed to billet.’

Matti tore a green stem from the flower bed. He chewed it. ‘Might not be billeting,’ he said, ‘but they’ll end up in your bed regardless.’

There was the Matti I knew. All cheek. Were it any other day I’d punch his arm and push him in the mud, but the image of all those helmets shining in the sunlight had me startled.

‘Have you seen Mamé?’

He shook his head. ‘But I’ll come with you.’

The woods are a trembling place. Light falls and fades before it can seep into the cracks of the dark. I like the mist when it comes. The grey that brews between tree tops with air that hints at wet. The fog obscures. It allows all the little creatures, the squirrels, the mice, the hares, to prowl their lands in secret. And we prowl as they do. That night the moon was full. The long shadows of birches crept into the road and the air stewed in a gauzy haze. A raven swooped above our heads, its wide arc silhouetted against the moonlight. It pointed us home. We trudged. The cottage was not far from the village, but deep enough to lose all sight and sound below. Even the Château de Saint-Ulrich, which perched rugged on the opposite hill, was lost through the trees. Soft tracks of recent hooves marked our remembered way. And so did the speck of light in the veil of mist. A shimmering, half formed creature, shaped just

like a low-bent woman. My stomach dropped. She led us to the lantern that burned by the doorstep.

The cottage sank under timber beams and groaned when the wind rode through the eaves. A trail of smoke rose from the chimney. It smelled of pinecones, autumn evenings, honeyed tea and Mamé's tales. A web with a spider, oblong and two legs lost, crossed from a skeletal branch to the doorframe. Crusts of leaves trapped the door closed and Matti swept them aside so we could enter.

It was hot inside. Acrid tansy and honeyed pennyroyal were draped from the beams like strange fruit. The stone walls bled the orange that flickered from the hearth. We saw her then, slumped in her chair. She faced the stove so her grey curls were lit up angelic. Warm still, so much so we could fool ourselves into thinking she was resting. I knelt by her legs. Her skirt smelled of crushed apples and ginger and I gripped it tight. But it hadn't been real, not even when the ghost of her led us up through the woods and I knew that she was gone until that second when I smelled the sweet sauce she was stewing and realised she'd never eat it. It was still simmering with the bite of a sugared burn in the iron pot. I fell into Anna's arms and then she fell too, till we were heaped in a bundle by the hearth. Matti draped a patched blanket over Mamé's face and then he dropped beside us. We crawled together somehow to the pallet and slept tangled, so I couldn't tell if the heartbeat I felt belonged to me or Anna or Matti, and we did not stir, not even when the morning sun rose, arced and dropped west to become the afternoon.

It was quiet when I woke, and with one eye half open everything seemed as it always had been. Her silhouette faced the fire and I waited for her to turn, to wink and tell me good morning. It was a blissful moment. I looked up, above the hearth mantle, and just as a lump of grief wedged in my throat I saw a pair of porcelain eyes looking back at me. The little statue with her arms outstretched had a benign kind of

grace. Mamé's favourite. I stared at the Virgin's face until my tears blotted all sight and fell back to sleep once more.

San Giovanni, Florence

Martedì Grasso, 23 February 1543

Lucrezia spits a tooth and watches it curve and land on the terracotta tiles. She is limp against the wall, struggling with her own weight but too stubborn to fall. The house has swallowed her up and spat her out and it's her own fault for letting it. She should have left when the emptiness started bruising the walls like the yellow that blooms on her arm. She should have left when the saints were stripped and incinerated in the bonfire in the courtyard. Saint Anne would have watched her once from a fresco on the wall, but Marco scratched her face with a trowel and now there are only chips of blue on the stone underneath. There is a basin under a too high window, a bathtub filled with red and a bench with a hole. Otherwise the room is bare, like she is. Blood is smeared across the tiles. It is dried in smudges from the insides of her thin legs up to the swollen place between. Lucrezia presses her fingers into the tender flesh beneath her ribcage. She grimaces. Her belly is still distended, but it sinks under the ridge. The skin is smooth and just beginning to stretch.

She slides down the wall, winces, and settles on the tiles. Across the room, the fractured head of the Virgin watches. Her porcelain headscarf cuts jagged across the neckline and she lies with one veiled ear to the ground. Lucrezia becomes entranced by the sad eyes. Fragments are scattered. Lucrezia gathers what she can and fits the pieces together imperfectly. But the Virgin's hands are missing—two clasped palms that should fit into the sharp gulf of each sleeve. Lucrezia looks around the tiny privy chamber; pentagonal with towering walls so she feels as though she is in a turret. There are two doors but she tried them earlier, slamming her sore and swollen body against them, screaming. She'd clawed her fingernails until they were raw. But she gave that up hours ago.

She spots the hands lying together, almost as though in prayer, beneath the privy bench. She holds them against the cracked arm stumps as though miraculously they may meld themselves together. They fall and she sighs before she picks them up. If she rests her palms out flat she can hold all the pieces together and pretend the awful thing never happened. It doesn't matter about the serrated cracks like axe clefts that carve out the Virgin's porcelain flesh. It doesn't matter about the head that turns of its own accord toward the corner of the room. Lucrezia holds her close to her mouth and whispers.

'Hail Mary, full of grace.'

She has not said those words aloud for such a long time. Through the shimmer of a tear she sees the little phantom by the corner where the Virgin's eyes rest. Lucrezia had wondered if she would come. The girl looks beneath the privy bench to the little box, hidden with the Virgin when she'd saved them from the fire. Lucrezia shuffles forward and opens the box.

Beneath the *Hermetica* and sheafs of sonnets—Petrarch—inscribed in a loving hand, is her journal. A quill pen. She looks at the bathtub where the poor half formed thing rests in a pool of red, then back to the strange girl with ribbons in her hair. Lucrezia opens the book, dips the pen in the drying well of ink, looks back to the Virgin and begins.

In the name of the Holy Mother, Madonna, Mother of Christ, I entreat you to hear the confession of a wretched daughter. I, Lucrezia Cassini, here do confess my sins.

Lord forgive me, for I am a woman, and from woman I was born.

San Giovanni, Florence

3 September, 1542

I married Marco di Nicollo Casini the day after my sixteenth birthday. The air that day was soupy, like Fiorina's kitchen, and it seeped into my clinging dress. The notary arrived under a sky that yawned. I thought I could see my future in it, the way theologians and astrologers might, cyphering the shapes that formed in the shifting bulges of cloud. I wish I'd paid more heed to those signs. But this is a confession of what was, not what could have been.

We marched a labyrinthine procession through drizzle to the palazzo Casini. Musicians had led the parade and we were followed by children who splashed mud into the finery of the guests. Women slunk from their doorways and crept along the walls like lizards. They made me feel regal and I loathed it. Porters heaved under sunken shoulders as they carried the wedding chest. Carved into the wood, ornate in gilt, Saint Anne appeared to the Virgin. Marco had boasted of the artist's work, the detail of Mary's face. I agreed—her fear was palpable.

The sky was pink when we arrived to feast at that mansion, an ancient dwelling that terrified me. Its crenelated rooftops towered like battlements over its neighbours and its shuttered windows held no hints of light. Marco had filled the hall with his associates: bankers, merchants, patricians. Even that huddle of black cloaked men like crows who whispered and kept themselves apart, as always—but I did not know them then. As I was paraded up and back, I became aware of a gaze. Eyes that crept along my skin, a hint of snarl in the lips. I'd been kept away from the eyes of men, safe in Papa's palazzo. I remember that first sensation of skin bristling in its awareness, in its futile attempts at defence. They all looked at me that way. All of them but him—Jacopo. He stood in the corner quietly, his stiff pleats heavy over his

shoulders. I noticed his eyes first, and the way they followed me. It was particular and apart. I suppose that was the first sign. My first sin.

Luca, my brother, teased me. He drank wine and twirled me in his sinewy arms. He was nineteen and still discovering the happy surprises of his adult form. He stuck his fingers above his head like a Minotaur and chased me. He called me virgin and I punched him in the arm, but I was too nervous to play our usual games. I looked up. My mother watched from the landing. She wrapped her fingers around the balustrade and she disappeared as the light changed. Luca didn't seem to notice, but before he left he gave me one last kiss as though he had.

Before Marco took me upstairs to the jeers and taunts of men, their virile codpieces thrusting at us, a strange parade, Papa held me with his fleshy fingers.

'Beautiful *passerotta*,' he said, tucking hair behind my ear. 'You make a beautiful wife.'

We passed my mother on the landing and I felt her hand on my shoulder. She brought me the briefest relief. I knew what was to come and I felt it with trepidation. But when I turned to her she had disappeared, as the dead are wont to do.

It was Fiorina, my milk-mother, who met me in the chamber to dress and prepare me. She held my mother's antique lace.

'I saw her on the landing,' I said, as she pulled the dress over my head.

'Of course, my darling.' She patted down the folds, brushed away the lint and down. 'Beautiful.'

When I was first betrothed I had rushed into her kitchen and Fiorina told me of her wedding night. She was sixteen and burning with lust. I asked why she had married her sweetheart when so many cannot and she had grinned. There were particular circumstances, she said. And what if I have particular circumstances? I was innocent then, I didn't know. She ruffled my hair. *Bambina*, trust me, you do

not.

My brother was to join the bank, work his way to patrician, as my uncle had, and the Casini were a family firmly established in the business. I was married for Luca's convenience, but I could not begrudge him that. I loved him more than any in the world. But it did seem a strange aspiration. We lived in a house unlike most others, my father a scholar of the Platonic Academy. We spent our days together in that library where grimoires nestled between treatise and ancient hermetic translations. Despite my father's passion for knowledge, a passion he was eager for his children to share, he did not allow me the chance to see the world I read so much about. Mine was a twofold desire. I so desperately wanted to run the streets with the ownership that young boys seem to have. So too did I want to escape from it. Part of me would have been happy in a convent so I could dedicate my life, like Papa, to my studies. But I was far too headstrong for that. Too curious for cloisters. So Luca became my eyes. He disappeared into the streets at night and in the morning I would hear stories of his daring flights from maidens' windows, his drunken scraps in alleyways. I envied the ease of his body, the stretch of his stride and where it could take him. He understood me like no one else. I still think of the boy he was, and how strange it seems to know that man he has since become. The night before my wedding, we had sat in the courtyard, sticky with summer. The stars, a celestial fresco, shone through the square of sky.

Join the convent, he had said. Or the whorehouse. I tugged viciously at his hair. I think you'd make a lovely whore. He pulled my face close to his. His breath was sweet and fruity with wine, the kind we used to drink in summer when it would dribble down my chin and he would lick it up.

Better a whore than a nun and better both than a wife.

I kicked his shin and he howled.

And yet it was for him that I was married.

Fiorina spun me before she left. There were tears sitting in the corners of her eyes. ‘You are being silly,’ I said.

‘But you’re my *bambina*, all grown up.’ She’d had her own baby once, but he died suckling in her arms and she’d put him in the ground and given her milk to me instead.

She stroked my sleeves. ‘May our Holy Mother be with you.’ She kissed me again, once on each cheek, and then she pressed a candle into my palms. ‘It’s blessed,’ she said, before she left.

Marco was not unkind to me that evening. I was too nervous and giddy with drink to realise that his fear was just as great as mine. He had entered the room shadowed by his servant, Ludovico, a man who, even on that first night, sent chills down my spine. His fingers, bent like tree branches, clasped Marco’s shoulders and his hissed something in his ear. He eyed me warily before he left, and even when he did, I swear I caught the glint of his gaze in the crack in the door. With Ludovico gone, and the guests and their revelry hidden two floors below, Marco became like a boy. His hair was matted, his forehead wet. He had scars from blemishes that still wept red and his hands were clammy. He sat beside me with two cups of wine and drank like he was dying. His breath faltered and he ran his fingers up and down the stem.

‘Forgive me,’ he sputtered.

I rested my hand on his knee. I had given so much of my life to thinking of this moment. Reluctantly, for it was not what I’d have chosen. A girl cannot help but imagine what it means to become, in this moment, a woman.

He took my hair and tucked it behind my ear, just as Papa had done. It was a familiar gesture, and yet it felt so strained. His hand trembled. He hooked his fingers

under my chin and pulled my lips toward his. They were plush, not at all as I'd expected. That was the moment I felt the first stirrings of longing, the sensation of touch and what it could mean. I caught my reflection in the corner of my eye. My shoulder exposed when the lace had dropped, my hair tumbled, my breasts ripe, just barely covered. My apprehension drained suddenly away. I did not then understand that rush and all of its terrible power.

My hands found his arms, lithe, strong, and my fingers tensed. I trembled. This must be right, I thought, it must be what God intends. I could already feel what it might be like to be together. To join ourselves in holy corporeal union.

I expected the weight of him to crush me, but he held himself up and I disappeared into the bulk of the bed. I held my breath as I waited. There was a Norman frieze across the top of the wall. Chivalric knights chased long-tressed maidens, tricky and sweet, who kept themselves from reach. I watched them as I waited for the prod that didn't come. I looked down. He was flushed. He rolled over and took the thing, shrivelled like a worm, and began to tug. His eyes squeezed shut. I had hardly any idea of what to do. It was not at all like his kiss. I no longer felt that tenderness, that yearning. I felt like a stranger suddenly, an intruder. He gasped, frustrated. 'Come on.' His voice was lower now, more desperate. Finally, he sighed. He stood quickly, gathering a sheet around his waist. He didn't look at me.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It must be the drink. If you'll forgive me, I'll sleep in my own bed.' He pulled up his hose.

I was too surprised to protest. He was frozen, half poised in the dim light, eyes cast low to the ground.

'I am sorry, Lucrezia, truly.'

When the door slammed shut behind him, I sat back into the bed and tried not to feel the knot forming in the pit of my stomach. I can only laugh now at my naiveté. I

thought myself a failure. I turned to the bedside table. I had placed my mother's Virgin there, a small porcelain statue. I picked it up and ran my fingers along the folds of her dress. I wouldn't cry, I told myself, not then, not for that. I hadn't known then it would be an episode not unlike any other. That it was a curse that would haunt us, that would follow me here, now, to what must soon be my most wretched death. For despite his failure, he had awoken something in me. Something from which even the Virgin could not save me.

San Giovanni, Florence

10 September, 1542

I had unpacked the trousseau with the help of Marsilia, the maid, a tall, dark-skinned girl with tight black curls and green eyes. A pretty mulatto. A slave. We arranged the symbols of my former life—my shoes and combs, necklaces, silks and books—in visible places, so to ease my sense of strangeness. But I was uneasy, a mere guest in that ancient mansion. It was a house almost bare. Spartan in its décor, old rugs, tattered tapestries and dust thick on every surface.

‘It was the Bonfire,’ Marsilia explained. ‘The family were *Piagnoni*, they offered much to the flames.’

Papa had told me of the friar Savonarola and his Bonfire of the Vanities. His followers, the wailers, cried in the streets of purity and repentance. Papa was bitter; my grandfather had much of his art confiscated for the fire. Since the return of the Medici, the *Piagnoni* had been hunted down, tortured and executed. Marco must have cast off his father’s purity. Or had chosen to keep it silent.

Marsilia was kind and I hoped to befriend her. It was a lonely place, and my husband had not returned to my bed since that first night—he was poorly, he said, exhausted by the wedding festivities. But I wished to know him more, and not simply as a wife—as a woman. Perhaps it was solely the despair of my isolation, my restlessness in that strange new home that led me to seek out more than was proper. I was innocent then. Curious.

It began with a shadow. A black figure moving in the space between a doorframe. On my way from breakfast—another meal alone—I’d wandered through the great hall, taking in all of its little details to make myself feel at home. The ceiling was studded with hooks, empty of the tapestries they were placed for, that

cast shadows like knife points. Metal plates covered trapdoors that once let oil to scald intruders but would now only look down into the loggia and the chatter of Marco at work. A row of busts, chipped grotesques, stared with glazed eyes between spiked shutters. It was an austere bastion compared to Papa's lavish house. I wondered how it could ever feel homely.

I was staring at the grim faced portrait of some long dead Casini when I saw the movement. I followed onto the landing. The courtyard walls were tall and narrow with vaulted arches. Carved atop the fluted columns were faces, hideous, with bulging eyes and unrolled tongues. The shadow emerged on the opposite landing. He paused, gazing across the plummeting courtyard, then disappeared. A phantom. In that silhouette, arms laden, doublet dull and faded, I recognised the scruffy scholar from Papa's library. Jacopo. I crept to the spot where he had been. The air lingered with his presence, a hint of oils and wax. Those scholarly tools I missed so dearly.

I followed through one door which looked much like the others. Morning was giving way to midday, but it did not seem to chase away the shadows. If anything, it cast them more sinisterly, sharp and angled. I heard a tread ascending the inner staircase. I followed. I saw his cloak swish and disappear into the living room. The faux fabrics along each wall were scuffed, the colours of the intricate patterns now faded. Heirlooms were kept on unadorned cabinets—simple pieces, plates and crockery. An arms cabinet with a Latin inscription held a fine pointed stiletto, two rapiers and a Persian scimitar.

Footfall on the stairs. I ascended, swiftly but quietly. The chase had become a game. I was breathy, excited. Unsure why I had begun but certain now that I could not stop. I'd not been up to the top floor. It housed the servants' rooms, the kitchens. There was a door with an iron bolt. I could see no trace of Jacopo, but I could hear voices. Urgent voices. Then a crack, the sound of wood snapping. I was startled.

I had always been of a curious nature and I was fortunate to be raised in a house that did not chastise Eve's sin like some. I knew such inquisitiveness would not be tolerated here, but still, I could not stall the heart thump that compelled me to press my ear to the door. The voices were muffled but agitated, a chorus of sharp consonants. There was a cry, a sob perhaps. Then heavy footsteps hurried closer. There was an identical door beside me and I opened it, slid through, and watched through a narrow gap as Marco emerged onto the landing. He strode away as Ludovico called after him, desperately. Marco did not stop. Ludovico bowed his head, turned and pounded his fist upon the wood. His eyes were heavy and he swivelled his head as though a bird. As his gaze threatened to find mine, so close—so dreadfully close—I held my breath to stop from gasping. His pointed nose sniffed, paused. He stepped away. I breathed relief.

‘Can I help you?’

I gasped. I'd forgotten I'd entered a room quite unknown to me. I turned. Jacopo was standing behind a desk piled high with books. It was almost dark, the shutters drawn, so that only his pale maned face was illuminated.

I stumbled back. ‘I ... I'm so sorry. I was—I was lost.’

He glanced over my shoulder. ‘Lost?’

My throat was thick with my discovery.

‘You're not hiding then?’

My hands reached behind me for grip. The vision of him seemed to slow time. A magician. He stopped my heart.

‘I believe he's gone,’ he said, matter-of-factly. ‘You can continue your sneaking.’

‘I didn't mean to,’ I said finally. ‘I don't usually—well, I mean I was... I'm sorry. I'll go.’

I had my hand on the door.

‘It’s funny,’ he said. ‘I could have sworn I too was being followed.’

I turned, scorched with humiliation, and hurried back onto the landing. I pressed my forehead against the door when I closed it. Stupid girl, of course he knew. But then I noticed that the door with the iron lock was ajar. I glanced about. I could hear nothing, only the thudding of blood in my ears. There was no reason to have come this far and not continue.

It was a bare room, plain and brown. The paint bled watermarks under the sill of the only window high in the corner. There was a small writing desk, a bookshelf. A strongbox with iron grillwork and two locks like closed fists. A plain pallet in the corner. It looked slept in, the rough woollen covers crumpled. There was hair on the pillow. I leant close, twirled a strand in my fingers. I lost my balance and my knee landed on something protruding from under the pillow. Underneath was a small leather book. There was nothing on the cover. I turned the front page.

In the beginning ...

‘What are you doing?’

I dropped it and stood. It was Ludovico in the doorway, head cocked, those long pointed fingers clasped together.

‘I was lost. I’m sorry.’ I wondered for how long I could get away with using such an excuse.

He lunged toward me and I stepped back. ‘I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘Perhaps you should respect the privacy of your master’s affairs.’

‘My husband.’ I hated the word master. He hardly seemed to register the correction.

After a drawn moment he shifted, only slightly. ‘It is time for vespers. Perhaps you should join your master in the chapel.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

I felt him watch me as I left. He didn’t like me; I wasn’t stupid enough to miss that. I only wondered what I’d done.

The chapel was a tiny room, just large enough for two to kneel side by side. Angels reached out with soft white wings, pillowed on clouds that emerged from blue. They pointed to Christ, his body limp in the arms of the saints, his mother weeping at his side. Marco knelt at the altar. He glanced up at me and offered his hand.

‘Please,’ he said, ushering me in.

As I knelt beside him I felt his disturbance radiate. His prayers were a fervent whisper. He sat high, eyes moist, and raised his face to heaven. I crossed myself.

‘Marco, is this where you hide all the time?’ I asked when our prayers were done. ‘It’s been a week, I’ve hardly seen you.’

‘I am neglecting you as a husband. For that I ask God’s forgiveness, and your own.’

‘You are busy, I understand that.’ I smiled, demurely. ‘But there’s no need to continue to neglect me—us.’ I rested my hand against his cheek. ‘Come to bed. Let us be united, finally, as God intends.’

He looked at the face of Christ. His limp arms and bloodied wrists. He took a deep breath. ‘As God intends.’

But that night his frustrated groans were exacerbated by the howls of wind against the window shutters. I rolled my eyes back to the ceiling and bit my lip, impatient, inadequate. I wondered if this was how it would always be. If this was how it was with all men. As I looked down at the shrimp thing that he pulled in his hand, I wondered if Jacopo would be similarly troubled. I flushed, shocked at my mind’s wandering.

‘Let me help,’ I said, but I could see his distaste. He pushed himself away.

‘What is wrong, Marco? I don’t know what you want me to do.’

‘Nor do I.’ He stood, hands on his head. ‘I ...’ He pulled on his hose, his shirt.

‘Perhaps tomorrow.’

‘Marco, I heard you this afternoon. I know you were—’

He turned slowly. ‘What do you know?’ he sputtered. ‘You don’t know anything.’

‘I only mean to help you. Talk to me. In God’s name, I am your wife.’ I raised myself up high, knees firm against the mattress. ‘Look at me Marco—you hardly have. This belongs to you now. *I* belong to you. Are you displeased?’

He threw my nightgown at me. ‘You are disgracing yourself.’ He walked to the door. ‘I shall return when your behaviour reflects the modesty of your position.’

I gasped, hardly able to swallow his injustice. When he stormed out the walls encroached like a tomb.

San Giovanni, Florence

Martedì Grasso, 23 February 1543

Lucrezia's hands are too numb with cold to continue writing, so she cups the Virgin instead. A shaft of light inches closer. If she could pick herself up, she could shuffle on sore hands to the opposite wall and it would warm her far sooner than sitting here waiting. Her legs are stone pillars and they cannot be moved. She rests the Virgin in her lap, but it causes the broken limbs to fall away from one another. Lucrezia seizes; she cannot let them break apart. She rests back against the wall and looks at her feet. She can feel the pull of the tendons as she flexes. She tells her ankles to roll and after some desperate urging, her foot curls and drops to the side. She winces. Now, the calves, she tells herself. The knees. Her legs are white, with blue veins that carve into tundra skin. The hairs are sparse and stand on end. She is thirsty.

'Can't you help?' she asks.

The girl tilts her head. Looks down again at the Virgin.

'Did you send her, Holy Mother, to look after me?'

The Virgin's eyes face the wall.

'Did you send her because you could not come yourself?'

Outside the day is starting. She can hear the clomping horse hooves on the flagstones, the creaking and thumping of workshop doors heaved open for the day. It won't be long before the circle of light creeps toward her. She carefully places each of the pieces of the porcelain statue on the tiles beside her, attending to them, turning the hands to face the ceiling. Pain shoots from her abdomen when she inches forward. She grits her teeth and crawls as though on glass.

Lucrezia reaches her hands into the bowl and brings it to her mouth. The relief is great. She cups a small well of water in her hand and takes it back to the ink and

pen. She wets the ink, the tip of the pen, hoping to extend their life. She is renewed now, and must continue her confession. She taps the nib against the corner of the page, once and then again. It blots dark blue and so she writes.

Vosges Mountains, Alsace

24 April 1622

We buried Mamé the day the last heifer dropped in her field. Old Herr Walder and his sons, Big Erik and Little Erik, had gathered up all the men and taken them out to dispose of the dead beasts. Burning them would be the likely course of action, though what would I know of such things. I had a heart too heavy to think on the hunger that would come with all that death. There was hardly a soul at the churchyard. Us, Matti, Father Thomas. Anna worried at the rosary beads strung between her fingers. She mumbled, too. *Hail Mary, full of Grace*. They'd come from over the mountains with Mamé all those years ago. French beads made of bone. They were knobbly and gnarled so that they each left their own impression deep in the flesh of the finger. And I knew all the little dimples and dents of each bead, too. I liked to think on the identical marks I shared with my sister and Mamé, and her grandmére, and theirs before them. All of us were marked by that same desperate clutch.

It rained the whole long hour that we stood under the shadow of the church steeple with Father Thomas uttering a litany to the drowning wind. Nobody came. We knew that Mamé never truly belonged. She had strange French ways and preferred to keep herself apart. But we didn't realise just how friendless she'd been.

'Come, look at this,' Anna had said that morning. She had pulled out a book, the edges curled and crimped with moisture, from a trunk by the window. She flattened it open on the table, blew dust from the crack. The writing curled in barely perceptible letters. There were drawings, ink blotches, and annotations on the text.

'Is this Mamé's writing?'

There were several scripts, a layering of hands.

‘They’re like recipes. An almanac?’

How strange, I thought, that she’d never shared it with us. Before the famine had forced us into service in neighbouring villages, Mamé had taken us to all of her birthings. She taught us to mix poultices and tinctures, how to staunch bleeding, and how to start it. Midwifery ran strong in her Lorraine blood, but she found those of us on the Eastern side of the Vosges both harsher of tongue and harsher of tolerance.

‘Devil’s girls.’ The image of Elspeth Stark appeared before me. ‘Bleak inside, like she is.’ Was.

After Father Thomas said his blessings and consecrated Mamé’s body to the earth, we stood by her plot until the sun began to sink and a mist crawled up toward us. And in that mist I swear I saw, sudden as a blink of the eye, Mamé, standing in the vapour. I looked to Anna who stood squinting at the same spot as I.

But then her gaze was drawn to the churchyard gates. A fowl scurried into the clutch of mounded headstones and ruffled her grey feathers. She stopped and pecked between the blades wedged in clods of dirt.

‘Where have you come from?’ said Matti.

Meals like that don’t blunder into churchyards lest some fools let a gate open, but fools do suffer themselves to loss and we were too hungry to let such error pass our bellies by. I clucked my tongue and inched forward. Matti stooped and crept by the flank.

‘How strange,’ I heard Anna behind me.

The bird leapt onto a small rounded stone and shook her feathers.

‘Pretty bird,’ I whispered.

‘Oh, leave her.’ Hunger was to Anna a most sacred devotion. She saw her body’s protests to emptiness as a sign of her transcendence. She could hardly articulate what was to her the strangeness of flesh. I felt my body with similar

unease. But at that moment in the churchyard at the fresh mound of Mamé's resting place, I felt only emptiness.

The bird's neck craned and she considered, with a cluck, my outstretched arms. I was found sufficient and she hopped onto the rounded tip of a close cross.

'Hey, there!' The voice could have splintered the gravestones. Red hair, wild and furious, tore through the gate and across the tumbling stones. My gut clenched when I realised who it was. Ursule Kramer, the bailiff's daughter. She'd not grown much since the days when she used to fling mud at us across the fields. She picked on Anna the most. Hare-witch she'd call her.

'That's my bird!' She snatched at the hen perched on the cross. 'Come back.' She pulled it into her chest as it beat a violent protest. Ursule cooed and smoothed the rustling with her free hand.

'What were you muttering to make her come? Did you lure her here?'

'Lure her?'

'I was gone just for a moment. Naughty thing,' she scowled at the bird, and then down at the fresh mound. There was a footprint, the hurrying kind, pressed into the dirt. She blushed. 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

I looked at Anna but she was staring at the ground. 'Thank you,' I said for both of us.

A man stopped by the low churchyard wall, leant his elbows on the stone.

'What's this, Ursule? Who do you terrorise today?' I looked up. It was Michel. I brushed down my dress, tucked back loose hair.

'Terrorise?' she looked appalled. 'The hen ran off. Not like her at all.' Her eyes darted to us, but she didn't say anything more.

'Perhaps closer attendance to the duties your father trusts to you will help prevent such mishaps in future.'

Her face turned as red as her hair.

He laughed. ‘Ursule, I’m just teasing.’

Ursule’s snarl turned to a smile. She approached him at the wall. ‘Can you help me get her back?’ The hen shook her wings and Ursule nearly lost her grip.

‘Hold her like this,’ he said as he reached across the wall and took the bird by its feet. Once subdued in its upside down trance, Michel returned it to Ursule. She smiled coquettishly at him.

‘Whatever would I do without you?’ She leant across the wall to kiss his cheek, but was quick to return her gaze to me, a hint of triumph in her upturned lips.

‘Come, Michel. Let’s leave them to their ... grief. I must speak with you about the banns. Father Thomas will make the announcement about the wedding when Papa returns from Rorshwhir.’

‘In a moment, I need to speak to them first.’

She sighed. ‘I’ll come by later then. I must speak with your mother anyhow.’

Michel rolled his eyes and then they rested in a drawn moment on mine. Once she was gone, he climbed over the wall.

‘Sorry for your loss,’ he said as he tipped his hat. ‘She was an asset to this community.’ He turned to the retreating Ursule. ‘If not appreciated by all.’

‘What do you need to speak to us about?’ asked Anna.

‘I hate to bring it up under such circumstances, but I’m afraid it’s unavoidable.’ He paused.

‘Yes?’

Anna folded her arms.

He cleared his throat. ‘Your grandmother fell quite behind in her rent. I am not unkind, and owing to her age and station, I was willing to extend to her some concession.’ He stepped towards me as he spoke, but kept his eyes lowered.

‘However, I must insist that these payments be made. Being a reasonable man, I think three months should be sufficient—and rather lenient—for the rent in arrears.’

‘Herr Müller—Michel,’ I said placidly, ‘we’ve not yet found work. We were rather hoping to procure our means independently, carrying on our grandmother’s work. But establishing ourselves may take some time—’

‘That’s admirable, if not perhaps naïve.’ I couldn’t tell if he was serious or teasing. His feet pointed towards me, and he straightened so he stood close. Too close.

The differences between us never seemed so marked when we were young. When all we had was abundance. The hot night we’d stolen into Old Walder’s cellar and taken our loot to the stream beyond the wall. Lost stockings, we paddled ankle deep, fish darting between our toes and the stones. He pulled me down so my dress soaked through. It clung to me as his shirt did when I pulled him down beside me. A tremble in silence, and a fresh gasp on the cold bank. A little pain, and then something warm, something distinct from me and him, that hurried up through me. He spilled by a rock pool where the stream had washed away the blood.

I stepped back and it broke the shared remembrance.

‘There’s no manure for planting,’ he said. ‘I could use help with labour. I’ll consider it payment.’

‘I’ll consider it,’ I said.

When he was gone Anna raised her eyebrows at me. ‘You play a dangerous game, Mathilde.’

The Witches' Tower, Bergheim, Alsace

30 January, 1623

Father Thomas drinks from the small earth-coloured cup and offers it to Mathilde.

‘Water,’ he says. ‘Perhaps you would prefer ale?’

Mathilde shakes her head. She smiles when she sees the girl standing over Father Thomas’ shoulder. He turns to look at the blank wall.

‘What is it?’ he asks. He knits his brow. ‘What are you looking at?’ She seems to make him uneasy.

‘Have you any children, Father?’

He scoffs. ‘You know I don’t. I am a man of the cloth. That you would even ask—’

She looks at him sideways. ‘There are many fathers of the cloth, *Father.*’

He clears his throat. The sun breaks out from cloud beyond the window. The stink of hot, fresh waste tipped into the street rises with the light. ‘I take my vows seriously, Mathilde. I would ask you to respect my position as cleric of the Dominican order.’

Mathilde sweeps her hair behind her ear. She rolls her sleeves to her elbows. ‘It is hot in this tower, isn’t it, Father?’

He nods and pulls a small square cloth from the inside of his robes and offers it to Mathilde. Her own clothes are brown with filth, sweat patches beneath her arms and breasts. She takes it and dabs her face. She pays particular attention to the right side of her upper lip. She rests the cloth there a while before she returns it. She looks again at the space over Father Thomas’ shoulder.

‘And you have no secret children, Father? Born of some young wench, not unlike me, who birthed your bastards and curses your holy prick as she launders by the Mosel each day?’

‘Mathilde.’ His voice is heavy now. ‘I will leave. There are other ways of extracting your confession.’

‘Did she moan at least a little, Father?’

Father Thomas stands abruptly. The pitcher of water tips and cracks up the middle. ‘Mathilde, I will not listen to this filth. Cooperate or I will send for the bailiff.’

Mathilde rests her back against the jugged wall. She looks at the high ceiling. In the corner of the room, the rope of the strappado is winched over the centre beam.

‘My mother was banished from Riquewihr with a pair of shoes and a pair of babes growing in her belly. Did you know that, Father?’

Father Thomas takes a moment to breathe. He looks at her and she shifts, leaning on the stone like palace pillows. He does not sit, but neither does he walk away. He turns to the tiny slit window and the hill that rises up to meet the blue sky. Starlings swirl in a long arc, settling on a row of vines over the road. ‘I did know that, yes.’

‘And did you know that she wore a burden stone about her neck as they marched her across the village, back and forth, before they threw her out into the winter?’

‘The punishments of the Württemberg estates are not so different to our own. I can imagine that such an event took place.’

Mathilde runs her fingers through her hair. It is knotted so she tugs and tugs.

‘Do you think such things can be hereditary, Father?’

Father Thomas turns finally, and after pacing with his hands tucked behind his back, he sits once more and draws the stool closer to Mathilde.

‘What do you think?’

Hampstead, North London

21 November, 1882

I was nervous when I went down to breakfast in the morning. I could not imagine that Edward would approve of my staying out so late. He was at the table brushing coffee from his moustache. He turned over the broadsheet and coughed. He didn't look up when I sat beside him.

'Good morning,' he said. His toast crunched when he bit. There was sliced apple with cheese and ham arranged on a tray. Edward had begun to insist on taking breakfast the French way. He had new clients from Normandy, though I could hardly figure how such a thing might impress them. It did not bother me; I hardly ate anymore. Where I had diminished, shrinking into sack-like dresses in the months since Sophie's death, Edward had engorged, swallowing up what I had lost. The plump roll of his belly rested on the table. He piled jam onto toast. Wiped crumbs on an advertisement for shoe polish. I poured coffee, added sugar and stirred. I picked up the cup thinking I'd somehow escaped his scrutiny when he coughed and rested his paper on the table.

'You were out late.'

I let the coffee simmer in front of me. 'I didn't mean to be. The weather turned. I don't expect you'd think it wise to trudge home in the wet.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'And how did you get home?'

'I took a cab in the end. It's only a short walk, but I know how you'd feel about my being alone after dark.'

'Indeed.' He glanced down to the paper. I waited a moment before picking up the cup again, brought it my mouth.

'And what exactly did this meeting consist of?'

I blew on the liquid. Rested my elbows on the table. ‘I told you already. It was a spiritualist group. I found it very comforting to be surrounded by people who had suffered a loss like ours. Very comforting.’

‘You know how I feel about that nonsense.’

‘Yes. But would you prefer that I continue to languish in bed all day? I need something, Edward. Something to release me from the oppressiveness of my condition.’

He took a drawn breath, and with a barely perceptible nod, looked down again at his page. It seemed, for now, he’d relented.

‘Blast.’ He squinted. ‘There’s a piece on the bloody Borneo mine. Who the ruddy hell spoke to the press?’

The mug warmed my fingertips. Perhaps I would take a sip, I thought, when the steam dissipated.

‘Some blasted clerk must have run his mouth. All we bloody need.’

The spoon tinked as I circled it. Edward knocked the table and I jolted. It felt like a shock. It brought my mind suddenly to the knocks of the night before. How strange it had been. I glanced at Edward gorging on an egg. He had no idea, I thought, what I had so lately experienced. I almost felt sorry for his scepticism. But had it really been her? It seemed preposterous. Though, I’d suspected things. Little glimpses half caught in candle flicker. It recalled to me those childhood moments alone in my soft bed, with ceilings that seemed so vast above me, when I could hardly contemplate the idea of death. That life could simply extinguish itself, and so suddenly. My mother had passed when I was three and so I scarcely knew her. But sometimes, as a child, I felt her presence. My nurse was comforting, but she did not allow me to indulge the idea. My mother was in God’s protection, safe in Heaven,

and would hardly deign to walk about the earth. It was silly to think such things.

Popish nonsense.

I fell away from such fanciful notions as I grew older. But death stayed close and abstract. Month after month my menses washed away my hopes of children. There were few occasions in the early years of my marriage when my courses stalled and I allowed myself hope, dashed inevitably in the coming weeks. But just as I had given up the bud of Sophie lingered. She emerged red and squalling and I never thought I could be happier. Some women lose children in their dozens. Babes that arrive half formed cried out in beds or back alleys, choked on their own cords, cold and unbreathing. I should consider myself lucky that I have lost only one. Perhaps that is what makes the pain all the worse.

‘Emma?’

I turned to Edward. The steam from the coffee, still held to my mouth, obscured his features.

‘Are you going to drink the damn thing, or are you just going to sit there?’

I sipped. ‘Are you happy now?’

He sat back, resigned. He was worried, I knew that. He didn’t know what to do with me. ‘Just eat some toast. Please? I have to get to the office early, probably stay there late too, calming investors.’ He wiped the crumbs from his shirt and shovelled his arms into his jacket. His shirt sleeves strained.

‘Will you be home for supper?’

‘Probably not.’

‘I need to tell Alice.’

‘Seeing as your own supper went cold last night, perhaps Alice can serve your leftovers. I’ll eat at the club.’

I placed the spoon on the saucer. ‘Don’t be like that.’

He shook his head. ‘I hate to think what people would say, Emma. Out, alone in the streets at night, all so some quack can talk about ghosts.’

‘Edward.’

He stomped into the hall. Alice stood with his hat and bag. I followed timidly. It was all I seemed to do, creep and potter, like a mouse. He put on his hat. ‘It’s good that you’re up and about. I’m glad to see you off that bloody medication, but honestly—’ He turned to the maid. ‘I shan’t be home for supper.’

The door slammed and I turned to Alice, dejected. I could never tell from one day to the next if Edward would be sympathetic or impatient. I tried not to blame him. Sympathy for the ill can be difficult. The burden of care. I knew that too well.

‘Will you be continuing your breakfast, ma’am?’

‘No, Alice, thank you. Put it away.’ I wandered into the drawing room and stood by the window. I felt a lurch that rushed like the tide. It was not an uncommon struggle, and one I often gave into. I so infrequently had the will to fight. Some mornings I woke so heavy that I could not stir. I would spend entire days adrift in lethargy, tossing and turning, or worse, staring for hours at the blank white walls. I had begun to rely on that earth brown liquid, the bitter bite laced with the faintest hint of cinnamon. Dr Gissing had prescribed it, and I confess that sometimes the dullness was all I craved in the world. But not just to forget. I was restless too, and only the laudanum could quell it. Something stirred in the deepest part of me, a desperate urge to flee the London grey. I watched a little finch beyond the window dart from one stark tree branch to another. I’d felt the same the night before. I told myself it was simply lingering emotion, but my hands trembled so on the sill I had to grip it to keep myself steady.

I turned to the fireplace. It was as though I could see Miss Emmett there, as she had been in her own parlour, standing poised, her face a whisper of orange. She’d

regarded me with a strange kind of intensity, as though I was a specimen in a cabinet. She told me to take all the time I needed, that I'd had a terrible shock. I remembered suddenly how she smelled: potpourri and smoke. A strange detail to recall. She had come to sit beside me and rested her hand on my own.

'This type of communication can be daunting at the best of times. I cannot imagine how it must be for a bereaved parent in their first communication with a loved one, especially one so young.'

I'd thought of little hollows on the bedcover and a breath I'd felt in my ear. The thoughts became words that ached at my tongue. Something about her invited divulgence. The kind I'd last indulged in as a schoolgirl. And as that heaviness that threatened to drown me had crept up, ready to swell, something unexpected had happened. Miss Emmett drew me to my feet, pulled me to her chest and her head fell softly on my shoulder. Is it not a terrible sadness to realise how unaccustomed one has become to tenderness? That such an action should elicit shock and marvel before any kind of comfort.

The thought made me blush. It was almost as strange as the rapping of Sophie herself. And then that strangeness turned to wonder. I smiled as I marvelled. I can return, I thought. I can experience that profound phenomenon again. But which of the two was truly profound? The echo of a thump on wood from a little one dead some six long months, or the echo of my own heartbeat and the tremor elicited by Miss Emmett's hand when she touched mine? I looked towards the window again. From the little place in the clump of sunlight, broken through tree branch shadows and window frames, I swear I saw a ghostly pair of feet kicking the air from the space where Sophie used to draw on the rug. I clasped my hand on the mantel and I watched.

Ticehurst House Asylum, East Sussex

6 January 1882

The wallpaper is horrid damask. Brown, peeled and discoloured. Water marks seep from the ceiling and peel away to dull grey beneath. Emma stares at it from her position in the reclined chair, legs prised, Doctor Gissing fumbling between. She feels the deep prod of his fingers and grimaces. He hums and scrapes. She purses her lips. The ceiling is high, and plaster cherubs sit against the wainscot in the corners. Wrapped in wreathes they watch. The doctor's fingers find the tip of her cervix and push. Emma winces. Gissing stands back, wipes his hands.

‘Has there been improvement?’ she asks, hopefully.

‘It is difficult to say.’ He washes in a basin by the wall. ‘I have reason for concern.’

Of course, she thinks, there is always reason for concern.

Gissing smiles. ‘I have added a course of moral treatment to your case, Mrs Blount. We must address your ...’

She scowls.

‘Unnatural perversions. Hydropathy should do it. You like to bathe though, don't you, Emma?’ His grin is malicious.

7 January 1882

‘You are quiet today, Emma.’

Doctor Barrett’s office is not like Gissing’s. A bursting bookcase, loose papers stacked on the desk. A chaos of scattered thoughts.

‘I think you would be too Doctor, had you undergone hydropathy.’

She looks down at her skin, still red and raw. The air had caught like ice and the water landed as a shock. Her chest tightens to think of it. The bucket gurgling through the tub of ice and water. But it isn’t the memory of the anticipation, of squeezing her eyelids shut as she listened to the drag and swish, bracing herself for the oncoming drenching that troubles her. It’s the water, constriction. Knowing she would never breathe again. The memory swells in her throat and she claps her neck. She can’t ask herself, again, what it must have felt like for her.

Barrett shifts uncomfortably. ‘It is customary for patients with hysteria, Emma. It shocks the nerves. It can be quite beneficial.’

‘If you say so.’ She returns her eyes to the window.

‘I’m glad you’re here because I’ve been thinking a lot about our talk at Christmas. I must say, I am intrigued.’ He pushes his hair from his face. There is a copy of *Medium and Daybreak* just visible under a newspaper.

‘Surely my story is not so different from any other.’

He sits back and rests his fingertips on his lips. ‘It’s what you said about the mind. It sparked an immediate interest in me. I must say, such a, what did you call it? A *division* of the self has been a topic of interest growing for me.’

‘Is that so?’

He smiles. ‘I confess, I’ve asked you here as much for my own professional curiosity as to get to the root of your own trouble—though, to be sure, that is central to my purpose. While I respect the methods of my colleagues—’

‘Hydropathy and prodding about in the womb?’ Emma interrupts.

He coughs uncomfortably. ‘I feel that we’ve reached somewhat of an impasse as far as these treatments go. There’s very interesting research taking place in Europe in regards to the independent functions of the mind and it strikes me that yours might be one worth looking into.’

Emma folds her hands in her lap and casts her eyes downwards.

‘Of course, if there’s anything I can do to help persuade you ...’

She thinks for a moment and then it comes to her, blooming like a sunflower.

‘Paper,’ she says. ‘I’d like paper and a pen.’

He looks relieved. ‘Is that all?’

She smiles, for he doesn’t yet know what miracles she can procure with paper and pen. She nods.

‘Then please,’ he says. ‘Won’t you continue your story?’

21 November, 1882

If I had known that morning at breakfast the events of the remainder of the day, I'd have taken to bed with a heavy dose of laudanum quite convinced that I was half-mad. For what sane person could credit such phenomena had they not seen it with their own eyes? But, even with that lingering taste of the supernatural, I was not prepared for what was to come. Though the idea of visiting Susannah Emmett a mere half day after our first acquaintance never seemed to arise fully formed in my mind, I was not surprised when I found myself dressing to head out. Alice had seemed startled, relieved perhaps, as she laced my dress and brought me my umbrella and gloves. I was not then sure where I would go, and I told her so, but to be out of the house, even for a mindless walk in the heath, was one of the directives of my recovery and so she could hardly protest. I always had some excuse for staying in.

I walked by the ponds first, where Sophie would swim sometimes in summer. Nurses strolled with perambulators and children in knickerbockers and pinafores followed in line, like ducks from the pond. They jeered at long-necked swans on the banks. Ordinarily, such a sight would halt my breath but I continued, picking up my skirts to tread through puddles. I passed through a thick copse and emerged in the long grass of Parliament Hill where the smoggy sky-line of London emerged in haze. Down the hill to the streets of Highgate, to the grand grey-brick terraces slanted on slopes.

The young maid was polite, curtsying when she opened the door. 'The lady is out,' she said.

I was surprised by the heaviness of my disappointment. Though I hadn't planned the visit something about it seemed so suddenly inevitable, a date arranged months in advance and all my restless energy suddenly spiralled. I turned, without leaving a

calling card, and walked beyond the low fence and looked down at myself. Mud was crusted on the rim of my boots, water dripped from the hem. I rearranged my bun, frazzled hair pulled roughly under my lop-sided bonnet. How I must have looked, I thought. The street was empty, grey and cold. The world began to close. I thought of my bed, my need to fall in. I could never get home soon enough. I should have to walk through the park, or wait for an omnibus, but then I'd be seen, and who knows by whom. It would be crowded, hot, loud. How could I possibly manage it? I gripped my umbrella until I could no longer feel the firmness against my fingers. Until I could feel nothing.

‘Emma?’

I turned. Miss Emmett was walking towards me, a fresh bouquet in arms.

‘I’ve just come back from the high street. I insist on flowers every week, chosen myself, of course. Have a smell. Beautiful, no?’ She leaned the bouquet toward me. ‘So difficult to find at this time of year, but my florist is the best in London, always keeps something aside.’ She winked as she strode beside me, caught my arm familiarly and pulled me along. ‘Come in, come in,’ she insisted. The sun caught the threads of grey that hid amongst the yellow, and fixated on the sight, I followed her.

Susannah lived with her brother, John, a bachelor. Ordinarily such an arrangement would have incited pity, but despite the brevity of our acquaintance such a response seemed entirely unnatural. They kept a strange house, though charming in its own way. There were the ordinary kinds of curiosities, a fernery with exotic palms stretched upon the glass like a child’s handprint, Sévres vases besides ceramics from the East and an enormous fossilised gastropod in the centre of the mantelpiece. But there were other strange objects, taxidermy exotics, birds and small mammals, even a monkey. A tribal shield, an obscene black fertility statue and, between a mounted bezour and a leather prosthetic hand, the skull of a small child.

Miss Emmett seemed as foreign and curious as the collections mounted about her parlour. A strange picture of femininity; her hair was finely bundled, her dress immaculate, and yet her mannerisms and tone were quite incongruous with her delicate veneer.

We sat, and as my eye strayed across all the cabinets the maid brought us tea and biscuits. A cat leaped onto the arm of the chair and slunk into my lap, warming me with the vibrations of its purr.

‘That’s Mister Boots,’ Miss Emmett said. ‘Mister Boots is very friendly and always hungry, aren’t you Mister Boots?’

‘Sophie would have loved a pet. Cat, dog, turtle, it wouldn’t have mattered,’ I said. ‘My husband would have none of it. Said there would be nothing but mess and noise; two most grievous sins in his opinion.’ I rubbed the cat’s cheeks and they folded up, covering his eyes. He shook his head and moist flecks sprayed on my face.

‘He was a gift from John. I think once he realised I was destined for spinsterhood he felt he should find me a companion.’ The cat leapt across from one chair to the other, landing softly on his mistress’ knees. ‘I don’t think any husband would be as affectionate as Mister Boots.’ She scratched under his chin and he purred.

From the hall came the sound of the front door shutting.

‘Thank you, Annie.’ Footsteps echoed as they neared.

A skeletal man appeared in the doorway.

‘What a pleasant surprise,’ he said, thrusting his hat into the maid’s arms. ‘Good afternoon, ladies.’

‘John, come meet my dear new friend, Mrs Blount. Mrs Blount, my brother, Mr Emmett.’

He shook my hand then flung himself onto the sofa. He seemed the type who never finished growing into himself. His body stretched, that was evident, but the rest of him forgot to fill it out. His beard was dark and closely shaved, his hair curled past his ears. When he smiled, as he did often, his teeth were white and straight.

‘I’m terribly disappointed to have missed the séance. How was our American chap, Susie? Up to the all the brouhaha?’

‘As impressive as any other medium, I suppose. He seemed to hit a few marks. Mrs Griffin is dreadfully enthralled by him, but of course it doesn’t take much to impress her.’

They both laughed. They were so easy in one another’s company, I felt suddenly stuffed up. Too many layers of fabric lying heavily upon me. They were slippery by contrast, like eels at the fair.

‘How did the two of you become involved with spiritualism?’

‘I was invited by a college friend a few years ago to a séance of one Miss Cook; she became quite famous, though she’s suffered a bit of controversy recently and has dropped off the scene. It was awfully interesting. She manifested a spirit control, Katie King, who would emerge from the cabinet and walk among the guests. I brought Susannah along with me to some of her public appearances. We’ve been attended séances in London since then, some more impressive than others. I’ve even written a few pieces for *Medium and Daybreak*, the spiritualist journal,’ he said.

‘Have you read it?’

‘I am sorry to say I have not.’

‘Well, I shall send you a copy.’ He reached across the table for a biscuit and clumsily brushed the crumbs that fell down his chest. ‘I think Susie is hoping Mr Hawkins can teach her a bit more. It’s still all very new, but she’s been exhibiting some talents herself. She’s quite good.’

She glanced at me. I couldn't tell if it was a look of true or false modesty. I think she knew much more than she let on all along.

'Do you wish to see something extraordinary, Mrs Blount?'

It took me by surprise, the casualness with which she invited me to join in her experiments.

'John,' she began. 'Be a dear and bring over the table—the little one.'

'Oh ho!' John exclaimed jumping to his feet. 'You are in for a treat, Mrs Blount.'

John pushed a small, round table to the middle of the room, grunting, and when he was settled, grinning widely, Susannah instructed us place our fingertips lightly atop. John pulled the curtains so the room almost, but not completely devoid of light. Light enough for shadows, for whispers and tricks of shifting forms. Annie was pottering in the kitchen and the occasional clank or splash of dishes kept me present, held the fluttering nerves at bay. Neither Miss nor Mr Emmett explained what I could expect, only that I should concentrate my energy on the table. She muttered very softly. Words hardly perceptible, though I knew it was not a spell—it is an awful misunderstanding that spiritualists are so often linked with the devil and witchcraft. She was asking the spirits to step in close. I believe I felt them too, like the unexpected throb of electric lighting. Each hair rose until, I swear, I could feel somebody standing behind me. I did not know then what such sensations meant, only that there was something strangely familiar about the presence, and that they didn't frighten me at all.

Moments passed without occurrence but then, as though manipulated by some hidden pulley system as at the theatre, the table began to vibrate. A subtle thrum under the fingertips, intensifying with each little tremble. One leg lifted, and, as the table rocked like a ship on waves, the opposite legs lifted the same. I gasped. The

momentum built until the table tipped as though it should land sideways. It was a careful movement, precise, and just as it reached that last inch before the floor, it picked itself up again. All the while, my fingers sat lightly on the surface.

Miss Emmett smiled, eyes wide and wild. Her hair had come out and hung about her shoulders so she appeared as some creature of the forest. I felt the grains of wood pass under my fingertips, faster and faster. We had to run in a circle in order to maintain contact. And then, by one inch, then another, the table began to levitate. How can one account for such a thing? It rose, spinning, until we had to stretch our arms and stand on toes. For if we lost contact, so Mr Emmett said, our energy would be severed and the table would crash to the ground.

‘Thank you, dear spirits,’ Miss Emmett said, and, just like that, it landed heavily by our feet. We were silent for a moment as we stared at the table, now returned to its normal function, quite still in the space between us.

‘What was that?’ I had to sit down. I edged back into a chair and fanned myself. John clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

‘Marvellous,’ he said, ‘bloody marvellous. A drink, I think.’

Susannah paced the room, hands clasped at her hips, lips pulled tight together.

‘We’ve never achieved full levitation before. What a thing.’ She stood before me suddenly. ‘Mrs Blount, you simply must come again. The spirits like you.’ She smirked then, with a strange kind of knowing.

She reached for my hand.

26 April 1622

‘My girls,’ she said. Her voice seemed to come from all corners of the small room. Fat candles, swollen with a lifetime’s drippings, hung from the casement bays. A stuffed jackalope stared with lifeless eyes at antlers draped with furs and skins on the wall above the hearth. In a high-backed chair, Mamé rocked as the fire highlighted her sagging eyes.

So many things were different now. The image fell away as we stepped over the threshold. Sighing heavily, I made my way into the little room. I picked through the collection on the mantle. The Virgin. Saint Margaret. A lavender amethyst. Speckled ruby kyanite. As a girl I was fascinated with Mamé’s pretty rocks, reflecting light like constellations. Mamé looked at me one day, the last time we were home. Her eyebrows were thick as caterpillars and they deepened as she peered. ‘Come here, Mathilde,’ she said. She brushed down my shoulders then stepped back to take in more of me. Her eyesight was troubled up close.

‘Wait there, my girl.’ She pushed past Matti so he stumbled like a calf. She dug through a box stuffed with trinkets—bits of old bone and animal skins, candles and waxed paper, threads, needles, pins and muslin. She cupped her hands around something small. It glittered between her fingers.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘You need this.’ She looked at Anna then too. ‘I won’t be around forever. You girls been gone too long away from me. Away from my protection.’

She opened her hands and revealed a stone, small as a bird’s egg and shaped the same. It was blue with concentric swirls in ever deeper shades. ‘Agate,’ she said. ‘Next moon put it in the light. Keep it there a time, whether cloud or clear, and when

morning comes wash it in pewter with salt. Then clasp it to your heart, my dear, keep it on a string. It'll keep harm from you—much as it can.'

The room felt cold. I shivered. I reached below my neckline and clasped the blue stone.

Anna pulled out the strange almanac we'd found that morning, ran her fingers across the cover. 'Look at these strange markings.' She tilted her head. 'I wonder if there's a code here.'

I was distracted. There was somebody coming through the forest. I could hear the footfall and the crush of leaves, even above the rustle of kindling as Matti stooped to lay a fire. 'What do you mean?'

'I'm not sure. I wish we could read it.' She leant close, running her fingers tenderly along each line of script. I stood over her shoulder. She was right. It was full of strange markings. Symbols and scrawl so small and slanted it could hardly be read. Something about it made me uneasy.

'It's mostly French, I think, but there's something else. Latin? Didn't know Mamé read Latin.'

Each page was like gauze. Anna turned them carefully.

'Mathilde,' she said, flipping faster now. There was a hint of urgency in her voice. 'I do not think this is merely a manual. Mamé taught us her trade by memory; we know all our recipes without the need for such a book. So why then, does she have one?'

Then the knock I was expecting echoed through the cottage. Anna shut the book. I glanced at her warily.

'Good day to you both,' Michel said, ducking his head as he entered. 'I imagine you know why I'm here.' He had a bundle of papers under his arm and he placed them on the table, just by the book.

‘I haven’t been here since my father passed.’ His eyes darted across the tangle of curiosities.

Anna kept watching me, but I took no notice of her.

He wandered to the window, ran his hand along the casement as though testing for something. He followed the line of the beams up, across the ceiling, to the hearth.

‘Thank you, Herr Müller,’ Anna said. Pursed lips, arms folded. ‘Is that all?’

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, stalled. ‘Well, I won’t take up too much of your time,’ he said, finally. ‘You can bring them, signed, to the farm. You can sign your names I trust?’

Anna folded her arms.

He grinned. ‘Will you come to the farm tomorrow, Mathilde? I will pay.’ It was subtle, the way his lip twitched when he looked at me.

‘Yes, I suppose.’

When he was gone Anna turned to me like she did when she was having thoughts she didn’t want to share.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Mathilde.’ She pursed her lips. ‘I don’t know about you working for him.’

I knew better too, but that old excitement, unfurling, was far too strong. To spend the day with him again. Alone. A temptation too great to bear.

Anna’s visions began the year the comet appeared. It blazed night after night across the cold November sky. We were in Riquewihr then, our first time in service. Those of Calvin saw apocalypse and the village fell to repentance. From the pulpit they sang sorrow. The pastor denounced the sins of the townsfolk and the plague sweeping from the Empire on the other side of the Rhine. Pamphlets appeared on the church door and stuck like leaf litter under cart wheels and dogs’ paws. The war was

coming. The sky was God's own pulpit, and from it issued his displeasure. But Anna saw more than sin. It was the night of her first fit. We never knew what caused the catastrophes of her body, the way she would writhe, lost somewhere inside herself. In the days that followed, she dreamed things we couldn't understand. She told me of her first vision. Or rather the inkling of it, for it had not formed into such a thing that can be described. It was too deep inside her, she'd said. It came like rainfall. Tiny spatters of something she could hardly cup in her small palm before they seeped through the cracks in her fingers.

'A man,' she'd said, with an abhorrence that shook her bones. She didn't know who, or how, only that one of their kind would be our ruin.

While the comet gifted Anna with sight, it scorned me with the curse. As the sun set and the sky was struck with that red trail, I felt the wet seep slow on the inside of my thigh. I thought I'd die, like Frauke the week before, haemorrhaging her stillborn onto a sparse straw-covered floor. I was in service to a merchant and his house was grand. I huddled by the bee hives his wife kept at the bottom of the garden. I squatted low among the green to the humming of their strange music and withdrew two dark red fingers. I held them up to see in the waning light as the trail emerged between tall birches. I was distraught. What kind of dark prophesy is foretold between the legs of a girl and a night pierced with that same red?

I should have listened to her.

We were side by side, elbow deep in muck. In lieu of dung, the fields would be ploughed with black sludge from riverbeds and ponds. We carried baskets on our backs and when the burden grew too heavy we hauled them to a cart by a clump of timbered trees. We didn't speak.

It was difficult to breathe; a smell of eggs left in the sun. Ripples broke each time we moved. His reflection would emerge for a heart's fleeting beat then the scum and dead things would rise from the bottom and obscure it. I began to look, not through vague reflections, but squinting across refracted light at the harsh bridge of his nose and the jagged cut of hair. I ran my fingers across acorn hollows and crusts of bark. The quick velvet of a fish brushed my knuckles. Something cut. I gasped.

He was quick. 'Are you all right?' His dropped scum plopped heavy in the water. He examined my hand.

Blood pooled at the tip of my finger, still and perfectly round.

'It's deep, but it will heal.'

'Is it a bite, do you think?'

'A bite? No. Just a scratch.' The image of the boy I knew came to me. It was as though he'd stepped right from my mind's eye and dived into the pond. 'Watch.' He plunged his arm into the water and bit his tongue as he searched blindly. He pulled out a fish, alive and squirming.

'Tench,' he said. The tail squirmed. He held his hands firm and it slowed, unable to compete with his death grip. He pulled at its mouth and revealed the single dull row of teeth. 'They eat vegetable matter,' he said. 'So there's no need for them to be sharp.'

'So it wasn't a bite.'

He smiled as he shook his head.

'Look at its sheen,' he said. 'Like gold.' The scales shone like the mosaics on the rooftops of Colmar. 'They like murky water, like this. They swim along the bottom.' He imitated the motion, drawing the poor flailing thing from his body in a slithering arc. He threw it onto the bank.

'Supper,' he said.

I held my finger as though it were a candle. He cupped it like the flame was dying.

We dragged ourselves to the pond's edge.

Michel wrapped my finger in a strip of linen from his undershirt and I remembered suddenly that I was wearing only the simplest dress. We sat on a bed of lush grass. My boots squelched.

'You're cold,' he said.

'The sun's gone.'

An ant crept over his boot and a dragonfly hovered in the space between us. I watched because I couldn't think of a single word to utter. I was so aware of each movement. Of how I sat, resting with my legs outstretched, a tumble of weeds around my feet. The length of each breath and how the pauses between them, like the frog croaks from the bank, weaved soft melody. That when I swallowed I could hear the swish of fluid and wondered if he could hear it too.

'It's been a long time,' I said, finally.

'And yet you look so much the same.'

'We're not children anymore, Michel. It's not so simple.'

'Why can't it be? You're still a mystery to me, Mathilde.'

I scoffed.

He blushed and laughed. 'Of course you are, ever since that first time I saw you as I travelled with Father to Colmar. What boy wouldn't be fascinated with your legend?'

'Legend?'

'Granddaughter of a French wise woman, alone on the edge of the woods. Fresh limbs like birch trees, hair like spun gold.' He thought he was poetic; his grin told me so. The grass by my hand melted into the earth as his own crept closer. 'I had to have

you.’ And then his fingers did reach out. Like spider legs, they crept. I felt the breath that caught in my throat grow, expanding, until his hairs, fine as cobwebs, brushed my skin leaving an almost nothingness between us. I’d never wanted to be touched as much as I did then. And neither did I feel the weight of my loneliness, a burdening stone from my neck, pull like it did when his heaviness brought it down.

‘But that’s all I am to you, isn’t it? A legend? Something to be conquered?’

He frowned. ‘Mathilde, you know what we are to one another.’

I did.

He pulled off his shirt and it landed wet and heavy beside him. ‘It’s cold.’

‘How would Ursule feel if she saw you half naked by my side?’

‘Ursule?’ He pulled back quickly. ‘What has she to do with any of this?’

‘Don’t pretend, Michel. I understand how things are.’

‘You’ve been gone a long time, Mathilde. Besides,’ he scoffed, ‘it’s not as though ...’

‘I know she loves you.’

Michel grasped my wrist. His fingers cut deep. I winced. ‘She is not the kind of girl you are, Mathilde,’ he hissed. He bit my neck. I gasped. His hand slid down my dress and he seized my breast, pinched the nipple. I ran my hand up his leg. No, I thought, Ursule and I are not like one another at all. I pulled him toward me. I drank in his lips, his tongue. I pushed him back onto the mossy ground and taking that place atop him, we remembered each other again.

25 September, 1542

It became a regular occurrence, Marco's frustrations—and my own. Sometimes he would come into my chamber bashful, as though he might stick it in and never get it back. But sometimes he was fanatical and he would hit himself, or me, so we would share matching blooms like rose petals. He would rage—impotent except in fury. It was a scene as exhilarating as it was frightening. I bristled when his hand landed hard on the pillow beside me, alive with terror, with awe. Perhaps it was because his rage was the single hint of his sex. Of his passion. He was as lithe as an acrobat, as daring in his strange postures and as unpredictable in landing, but he could never conclude his grand routines. He would turn on me. I was deficient. I was supposed to be so of my sex that he could not help himself. It was supposed to flow from me like milk. I wondered sometimes if he was afraid of me. Afraid that perhaps one day I would become the succubus he seemed to think all women and drain him of his virility—if, indeed, he had any.

Fiorina had wise council. 'Some men,' she began, lowering her head and huddling close so I could feel the warmth of her breath tickle my ear, 'they act with bravado in the streets. But when they come to bed, my dear, they like a woman to be the bold one. They like a woman to act like a man.'

And so I made my hair citrusy and tart with lemon and sunlight. I tweezed my eyebrows so they throbbed. Dabbed myself with perfume. Pushed up my breasts like the women in the Borgo Ormessanti. I came before him like a goddess, like a whore. Tiziano's Magdalene, bare and imploring. But he cast even that aside.

'And if that fails, my sweet,' Fiorina had said, 'there are other things a woman can do.' I remember sitting side by side with Fiorina, the saints all around us in the great towering Duomo. The power of the Virgin had become known to me. We had

prayed together for the souls of our dear departed and the little statue of the Virgin, a porcelain thing given to Luca by our mother, had begun to weep.

‘She is a miracle,’ Fiorina whispered. ‘She is present with us.’ We placed her in the chapel that Papa never used, and there we prayed to her daily. Luca especially seemed drawn to her power. He gave me the little figure on the day before my wedding. He and Fiorina stood together beneath the fresco and wrapped my hands about it. ‘There is magic in her,’ he’d said. He was one who knew of magic. ‘Keep her close and turn to her when you need her. She is imbued with us all, dear Lucrezia, all of us who love you.’

That was the night of my first vision. I never truly had dreams of the convent like Hildegard or Catherine, though I would have been happy with a life devoted to books. And perhaps it was Papa’s influence—all those dreams of the stars—but I sometimes felt a hint of what it might mean to be a mystic. A woman so pure I was hardly corporeal. Diminished from fasting and so devoted to Christ I’d not even bleed. As a child I often felt I was far larger than my body, that I encompassed entire rooms. I could watch myself sleep as though floating and I would awake with strangeness in my chest. A heat that burned from the inside and travelled swiftly under the skin of every limb so I’d never felt so unified. So full of life. Papa told me we can travel in our dreams; that they can reveal to us our inner lives and that which exists beyond us. That was how Mama first appeared to me—she stepped one night out of a dream and into my chamber. But my thoughts were far too sinful for convent life; I hadn’t the will for such holiness. So I never expected my hints at visions to become what they did.

That night the moon rose strong through the window. I placed the Virgin by the fireplace in the corner of my chamber and stoked the fire so it was high, the fixtures in swathes of orange. I knelt before her, bowed my head and then, decade upon

decade, I lost myself in the trance of the rosary. Once finished, I was compelled to begin my own prayer.

‘Beloved Mother, Queen of Heaven, I pray to thee. Let him love me as I love you. Let him come to me as the virgin I am, as the wife that I am, as the mother that I hope to be.’ The flames that danced in the hearth grew taller. The little Virgin grew hot in my hands. ‘I long to be the perfection that you are.’

That night, I dreamt of the Virgin glowing red behind the lids of my eyes. She opened her arms and beckoned me forward. And then, through that strange red glow, something altered. The Virgin was not alone. I saw myself in an orange grove. The graces, dappled in moonlight, swept in around me. They filled that part of me, that aching, empty part of me, with the promise of something. Abstract and intangible, but present, lingering. And then I saw her—the virgin who was no longer the Virgin. Her eyes grew sharp, her pose bold, as though she moved while standing still. I’d never seen a woman look quite like her. Her robes wrapped tight around her, a belt across her waist and mud at the hems. There was a quiver over her shoulder. She came forward, and as I felt the heat of her presence, so close against my lips, she disappeared.

The wind that howled beyond the windowpanes of that stormy night became the sweet songs of the spirits. I dreamt through silks beneath the broad green of an orange grove, but then, a bang. The shutters hit the panes. I woke, startled. The moon was huge and still, just emerging from thick cloud.

In that shaft of moonlight, I saw something shimmer.

I looked again, for I didn’t quite believe the thing that I’d seen. The dead were not strangers to me. In Papa’s palazzo they always watched—eyes in the stucco, in the peeling paint on rotten wood—and observed his star-read predictions. But they’d not followed me here, to this house with its strange attempts at holiness, where God

was kept too close for spirits to penetrate. My chest grew tight, for I did not know this girl, so full of form and light, and yet she was not unknown to me. Pale eyes, curled hair. She clutched a doll. It was her stillness that was unsettling. When the spirits came to me as a child it was in the dark, in the invisible behind my eyelids and the imagined space that I could not see. They did not cast shadows or creak floorboards.

I tried to speak. My body was stiff, but I was surprised by my terror. She was dead, and yet she looked so very alive.

Slowly, I was able to regain a sense of myself. I moved my arms, raised my head. I sat up. The girl regarded me still, unmoving, with that doll clutched in her hands.

'Ciao,' I said quietly.

She smiled and moved beyond the shaft of light and stood beside the door. There she stopped, waited. I followed.

The palazzo seemed a labyrinth. Twisted tunnels thick with ancient brick led to narrower and narrower passages. Portraits of dead Casini glowered from their gilt frames and the busts of marble children became terrifying visions of disembodied forms hovering in the dark. It was eyes I saw everywhere, eyes like the dead of Papa's palazzo. I've always trusted what I've seen. But when dread comes upon you as it did me then, there is no telling what fantasy may strike, indivisible from reality, and which half-glimpsed terrors are real. But I let her lead me, this strange dead girl, through the winding passages of that black palazzo and into the courtyard where even the light from the stars had become obscured by cloud. We wound up the stairs, from one landing to the next, the echo of her little feet like paw prints. We came to a familiar door, solid and thick, but cracked so candle flicker could be seen to dance. With a final look, beckoning, she vanished.

I peered into the crack but there was no sight of her. Instead, there in that suffering light stood Jacopo. I could see what had been hidden in darkness when I'd first stumbled in, instruments such as I had seen in Papa's study—the giant pelican, a rotund vessel for the production of spirit matter; a press, sturdy on thick legs to ground the solid inorganic; the athenor, a furnace, dull with dying embers. Jacopo was bent low studying a manuscript. He turned behind him to the athenor and took the great bellows at its side, heaved and pressed. A hiss of air, the coals glowed red. I could feel the warmth from where I stood, spying, on the landing. The room brightened and he turned back to his desk, took up a fluted vessel, tinged with red from the brazier, and held it up. When he reached for the second instrument—long charcoaled tongs—his eyes passed the crack in the door. I stepped back into shadow, but feared he'd seen. He narrowed his eyes, stuck forward his neck. There was a stillness that passed like a fatality.

'Lucrezia?'

My heart stopped when he said my name. I slunk forward like some admonished child, wrapped my fingers around the doorframe and allowed myself to be seen.

He rested the tongs on the table, quizzical. I expected him to tell me to leave, to be abrupt as he had been when we first spoke. 'Would you like to come in?'

I crept, taking in the curious adornments of the room—an owl, stuffed and turned with head just slanted, as though inquiring, on a pedestal; black stained rafters strung with herbs. Lines of jars and apparatus side by side on shelves draped with tattered fabrics, dead snakes and crocodile teeth wedged between. I knew Jacopo had studied under my father's tutelage, but I underestimated his dedication. He was not a simple scholar, but a practitioner, like Papa.

'It is a late hour to be wandering.'

‘Yes, I ... I was ...’ I halted for I could not think of what to tell him. Surely I could not reveal that I had followed the ghost of a girl. ‘I could not sleep. I decided to walk.’

‘It seems a habit of yours.’ He looked kindly at me. ‘It must be difficult, becoming accustomed to a new place. New people.’

‘Yes,’ I said simply.

He gestured for me to approach. ‘Have you seen your father work?’ he asked, taking up the vessel again, a crucible, I realised, by closer examination.

‘Some, but only simple things. More often he would tell me to watch a log in the hearth burn if I wanted to see alchemical transformation.’

Jacopo laughed. It surprised me. ‘And did you see it?’

I tried to discern if he was humouring me, the way that Papa’s pupils often did.

‘It passes from one state to another. I can see that.’

He snatched at a twig, still green with ebbing life, from a hanging bush at the rafters and held it above the burning coals.

‘Yes. The wood, being made of various quantities of the four elements, passes through each as heat is applied. Drops of water may leak at first, and then smoke—the air—rises.’ He pulled me in to watch the twig transform as though by his very instruction. ‘It catches alight, the fire burns, and finally it turns to ash, the earth.’ He let it break away, bit by blackened bit, until it was specks of grey that drifted into the open mouth of the athenor. I leaned forward to see the final form more closely but he held me back.

‘Careful. We too are of the elements. You will suffer the same fate as that twig.’ He grinned. ‘I’d not like to see such a transmutation.’

His hand, rested softly on my stomach, was hotter than coal. My hand drew instinctively to meet it. I was surprised by the roughness of his skin. His brother was

soft, like a woman, but Jacopo had the hands of a man who did something with them. He pulled away.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

I cleared my throat. ‘It’s all right. I’d hardly like to turn to cinder.’ I smiled up at him and studied the way his eyes held mine. What I had taken for indifference I now suspected was nervousness. There was something in the way his focus kept darting. Was it sinful to look for mirrored longing? To bathe in the flutter of excitement that was stirring to think that he might look upon me as I did him?

There was a creak on the floorboards beyond the crack in the door. We both looked up. A shadow passed. Jacopo craned his neck.

‘Perhaps you should return to bed,’ he said. ‘My brother thinks my studies the Devil’s work. We do not want some bird cawing in his ear about the corruption of his innocent new wife.’

It must have been Ludovico outside the door. I had wondered briefly if it was that little girl returned.

‘You seem so very different, the two of you. How can it be so? My brother and I are far more alike than not. Sometimes I think if I’d been a boy we’d be one and the same.’

‘My father was a very puritanical man. In his youth he fanned the flames of Savonarola’s fires, stripped the streets of their idols. Being raised with such fervour ...’ He shook his head. ‘My brother was not always so concerned with his purity, but of late our father’s influence has taken hold. I however, took a different path,’ he said, widening his hands. ‘I suppose the oppression of such zeal had the opposite effect than my father intended. But I could never reconcile the damage of his obsessions. The terror my mother lived in ...’ His face dropped.

‘Terror? Is Marco’s devotion like your father’s? Is that why he ...’ I pursed my

lips.

‘I don’t wish to alarm you. My father was a violent man. He saw his word as law and expected my mother to submit to him as her lord. Marco is ... He is passionate in his devotion, but he is not violent.’

I still had a bruise on my arm like a rose petal. I held it instinctively. ‘I’m afraid I don’t share his kind of devotion.’

‘But you are a Christian?’

‘Of course.’ I cleared my throat. ‘But I must admit, I share a faith more like your own. I should like to discover more of God through study and practice, not repentance. I believe ...’ I hesitated. I took up the condenser, twisted like a snake, and examined its strange curves.

‘What do you believe?’

‘I believe there is so much more to God than what we’re told. That God is perhaps not what we think of Him.’ I blushed, put down the condenser. ‘I apologise, I sound heretical.’

‘Nonsense. I believe such things too. I am, after all, an alchemist.’ He laughed.

‘Of course. But—oh, it’s difficult to explain.’ I sighed. and looked around me again. It was so much like my Papa’s laboratory, and yet so different. ‘May I come back here?’

He pursed his lips, a half smile. ‘Marco will not like that.’

‘Marco doesn’t have to know.’

1 May 1622

We walked quick for the smell. Disease, rancid and rotting, cow corpses strewn across the fields. We passed Old Herr Walder with two other men hauling a heifer into the back of a wagon already piled high. In the field the herd lay, spread like tumbled rocks, swarmed with flies and maggots. Above our heads the ravens cawed and Old Walder looked up at me with sad eyes. I nodded to him but kept on. It hungered me just to look at all those beasts with their meat still tucked inside their skin. I cast aside the visions of red juice dribbling down my chin, of gnawing on rare beef. I hadn't tasted meat for weeks.

We kept on into the wood with our votive candle for Mamé's soul.

When we were girls, Anna and I had stumbled upon our very first secret. Anna was hiding, so I crept through the forest like a huntress. Eyes sharp, ears pricked. All my senses tingled. A yellow chested finch hopped in the path before me, hinting for me to follow. We sprang through brambles and undergrowth until there she was in the clearing. The bird danced around us excited, as though knowing what she had found. Anna had her hands on something. Something old—a little figurine in clay. She lay in a tumble of stones behind the marker at the ancient crossroads. Beyond the worn tracks, new heretics ravaged our old idols. They tore down Our Lady and replaced her with dry tongues.

We were forbidden by Mamé to cross that line.

Anna wiped down the little figure: a woman, leant forward, one breast bare. Her robes fell across her shoulder so she looked like she was striding. She held something.

'A bow.' Anna had said. A woman with a weapon, we'd never seen anything like her before.

She must remain our secret.

And so we buried her again in that tumble of stones, whispering to each other a pledge to protect her. The finch hopped to the mound, pecked at the dirt and flew away.

The crossroads were timeless. Whenever we approached it was as though we were still those two girls. But the tumble of rocks had changed. We'd built something of a shrine. The woman with the bow still sat beneath the earth, for her secrets whispered too much to risk her to the open world, but above her the tumble had become a clutch, carefully attended to, of figures of women we'd found—or taken—since that day. None were so bare or bold as the huntress. Our Christian women were draped in plaster cloths, modest and regal. The Virgin stood in the centre, flanked on each side by her holy sisters, Mary Magdalene, Saint Anne; a collection of others, swiftly stolen, and resettled. We'd once kept a bed of moss for our knees, but now weeds grew by the stone. We plucked them out, raked the dirt with our fingers. We washed away the years of grime, settled the women in their proper positions. I'd never found God so easily in Cathedral vaults or chapel walls as I had in these sacred woods. Among the birds and the leaf littered ground it was easy to be overcome by the stillness.

As we stood and brushed the litter from our skirts, I caught a hare from the corner of my eye. The second of the week. Could we be so lucky? My belly growled. I had a dagger for cutting brush and I knew how the blade would move through the soft pelt. How the skin would shuck from the meat. The shine of the gristled flesh beneath.

Anna knew what I was thinking, and before that thought was finished, I was chasing. He wasn't too fast, not so fast I couldn't keep up. We wound down the hill, through the stinging slap of conifers, ankle deep in brambles. I felt nothing. Blood

drummed rough and I knew I'd do anything to get that hare. My hollow stomach made me light, feathered, like I was flying. A rare kind of exhilaration. I crashed through thicket and found the hare stopped sudden. He was mud brown with a white mouth, as large nearly as a tomcat, and he looked at me. It was like he was waiting. Quiet, I approached. I grabbed him quick. And before I even sucked in breath I slipped the knife across his throat and watched the blood spurt. I held him up by the ears. His eyes were glassy and black and even though he was dead I knew he was glad I had him. He'd given himself to me.

It was all so quick I hadn't heard the crashing not so far off in the brush, not until the scream. It ripped the sky and all the birds flocked and swooped far off and as I looked up, past the hare's ears and through the birches and firs, I saw the glint of sunlight on metal. I heard the thud and crush of boots and then a yelp again. It was pathetic, moaning and panting, a rushed squeal. Anna crashed through the wood behind me and I held my hand for her to shush. I hooked the hare onto my belt and we crept up by a spruce as large as a house as two figures came into view. A huge man barrelled through trees. He was chasing a girl in a brown dress. As he caught her hair and her cap flew off to reveal the mass of red curls, I knew that it was Ursule he was chasing. He grabbed her and she twisted in his grip, trying to get free, but she was like corn cob and the fabric of her dress tore off like husk. I was still trying to catch my breath and so I held myself tight against the trunk, peering through parted needles.

He pulled her down and her fingers clawed at the ground. But he was so soon on top of her. And I was frozen. I didn't want to look, but neither could I move. It was like some spell was cast across the whole forest. Even the birds had left. The acorns had stopped falling to the ground. There was just Ursule and this mountain of a man.

She cried and scratched the earth, fingers snatching desperately. That blind hand found a rock, jagged, rough. As the soldier heaved and moaned, back arching, shuddering, she struck. He crashed to the ground beside her, twitching, as blood gushed from the side of his shaven head. Eyes wild, she turned. And saw us. Saw me.

I wanted to move. Couldn't. Not until Anna pulled me forward.

Ursule curled up sobbing, face in leaf-cloud, arms wrapped around her naked waist. Blood smeared the insides of her legs. The mountain had stopped his jittering. Limbs sprawled, heavy and firm. Deep red soaked the earth around his head. Anna removed her cloak and wrapped it over Ursule's shoulders. We pulled her from the dirt. She wiped her eyes and looked down at that huge man. Her words lodged like blades. Dig, she urged, and so we did. Silent and shaken. Night had fallen, the half-moon hidden in cloud, and we moved through the forest like ghosts. To the cottage, the wood pile with the axe and pick, and back through the haunting night to the place beyond the crossroad. We worked without words. We buried the soldier under the soft spring earth, covering the spot with bracken and branches. We didn't mark the ground or offer a word for his immortal soul, but as she packed the last fistful of dirt, grinding it down with her heel, she whispered, 'To hell.'

That was the night I first dreamt of the hole, like a well, deep in the earth. Three times it came to me. Three times I woke shivering. A raven circled above, cawing. A single black dot against the small circle of white blue sky.

November, 1882

I arrived at the house in Camden with apprehension. It was a tiny box of a place, just off the High Street. Mrs Griffin let me in and hurried me up the stairs. She was a jolly woman, flushed, and often stumbling into things. Mr Hawkins, the medium, had a rakish charm and he was handsome enough to get away with it: bearded, spectacled, with a broad American accent. He kissed my hand when he led me into the room. A golden watch chain glinted from the pocket of his damask vest.

Mrs Griffin's daughter Charlotte was already waiting inside. The protégée. She was a waif of a girl. The hollows of her collarbone protruded from the top of her dress and her lips were cracked. Nevertheless, John's gaze lingered until Susannah elbowed him in the ribs. Mr Hawkins introduced us to the other sitters: Miss Harris, a suffragist, and Mr Green, her lover. The kind of people some may term radicals and free-thinkers, they lived in rooms beside one another in Kentish Town. It was quite well known they never intended to marry.

'Please, please, sit down, friends,' Mr Hawkins said, gesturing to the seats around a table in the middle of the room. In the corner was a wooden cabinet, closed on three sides with a curtain pulled across the front.

'What is that?' I asked Susannah as we took our places.

'The spirit cabinet. It intensifies the medium's energy.'

'How so?'

She did not have a chance to answer. Mr Hawkins rapped his knuckles on the table. 'No, friends, that was not the spirits.' He chuckled. 'But, shall we get about the business of bringing them about tonight?' His teeth shone white. We each placed our hands on the table top. Miss Charlotte sat beside him. She was pale and drawn, hair lank over her shoulders. Her eyelids fluttered shut.

She sat still for some moments and her breath grew long. ‘There is a spirit here. I can feel him beside me.’

Mr Hawkins looked at Miss Charlotte. She hung her head back and he seemed satisfied as she twitched.

‘If we have any luck today, we may see the spirit come upon Miss Charlotte. He may overtake her body, speak through her mouth. We call this channelling.’ He cast his eyes across us like magicians do. A hush settled. I caught Susannah’s eye. She looked as excited as a schoolboy, as did John beside her. He winked at me.

‘Let us all focus our energy on Miss Charlotte, to aid in their connection. He is very close.’

It felt strange, the idea of concentrating energy. What did it mean? Even still, I closed my eyes and thought about the man Mr Hawkins said was in the room. It was easy to become lost in the darkness, in the silence and stillness. There was hardly a sound of breath. And then, as my mind began to clear, I sensed the form of a man. It caught me quite off guard, that tingle on the back of my neck, the itch on my scalp. It seemed so obvious that there was a man beside me. My pulse grew rapid as I felt him loom. I became claustrophobic, as though engulfed in thick blankets. Then there came a whisper, dim and far away. I grew heavy. I could no longer feel the pressure of my hands against the table. I was weightless and I was dense in equal measure. The whisper began to form into something like language. An unknowable tongue. The table jolted then dropped with a bang. There was a collective gasp. The words became urgent. They fought, struggling from somewhere inside me. As I felt a most tremendous purging, my mouth began to take their form.

‘Mona,’ I gasped. ‘Mona ... my dear Mona.’ I felt my head twist but it was not I who shook it. ‘I never left.’ My eyelids fluttered under my closed lids and my heartbeat trebled. The words came from the top of my mouth so they were airy, fine,

and hardly spoken. ‘Mona, I waited ... I waited ... by the black post. Marylebone.’ As my mouth stretched into a smile I felt overcome by the most profound sense of bliss. My hand crawled across the table and took another in its grasp. ‘The locket, Mona. Lily-of-the-Valley.’ I rocked. ‘I waited. Know that I waited.’

The exquisite peace shifted. It slowly detached itself and I felt my body return to me. I could not open my eyes for some moments. My legs trembled. I grew cold. Finally, control of my body returned. The sitters were drop-jawed. Mrs Griffin, whose hand I still held, was ghost white and sobbing. Her grip grew desperately tight.

‘Remarkable,’ said John.

It was difficult to compose myself.

‘Would somebody please fetch her some water? And some for Mrs Griffin,’ Miss Emmett said, standing, her hands on each of my shoulders.

‘Are you quite all right now, my dear?’

Mr Hawkins placed a glass of water before me.

‘I am, yes.’ As I spoke some shadow of that bliss returned. I was myself as I had been some twenty years before. A girl, alone, wind streaking her hair, dirty yellow and knotted, so she could hardly see the thing that awed her. The ocean, huge and vast and crashing. So overcome, she runs. She gasps, sweet and salty, the timbre of lapping waves on stony shore. She dives, mute and numb to everything but the suck and pull of water at her feet.

‘Mrs Griffin ...’ I felt so full I could burst.

Mrs Griffin reached under her collar, withdrew a silver locket and sat it before me. Etched into the back was a flower. Lily-of-the-Valley.

‘Open it,’ she instructed.

Inside was a lock of curled, golden hair. When I held it I felt the most tremendous love. I laughed.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

Miss Charlotte, at the opposite side of the table, pulled at the loose threads of her sleeves. Mr Hawkins, beside her, looked at me sideways. He drummed his fingers.

‘That was quite a remarkable show, Mrs Blount. Have you ever conducted a séance before? Privately, at home?’

‘No, no, not one. Not until I met you all.’ I grinned like a fool.

He leant back. ‘Hmm,’ he murmured. ‘It’s quite a talent you seem to have.’

‘Yes, you rascal, who thought you had it in you!’ John interrupted. He had a bottle in hand. ‘It’s been a short but rather exciting séance. Would anybody else care for a tippie?’

It did not take long after drinks were served for the idea of a second attempt at communication to be abandoned. Instead, Mr Green produced a fiddle. Miss Harris sat close, her hand ran up and down his leg and he stopped frequently to kiss her. We drank three bottles of wine and then a bottle of scotch emerged. John flitted merrily between the young women, Miss Harris and Miss Griffin, touching liberally at their rouged cheeks. Pairs broke off to dance, and Mr Green didn’t seem to mind at all the way John flirted so outrageously with Miss Harris. I watched, but did not quite share their merriment. I sat instead quietly by a chaise at the window, that peculiar radiance still inside me. Outside the lamplight streaked the wet sidewalk. Passing carriages spurted ripples of yellow. But my illumination was straining, for it revealed so much that had remained hidden. How could two such contrasting emotions exist within me? Such fullness, and yet such emptiness. What happened to the girl who threw herself into the ocean? Her father told her to watch herself. To be careful of the crashing waves, for she’d be lost to them. Born to the deep, drawn into the swell, and

washed, washed away. I'd lived my life in shadows. The city was lustreless. A machine. Inorganic. A swollen beating drum, thousands of tiny cogs all clicking and turning. Edward was such a cog—commander of the cogs. He'd suck up the ocean for the oil to turn his wheels.

'It's beautiful, isn't it? These rainy evenings.' Miss Emmett said, sitting beside me. She sipped from her glass and offered it to me.

I shook my head. 'I hate the rain.'

'How can you look out there and tell me there's no beauty in it?' She smiled as she spoke, and wistfully her eyes glanced across the London skyline, a chorus of chimney stacks and slanted rooftops. But I struggled to see it. Those stacks were the barriers to something that must surely lie beyond. It was oppressive.

'I don't think I'm suited to the city.'

'Perhaps. Or perhaps you've yet to experience all its wonder.' She was so warm when she looked at me. She was a marvel.

'You shall have to show me.'

'I will.' Her eyebrow arched so she looked sly. She could easily have been mistaken for being coy. She was like a boy.

'Suzie, dear,' John staggered over, his arm around Mr Hawkins' shoulder.

'Arthur wants a dance.'

Susannah smiled and stood as Mr Hawkins took her hand. She squealed as he lifted her and twirled her into the middle of the room.

John dug his elbow into my ribs. 'Won't you have another drink?' He pushed the glass before me. He raised his own. 'Here's to you, medium extraordinaire!'

I giggled.

'Just throw it back, darling,' he said.

'Throw it back?'

When he laughed he looked remarkably like his sister. He placed his finger under the bottom of the glass and tipped it up. It was hot and sticky.

‘You missed some.’ He ran his finger along the side of my mouth then licked his finger. He was cheeky, his touch a mark of playfulness, but it was more. I reached out and took his finger like a child would. He returned my smile and kissed my hand.

‘John’s corrupting you, I see,’ Mr Green said. He and Miss Harris had appeared beside us. ‘Watch that one, he’s a devil.’

‘Come now,’ John said. ‘We both know there’s no such thing.’

Mr Green took out a box and produced a cigar. It dragged at the edge of his mouth. John leaned forward and Mr Green placed another intimately between his lips and then offered one to me. Miss Harris nudged him. ‘Come now, Charlie.’ She turned to me. ‘He’s just teasing you.’ She held out her hand, a little silver case with crisp white cigarettes all in a row. She took one. ‘Go on,’ she said, ‘all the ladies at the theatre do it.’

How had I found myself among such people, in such a place? I took the cigarette, but I didn’t light it. It may have been the drink, or the exhilaration of the séance, but I was overcome by a sudden defiance of my former self. How had I let that fragile, weak-willed woman become me?

Susannah and Arthur twirled to the music of our dull chatter and Mrs Griffin sat, hands clasped in her lap, kicking beneath her. Her daughter slunk against the corners of the room; she seemed unwilling, or unable, perhaps, to participate. I wondered what it was about her that was so striking, and yet so terribly miserable.

‘Mrs Griffin’s daughter, why is she so ...’ I struggled to express what it was that struck me so.

‘Fragile creature isn’t she? Looks like a breeze will knock her down,’ said Miss Harris.

‘Less than a breeze,’ John responded.

‘She’s a gifted medium, very gifted. She manifests, you know, physically.’

‘She what?’

‘She produces physical manifestations. That’s why she’s so frail. Takes an awful lot out of a person to do that. She’ll be the next Florence Cook, you watch.’

‘What do you mean she physically manifests? Spirits?’

‘Oh yes. She—oh how do you explain it, John? You’re much better at this.’

‘She sits in that cabinet over there, tied to a chair—to ensure the integrity of the endeavour, you understand—and goes into a deep trance. This creates the energy that allows the spirit to physically manifest. She’s a little girl; walks around this very room. I’ve touched her!’ John’s face lit up. ‘We all have.’

‘A little girl? A spirit?’

‘Yes, darling, that’s what I said.’

‘My goodness.’ To think, that young woman, slinking like a cat against the wall, was capable of bringing the spirit of a girl into being. Astonishing. Conversation grew dull in my ears as I found myself staring at her. I began to approach as though under my own trance. If she could manifest one young girl, then why not another? But she slunk further away, towards her mother who was upending a bottle into her mouth.

‘Mrs Blount, I know what you’re thinking.’ I was pulled into Susannah’s arms and I found myself as Mr Hawkins’ replacement.

‘Pardon? I was only going to ask the girl—’

‘I know,’ she interrupted. ‘But I must caution you against it. You’re not ready.’

‘Really, Miss Emmett, I don’t know what you’re thinking—’

She spun me further away from the smoke clouds swarming from the trio in the corner.

‘I’m not surprised, nor do I blame you at all for wanting to pursue something like physical manifestation. But it is ... it can be ... I’ve seen people become very obsessive. It can take over, Mrs Blount. It is so tempting to want to reach out and touch with our own hands what we have lost. You will become lost in its pursuit. But you have a talent, and that I cannot deny.’ She sighed. ‘I know it is not just me who senses this. I know that you feel the spiritual energy around us, around you. I sensed it the moment you walked into my drawing room at Mr Hawkins’ séance. I felt it again when that table danced above our heads.’

My cheeks began to burn.

‘Even dear John, as oblivious as he is, remarked on how fascinating he found you to be. That he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was exactly that made you seem so special. You have been noticing things since your daughter’s death, have you not? Before that probably, all your life.’

I remained quiet.

‘Tell me the real reason why you came to Mr Hawkins’ séance. It wasn’t simply to find an answer for your grief. You were drawn there because you need to know what is happening to you.’

Miss Emmett stepped closer, the rhythm of our dance lost. The fullness of crinoline pushed against my legs.

‘Miss Emmett—’

She placed her finger over my lips. ‘Please,’ she said, ‘Susannah.’

‘Susannah.’ I rounded each syllable of the name in my mouth, testing its fullness. It came out in a fine wisp of air, like a ribbon on the breeze. ‘Susannah,’ I repeated. ‘I just don’t know. I want to know. Desperately, I do.’ I stopped.

Susannah’s fingers softly lifted my chin.

‘Emma.’

I loved the way my name sounded as it is issued from her lips.

‘I’m here to help you.’

February 1883

‘I believed it madness,’ Emma says. She tours with the doctor among the grounds. The sun is high and casts the oaks’ speckled shade wide upon the grass. She could be rambling across the Heath. She adjusts her hat. The Hall is grand and imposing, the seat of an ancient family since ruined. Off-white and sharp, hard, rectangular walls. Emma looks to the hills in the distance. A great wall separates them from her, but they comfort her still. Woodlands sweep from the base of the hill. She imagines herself as a spirit roaming freely through that forest.

‘Did Miss Charlotte really manifest a spirit?’ Barrett asks. He drags on his cigarette.

‘Come now, Doctor, we’ve not yet arrived at that part of the story. May I?’ He looks surprised but offers it to her. She pinches and inhales. She moans, wistful. ‘I miss this.’

‘You can have cigarettes sent to your room.’

‘No, Doctor, this.’ She spreads her arms wide. ‘Strolling, talking. One could be mistaken for thinking we were courting.’

‘I would be so lucky, Mrs Blount.’

A small group of women sketch on the lip of a small hill. The aspect looks down over the wall to the ponds. She stops to watch.

‘Some days I think it is not so bad,’ she says, finally. ‘That perhaps this was what I needed after all. Proper rest, to be away from the city ...’

‘Away from Mr Blount?’

She turns and smiles curtly. ‘Yes.’

He pauses and rests his arm in the crook of her elbow. ‘You seem to be doing much better. I’m very encouraged by your rate of recovery.’

‘It is your influence Doctor. I never feel so sane as when we talk. If only all who work here were so interested in listening.’

‘I understand, though I do think there is more to it than that.’ They continue to where the corner of the house meets manicured rows of rose bushes. They sit on a bench, both cross their legs. A bird settles by their feet and pecks at crumbs.

Doctor Barrett extinguishes his cigarette and tramples it under his shoe. Emma runs her eye along the back of the house, so markedly foreign amongst the trees and grass. Gissing stands in the final point of the cornered shadow at the opposite end of the building. He turns to them and tilts his head, inquisitively. She stiffens and looks away.

‘I’m not sure that I should tell you this in my professional capacity, but I think I understand now something that you said to me in our first meeting. About finding something familiar. Something half-remembered.’

‘Yes.’

He looks to where Gissing stands and runs his hand over his mouth. ‘You see—and this remains within the strictest confidence—I am beset by the strangest dreams.’

‘How do you mean, Doctor?’

He turns to her and frowns. He runs his hands across his legs. ‘Last night I dreamt of a tower. I dreamt of a strappado, and I dreamt of a scream.’

Emma is startled, for she has had the dream herself.

‘The mind is far more a marvellous thing than we think. It is capable of revealing to us so much that is hidden.’

‘Yes,’ she says, and for the first time in a long time she feels a little burst of something almost like excitement bloom in her chest. ‘I understand you perfectly.’

February, 1623

Mathilde cracks when she drops. The shoulders pop from the joints and the skin on her ankles tears with the force that pulls her down.

‘Were you baptised in the Devil’s unholy name?’

Mathilde cannot speak. Her lips crack. They flake like snow when she moves her mouth to speak. The sound comes out as a ghastly, ‘No.’

The bailiff nods to the watchman, the fat one, who can hardly bear to watch. The watchman turns the wheel. Mathilde is lifted. Her head hangs limp. Her hair is strung in oiled clumps, shadowing her face. It itches. Lice crawl in that nested home.

‘Were you baptised in the Devil’s unholy name?’ he asks again.

Mathilde does not answer. The weight at her ankles takes more skin. She is raw now. Bleeding.

The bailiff nods.

Mathilde drops.

She screams.

Anna had her palms open on the table, eyes squinting in candlelight at Mamé's book.

'I can't find anything.' She wiped her eyes. 'I don't even know what to look for.' The cover thudded. I sat beside her and she rested her head on my shoulder.

'I've been dreaming again.' Her voice was soft and faraway. She sighed. 'Did you see anything today? Hear anything in town?'

'No.'

I felt hollow as the earth. I could still see that great rutting beast, twitching like a beetle beside Ursule on the ground.

Matti arrived with a clatter, as he always did. His face dropped when he saw us. 'What's wrong? You both look like someone died.'

Anna and I shared a look. She burst into tears.

'Oh Annie, I'm sorry.' He brushed the hair from her face. It was tender.

'Are you thinking of Mamé?'

We let him believe it was the case. I wasn't ready to tell him what we'd seen. What we'd done. 'It will take some time,' he said. He took one of each of our hands and kissed them. Matti was an extraordinary creature, uncorrupted by the world. But his purity was of the earth. He was a child, an innocent, and I couldn't think how we'd been so blessed to have him.

His stomach growled. He was skeleton thin, though we all were. He pushed at his belly and frowned. 'Don't you know, dear stomach, that we haven't the food to fill you?'

I remembered, suddenly, the hare. I'd forgotten it in the horror that followed the hunt. I scrambled for last night's satchel and pulled it out by the ears.

Matti gasped. ‘Mathilde, where did you get that? Let’s get him in the pot! There are chives behind the house; I was going to let them go a little longer, but I’ll harvest some now.’ Matti stood quickly and ran to the door.

‘I can hardly bear the thought of food,’ said Anna.

I thought I should share Anna’s unease, but I did not.

‘What if he’s found, Mathilde? What if a dog digs him up or someone else is hunting and comes across his body, buried not so deeply, after all. Oh God, Mathilde, I can hardly even remember how we did it. Was he sufficiently covered? Will he draw animals or men? And what of Ursule? We should bring her a tincture, you know that as well as I.’

I laid the hare on the table. ‘Anna, he was a soldier. Soldiers die every day. There is a war not far from here, remember? Bandits murder men on byways for far less. At least he was killed for a reason.’ I began to whet the blade.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I just don’t think I shall ever forget it.’

‘He deserved it. And more.’ I drew the knife to the hare’s paw, still soft in velvet fur, and sliced it from the leg.

‘There was something about the way he shuddered, though. Demonic, wasn’t it?’

I looked at her. ‘Now you’ve seen what we see each time we have to watch you fit.’ I made a cut and in one swift movement I pulled the skin from the red, raw flesh. ‘And so you will eat today. You will eat this hare.’

‘Mathilde, I...’ She reached her hand to her lip. She touched the split. She didn’t seem to know that she did it.

‘You will. Look at you. If you don’t keep your strength up, Anna ...’ She was wasting before us, and it wasn’t the famine’s doing. ‘These *notions* you have of

starving yourself to visions.’ I said sternly, pointing the knife. ‘You’re hardly Saint Catherine.’

There was more hurt in her eyes than I expected. I turned back to the table, the knife, the wooden board.

‘I know you see things too,’ Anna said quietly. ‘I know you’ve always been adept at Mamé’s ways. But there is something else. I wish I could explain it. I wish you could feel it as I do.’

‘And how do you know that I don’t?’ I wiped the blood from the blade and made the first incision. I pared the legs, following the contour of bone and sinew, so the meat came off in slivers.

‘Mathilde, I do not suggest that I know more than you...’

‘But?’

She sighed. ‘When I have my fits, I experience, just for a moment, what it means to exist beyond *this*.’ She looked down at herself.

I removed the eyes, the ears. I set the brain aside and placed the kidneys and heart beside. I chopped the meat into morsels and drew water into the pot on the hearth.

‘As much as I may wish to know what it was to leave this so *imperfect* skin, I must live in it, as must you.’ I rested my hands on the table and stared down at the cracked wood. The patterns in the grain branched in deep fissures. ‘Anna, I know it is harder for you than it is for me. You’ve always seemed to find life so unsatisfying. But it is the life that we have.’ I looked at her. She had curled into herself, leaning back with her knees in her chest. ‘And if you go, Anna. If you give up on it, I couldn’t—’

Matti burst through the door, bearing handfuls of green.

‘Chives,’ he said. ‘Parsley. Shallots, too. I had to dig about a bit for those. Have we any carrots left?’

I glanced at Anna who seemed, at least for a moment, to have considered me seriously, and took up the knife again. There was tension we could not dissipate. I had always felt Anna and I were supposed to be one person. That whatever split us into two physically identical creatures had split something else; two halves balanced only by the other, remaining always apart. She was frustrating, elusive. I loved her like I loved no other in the world.

September 1542

That strange girl did not appear to me again for some time, though I longed for her. But the Virgin did. That night and many others. I saw a vision of her in blue, her hair that I knew to be long in ringlets was tucked behind her veil. All around her, in an orgy of colour, grew flowers. They bloomed from her headdress, her mantle, and the dark by her feet. And at the centre of her head, reflecting all her colour and glory, a little silver disk.

Her appearances corresponded to my visits to Jacopo's laboratory—secret visits, hushed and whispered. Marsilia seemed to catch on, but I trusted her not to tell. We had grown closer, as maids and mistresses do, and I valued her confidence.

'You think he's handsome?' she asked one night, brushing my hair.

I blushed. 'His looks do not concern me, only his mind.'

She tugged, teasing. 'Only his mind?'

I didn't tell her that he was like fever; that I trembled near him. Nor did I tell her of the way he surprised me constantly with questions. I didn't know that having an opinion could make me feel so singular until he asked me mine.

'You said you believed things you couldn't explain.' When he spoke it was with his entire being, luring each word. I hardly realised he was doing it. So I told him about my visions, the Virgin in blue, her forehead like the moon, and the way she always transformed into that huntress. He thumped his hands on the desk.

'You must let me write what you see. Every detail.' He hurried for parchment. 'I knew I could not proceed alone.' He threw a tattered cushion onto an old chair and led me to sit. 'True divinity speaks to us from within Lucrezia—but you know that.' He fumbled in his excitement. 'And she speaks to you from within.'

My heart began to thump.

‘She?’

‘Yes. She cannot speak to me because I haven’t learned to hear her. But she is innate in you. There can be no Great Work without this union.’ He knelt before me. ‘Teach me of her, Lucrezia, and together we can learn to be divine.’

But Marsilia had other questions too—questions that pressed too much on my own mind. Questions of Marco.

‘Has he always been so secretive?’

She hesitated before responding. ‘He is unconventional, but he is a good man. He wants only what is best.’

He was becoming increasingly distant and disturbed. He hardly seemed able to look at me. A porter had arrived that morning with a box. A dress, lavish with gold brocade, long and red in silk. I wore it to dinner, but Marco had only shaken his head.

‘I want this to be a Godly home, Lucrezia.’

‘Of course.’

‘My dear, that is a harlot’s dress.’

‘My father sent me this dress.’

He turned his head to hide the flicker of a frown. ‘Your father is not a man of God.’ He licked his lips. Looked to the archway. A group of men, clad in black, appeared there. Ludovico waited beside them, hands tucked behind his back. It was the first time I saw those men, yet I knew they were the herald of something dreadful. They carried an aura of darkness so the room seemed to close in around them. I shrank into my chair under their gaze. *That* gaze. Eyes on flesh. My harlot flesh.

‘Lucrezia, I know I have been aloof, and I am sorry, but it is for the salvation of this family.’ He reached across the table and clasped my hands. ‘We are to save one

another, Lucrezia, for we are both sinners. I shall wrest from you that taint of devil, show to you the true light of the Lord. And so I hope your purity shall save me.'

He wiped his mouth, stood. 'I have business. I shall see you in the chapel this evening.'

My skin had crawled as though swarming with insects. Dirty things, creeping.

When Marsilia had finished dressing me, I went to his chamber. I found him wretched, huddled and mumbling on his knees, hands clasped before the cross on his bedside. He smelled like street boys in August, a butcher stench of slops and waste.

'Lucrezia, please.' He held me back. 'Can you not see that I am *praying*?'

'You've prayed enough. Come to bed.' I tried to placate him. 'We both want our union to be sanctioned in the eyes of God, but Marco, it is not. Do you not want a family as I do? Is that not God's will for us?'

He grabbed my wrist. 'Can you not control your lust for a single night?'

His words were like lashes.

'How can you say that? That isn't what ...'

He took a breath and turned back to the altar. 'Leave.'

'We've been married a month, Marco, and I do not know you at all.'

'No,' he said, 'you do not.'

'Won't you talk to me?' I reached to him and he bristled. 'I cannot be a wife to a man who does not want one.'

He kept his eyes forward and so after a time I stood and left him there on his knees. As I walked down the hall, faster and faster to beat the approach of tears, I heard a sound. A lash and crack that echoed along the closed stone walls, a pure, dry rasp and a still silence that settled in my bones like winter.

In my room, I threw open the shutters. The moon hung between towers. Free from the eyes of the saints, the holy chapel walls, I removed the heavy layers of my

dress. I pulled my hair from its lace and let it fall soft on my breasts. In the mirror in the corner of the room I saw my nakedness reflected. I walked towards it, enamoured by myself. I traced the skin beneath my breasts, examined the wrinkles that rose as the flesh tightened. I reached for the little lump of my belly. I squeezed it, pushed. I sucked in and my body changed into something boyish. Shadows defined the cut of my ribs, the triangle tipped at my navel. I turned to the side and let out air, arched my back and placed a hand on the mound that formed. I tilted my head. It's only a matter of time, I hoped, and that belly would take on a new form, pushing itself outward into the world.

I threw myself back into the bed. It is a cruel torture, I thought, that this desire, so pure and eager, a desire that fed into the giving of life, should be so exquisite and yet so painful. That it could manifest itself in creation, in life and goodness, but so could it be sinful. I raised myself up, straining against the bedding. My body loomed at me, my breasts plunged, my navel stretched flat, and there it was, the forest of black. I trembled and the quiver clenched the muscles of my legs, sending a shiver up in to the dark secret place. I gasped. My toes crawled and my legs fell apart. My feet flexed, lifting me higher. My fingers danced on my taut skin, reaching lower. I was exhilarated by the miracle of myself. I became detached; lifted from my own heaviness, and as my fingers extracted the most exquisite pleasure I thought of him, the alchemist, and erupted.

Drums pound in the distance. A slow rhythmic beat. Laughter, whistling, yelling. The Carnival festivities begin. They will march the streets and feast on food and wine, filling themselves with forty days of vice. She had been so looking forward to it. If anyone could hear her cry above that din, would they stop? What would differentiate her grief from their revelry? She slumps and tries not to let the thought that nobody is coming overwhelm her.

She knows she failed to love him the way that he needed to be loved, but she never thought him capable of this. It is madness. It may not be so bad if she were not trapped in here with her. She puts down the book, the pen. Stands and walks with leper steps towards the bathtub. Her stomach clenches and she crumples. The dead thing in the bathtub looks at her—ribbons in her hair—blue ribbons, a clean crisp dress. Lucrezia blinks. The bundle is hardly human, hardly formed, but the dead girl appears and presses her fingers against her own tight lids.

I forgive you, and I will always forgive you.

Lucrezia is startled. The girl is gone.

The smell grows pungent. The moon is rising now. She settles against the stone.

The ink is dry and not even a drop from the basin under the window will wet it. She looks down at her stained legs. She considers the blood coming more infrequently now, trickling between them. She runs the nib up along her smooth wet thigh. She places the pen to the paper. She begins to write again.

Jacopo smelled of the earth. Of pine and dirt, wood smoke, the crush of grass. Scents of my childhood, the countryside; the villa where my grandfather lived. Oakey, rich and grounded. It was the forest smell of beginnings, when the world was voluptuous and charged with its own creation. I came to him as of that same creation. My hunger was primal. His fingers, hard, gripped my arms. His soft lips and each little hair that grazed my skin made me aware of their singular presence. It was a bestial pleasure that first came to us. We touched with all parts of ourselves save one. A dance of hands and lips. But he restrained himself. He laughed and told me he was a snake only beginning to coil. I felt the same way—all of that frustration, the energy constantly withheld from Marco, sat ready in the base of my spine. And it was beginning to flow outwards from me, upwards.

He cupped my chin and held my eyes. My legs straddled his. ‘I never thought you’d come to me,’ he said. His mouth stretched to a liquid smile so it seemed to mirror my own.

‘But I’ve dreamt of this.’ His lips were wet on my shoulder. I was consumed by great relief: to see myself reflected in another. I surrendered to it and my laughter cast off the shackles of guilt so they sank as into the sea. I only wanted to be held by him.

We came together finally. As smoke rising from any fire can blend into the air around it, we dissolved into each other. We became limbs that formed one creature, a singular and limitless body—equal parts he and she, an amorphous geometry of sexless flesh; but so were we simultaneously both. We were each other and we were one. As that energy rose up through my spine, my neck, my head, I transcended so I

was no longer of any flesh. I was immaterial and I understood with perfect clarity what it meant to be divine.

If only I could have felt that always.

I awoke restless from a dream of Sophie. I pulled back the covers and paced the room. There was a sensation in my arm, in the back of my mind. A need to write. I eased the chair from my writing desk, set down the taper and withdrew paper. I dipped the nib into ink and waited. I was unsure how, but I knew such things were possible. If I let it, a spirit may guide the strokes of my hand. In the dark it was easy to find calm. I let my hand loop circles as if in the movement a message may appear. I heard Edward in my mind, the tone that always made me cower. Ghosts and ghouls belonged in the pages of Gothic romance, not in the parlours and bedrooms of ladies. I looked at the bed, covers rumpled, and considered climbing in once again. Give in. A small dram. Uninterrupted bliss. But I did not. I dipped the nib, shut my eyes. My ears were alert to the sounds of the night. Wind in the trees. A scuttle on the pavement. The temperature dropped and a chill ran down my neck. I peered through the black haze of my eyelashes; the candlelight flickered, then stopped. I felt heavy, vague. I was shocked when I opened my eyes.

Hello, Mamma, she had written. You're doing ever so well.

The following morning I was with Edward in the High Street. We were to place an advertisement for an additional maid. Edward was expecting to be made partner and thought the role called for larger staff. He was pleased I was well enough to walk with him and he stopped constantly to nod at our neighbours, the shop girls and ad men. We passed a rose bush on the corner, a single bud still in bloom. He plucked the stem and placed it in my hands. Though I smiled and held his arm closer, it felt an empty gesture. I twirled it and watched the petals fall.

‘Edward, ho!’

I looked up. Gissing was approaching from across the street. ‘Emma.’ He nodded courteously then turned as though I wasn’t there. It was something to which I was accustomed. I assumed he resented the woman who had taken his dearest friend. They had been students together, a pair of dandies. When Edward’s star was on the rise, his keen eye for markets being well observed, he had met me, daughter of an influential broker. Perhaps he fell in love with the opportunities such connections may lend. Though, his countenance on our long walks together in Kensington, chaperoned by my father, suggested it was love he felt, or something like it.

There were holes in the rose’s outer layer, as though a worm had fed there. I liked the petal’s downy texture. It were real. Tangible. I could smell the sweet perfume, hear subtle friction brushing together. I pulled one from the bud and watched it float to the ground. How could it be more real than anything else? Edward would see the rose. He could confirm its texture, the rate at which the petals fell. But its perfume may not be sweet, the colour not pink. We could argue those senses. I became overwhelmed by this idea. That it could exist because I understood that it existed. And what did that say of Sophie’s scribbles the night before? I smelt the rose again.

‘It’s all coming together quite well, isn’t it, Emma?’ Edward turned to me and, startled, I looked up. I’d not heard a thing.

‘Hmm?’

Edward flushed. I tried to recover myself. ‘Yes, of course.’

He scowled.

‘Are you sure your nerves are quite ready for such a thing, Emma?’ Gissing asked.

I coughed, stalling. ‘I do hope so.’ I could only assume Edward had been prattling about entertaining. He was planning a Christmas party to impress in his new

position. I'd just finished the invitations under his cheerful guidance that morning. I thought it ambitious of him to expect to be welcomed warmly into the upper realms. We were new money—a taint difficult to expunge.

‘I have heard you’ve returned to society and I must commend you. Though ...’ Gissing turned to Edward. He made a performance of it, as though he were only just thinking the words that he was about to speak, that he’d not been simmering over them, waiting for the perfect moment. ‘I’ve heard some frankly concerning things, Edward. I’m not sure that in my role as a physician I can approve of the kinds of activities your wife is involved in.’

‘Activities?’ Edward turned to me.

‘I’ve told you, Edward, I’ve found a supportive circle of friends.’

Edward shifted.

Gissing shook his head. ‘I can hardly think you would approve of your wife attending a *spiritualist* circle. All this nonsense of séances and spirits. It’s ghoulish. They take advantage of poor bereaved women and play them for fools. Charlatans, the lot of them.’

My cheeks flushed.

‘Emma, you told me you knew no one there. That your attendance at these charades was to be discreet.’

I could have throttled Gissing right there in the street. It was a deliberate attempt to embarrass me.

‘They are not charlatans. They have been nothing but supportive. Indeed I would not be here with you if it were not for them.’

Edward narrowed his eyes. I do not think he knew how to respond. He merely sucked in his breath so that his chest swelled.

‘Let’s talk of this at home, shall we?’ Restraint would be his response. I was glad. ‘Gissing, it has been a pleasure, as ever. Forgive us; we really must be getting on.’

Gissing nodded. ‘If I can be of any service,’ he bowed. As we walked away, I turned back to see him watching still. I shuddered.

‘He is a horrid man.’

‘Nonsense. He is my dearest friend and thinks of you as a sister. Frankly, Emma, what he said concerns me and so does this attitude of yours. Suspicion does not become you.’

Was it truly out of turn to express such misgivings? It stirred frustration. I could not make my mouth speak the words I sought. I could not protest or stop or act. I could merely step in turn with Edward and let his words pacify me as they always had—I did not know how to do anything more. And even as he looked at me the way one scolds a dog, and his face turned to tenderness, I could not shake it.

‘Come, let’s not let this ruin our day,’ he said.

We returned home through the Heath, that pretended wilderness I loved so much. We stopped to watch a cluster of birds shoot from hedgerows, casting shadows upon the still waters of the ponds, but I knew we were trying to recapture something that was growing as dull as autumn light. When I looked at him I suddenly saw him not as my husband. I did not recognise this man as my companion, my partner, my lover. He was husband in name only. I turned and looked across the pond. The light was growing faint, and small ducklings waded from the shallows. Edward placed his hand at the small of my back.

‘We should get you home. Perhaps today has been too overwhelming after all.’

We no longer slept in the same bed. It was an empty space, lonely. We had not known one another as husband and wife since before Sophie died. That night, as always, I was restless and alone. I decided to walk. I watched through the keyhole of Edward's study as he paced. He took the little rocks from his shelf—crinoids, ammonites, trilobites—and dusted them carefully. He considered each at arm's length, rubbed them lightly, and put them back just so. Watching him, I knew what he thought of everything; that Sophie was nothing more than the bones he held in his hand. That her body will crumble and decay. And that is all she will ever be.

Perhaps he is right.

If he saw the candle light he did not stir. He had turned to examine a board stuck with butterflies, taking notes on a little pad. I could hear the pen scratch, the tink of the magnifying glass as he set it upon the desk. He wiped his brow. I'd like to think that he saw the white of my dress from the corner of his eye and puzzled at the apparition. He'd never see anything supernatural in it. It was strangely peaceful to watch him in a secret moment of his own world. How could a man be so of the earth and yet so apart from it? He did not always seem so foreign to me. I'd been excited once by the idea of him. Before we married I allowed myself, finally, to picture us feeling, touching, a thought now sanctioned, legitimised. I'd never allowed such thoughts to reach beyond unarticulated half-formed things. And it would be with Edward that I shared them.

What a vast disappointment it had been, our first night together.

He was bestial in desire, but he had been so tender in our courtship, a gentleman of gifts and thoughtful letters. That night he changed. He did not seem to consider that I might have desire of my own, that it was part of me too. I was merely a reward, a fine possession. My jewel, he had called me. His jewelled rose.

I opened the door a crack to watch him more closely. He looked up, his face was drawn and long. Was this how Edward found solace? I walked toward him and as I did, I ran my fingers over the tops of stuffed birds, perched like ballerinas on thin branches. Their eyes were glassy and still, no hints of life lingering there.

‘Emma,’ he said softly. I took his hand and pressed myself to his body. I needed to feel him. I heard his breath change, slow and subtle. He ran his fingers through my hair. I rested my head on his shoulder.

‘Oh, Emma.’

All I needed to feel then was his heartbeat. His round body and the tickle of his moustache on my neck. So familiar. So permanent. And yet ... As he rested his heavy hands in the small of my back he turned my face to his. I kissed him with soft urgency. Desperation. I needed to feel something. I needed for there to remain some hint of what was gone. Tender, true enough it was, for though our marriage had become passionless we had created something more wonderful than life, and that was a loss we shared. But that loss could not bind us together forever.

We returned to bed and there, as they once often did, his hands reached for me in the dark. Salt in the taste of meeting lips. It was the closest I’ve come to bliss, that sweet ache, swollen and desperate.

The priest pours water from a cracked pewter pitcher. He lifts the rim to Mathilde's mouth and lets the water trickle between her dry lips. She stares at the ceiling and gulps. She hasn't spoken for some time but Father Thomas is patient. The light outside is growing dim and he whispers that he hasn't much time. Mathilde nods slowly. Her fingers cannot grasp the bench as she would like and she cannot rest her head in her hands. She can only sit and stare and wait until she can speak again.

'Mathilde, they will return to extract a confession. It is best you tell me now. I cannot help you when they are here.'

She rests her eyes on the wooden slats. They are dusty and speckled with something that could be blood. She cannot pull her eyes away, and as she stares her heart stops and a paralysis that begins in her chest spreads through her whole body.

'The child, Mathilde, you must speak of it. There are too many accusations to ignore it. The bailiff has returned the accusation made by Erik Walder the night that ...' He looks down. 'That you and Anna practised dark magic at the birth of his son. After the evidence provided by Michel and Ursule Müller, it is damning. They say you used the mother's blood at the dark mass. I do not want to believe you capable of such a thing,' he breaks off and shakes his head. 'Mathilde, if you do not tell me, I cannot defend you.'

Her stomach clenches. Despite the agony of her wrists, her back, her neck, she still seems capable of hate. It is enough to compel her to try. She drinks again from the pitcher and speaks.

Erik stood with one hand gripping the mantle. Even in the near dark I could see the white of his knuckles. He was out of breath and from the beads that glistened on his bald head I could see he had been running. His eyes darted from Anna to me, and he crept up slowly, warily, before he cleared his throat.

‘Agatha Reuther is sick with fever and Catherine said ... she said she wanted you.’ He looked up at the herbs bunched from the rafters, the row of stones on a sideboard. He sniffed and ran his hand across his nose. ‘God preserve me,’ he groaned. ‘We have no other option. She’s bleeding badly — hurry.’

Anna took my hand, the satchel, and nodded for Erik to follow. Even in his haste he seemed reluctant. He couldn’t stop his eyes from darting to my grandmother’s trinkets, the stacks of parchments, the crystals, the cards, the Virgin on the mantle.

We followed Catherine’s shrieking from the edge of the village. Not a soul in the parish could be sleeping that night. Rain slicked the cobblestones and moonlight lit small puddles by the roadside. It was wide through that passage, and no one, not even a cellar cat, was in the street. The half-timber houses cast strange shadows and a streak of cloud sat dusty over the horizon. The house was tucked by the town wall, its conical tower looming over the rooftops.

Inside, Catherine was swollen and howling in the birthing chair by the hearth.

The women glared at us. My eyes watered with the stench of excrement and blood. So much blood. Catherine sat hard against the chair, gripping the armrests so her veins pressed up. Straw covered the floor by her feet. The heat of the fire drew the odour from the spattered chaff. The shutters had been long latched and bolted, the keyhole stuffed with grass and rosemary. A crude curtain was drawn across the gaps

in the doorway. Two fat candles, ridged with dry wax, lit two corners of the room.

There'd be no dark spirits here tonight.

'Where is Agatha?' the older woman asked, bluntly.

'Heike,' Erik warned. He shook his head.

We knelt between Catherine's red spread legs.

'There's too much blood,' I whispered.

Anna looked but said nothing. The women looked suspicious, like we were maids caught in a master's study. I took the cloth from Anna's satchel and pressed it between the moaning woman's legs.

'I don't like this.' A voice behind me said. 'I don't like it at all.'

'Gertrude, there's no one else.'

'You know your grandmother's craft, then?' Heike appeared by Catherine's shoulder.

'Oh, Mama, let it go, Catherine needs them.'

'How long has she been in labour? Why have we only now been sought? We are almost too late.' Anna said.

There was no answer. 'It's already soaked through.' Anna held the sopping rag to me and turned to Heike. 'Have you a cloth? Something fresh, clean. Quickly.'

'Don't take that tone with me.'

'Mother!' The younger hissed. She hurried to the door and I followed. A girl, a maid most like, hovered uselessly in the doorway.

'Fetch one of Herr Walder's shirts, and water too, I imagine we'll need more.'

The girl was ashen faced.

'I'll follow,' I said. We hurried together through one room to the next where the girl rifled through a chest for a suitable garment. Her breath came quick and shallow.

'Calm, girl, you'll be no good to us if you faint.'

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Oh, heavens.’ Her voice was pathetic. She turned in circles, looking about the room. She clutched a shirt in trembling hands, but seemed unable to decide if it was the one she sought. ‘Here, take this,’ she said, ‘I’ll fetch the water.’

‘Wait.’ I said.

She had already darted to the door, but stopped suddenly.

‘Have you fresh wax? And ink. Can you get some?’

‘Wax?’

I regretted adding to the poor girl’s burden. She was terrified. She stumbled to the desk and rummaged. Erik peered around the doorway.

‘What are you doing in there?’

I strode by, wax in hand. His face grew disturbed. He grabbed my wrist.

‘I asked you a question, woman. What in heaven’s name do you need with wax and paper?’

‘You need to trust that we know what we’re doing, Walder.’

He released me but he scowled. ‘What kind of devil work is this,’ he muttered.

‘In my house, I should have you both back on the street.’

‘Erik,’ Heike hushed him. ‘Perhaps it would be best if you wait the birth out in the tavern. There is nothing much you can help with here.’

‘You think I’m leaving those two alone with my Catherine?’ He spat into the pail on the hearth. ‘I’ll wait here just fine, thank you.’

Catherine was deathly quiet, white as a chalk. I threw Anna the shirt as the maid returned with a pail of water. She looked strangely at me, or rather, just behind me. I turned. Mamé stood in shadow. She startled me, but then I grew comforted by her appearance. I took the wax paper back to the writing desk and smoothed it. I dipped the ink in the well. Erik hovered behind me. I knew my letters, but my scrawl was

unrefined. I'd make no scholar, but it would work. I scratched quickly, tore the section from the rest and rolled it up.

'Have you string?' I asked the maid.

She was unmoved, but her jaw was slack and her eyes darted between the small scroll and the shadow where Mamé stood. Slowly, she nodded.

'Come, girl.' I said as I hurried past. She followed mutely.

I returned to Catherine, crouched low beside Anna who rubbed flaxseed oil to replace the slick of blood and shit she'd cleared from the cunt, I held her gaze. I took her ankle and with the blade Anna had passed to me in knowing silence, I made the cut.

'Shh,' I said when she winced. 'We must let the blood.'

Mamé was in the haze. I took the loop with wax and tied it by the cut. Blood dripped onto the paper.

Heike's face loomed. 'What are you doing?'

'Divine intercession. Saint Margaret, among others, look down on us this night,' Anna said. She didn't look up to see the worried glance Heike made at her daughter and Erik. And still the maid stood slack-jawed by the doorframe, watching Mamé by the hearthside.

'Catherine, look at me and repeat what I say.' I waited for her eyes to slow from wandering. It was important that I held her there. You could lose a woman to fear just as easy as that gush of blood.

'Kind Virgin of virgins, Mother of God.'

'Virgin of virgins, Mother of God.'

'In the midst of these sharp and bitter grunts of grief.'

The figure of Mamé grew sharp before the flames.

Catherine wheezed. ‘In the midst of these sharp and bitter grunts of grief.’ She spat.

‘In this hour of my greatest need and distress.’

‘It’s coming!’ Anna roared.

Catherine howled. Heike and Gertrude crowded on either side. Their hands white in Catherine’s grasp.

‘Say it, Catherine.’

‘In my greatest need and distress.’

‘Say it properly!’

She cried out again. ‘In my hour ... In my hour of great need.’

Heike’s faced blanched and her jaw dropped. ‘I see it. Oh God grant it.’ She crossed herself.

A pale thing emerged, smeared red.

‘I pray to thee for mercy,’ I said, desperate now, bellowing.

Catherine sobbed and threw back her head. Her legs sank, slack, and she slid forward in the chair.

‘Catherine? Catherine!’ Anna shook her.

‘She’s too tired,’ Gertrude murmured. She wiped the sweat from Catherine’s brow.

‘Hush, girl,’ Heike hissed. She slapped her daughter and snapped her fingers.

‘You’ll kill your babe and yourself. Push!’

I could see the glow of Mamé like moonlight through fog.

‘I pray to thee for mercy,’ I said again.

‘We pray to thee for mercy,’ said the maid, sobbing by the fireside.

‘She’s losing too much blood,’ Anna said in nearly a whisper.

‘Come, girl!’ her mother cried again. She shook her daughter till she raised her head. With one last guttural shriek the child emerged, silent, but moving. Catherine collapsed.

Gertrude gasped, ‘A boy! Oh, a boy!’ She took the child from Anna’s hands and I slipped the knife through the cord. I heard the slap and the high cry that followed. Anna huddled closer to me. ‘Quickly,’ she said, ‘we must staunch the bleeding.’ She applied the cloths, already wet and sopped with red, to the new gush.

‘Stay Catherine, stay. Oh, it’s not too late,’ Anna hummed. ‘Come, quickly.’ We placed our hands together on the raw place. We called on Mary, Margaret, and the woman with the bow. Against our palms the blood came rhythmically, warm and wet, a pulse that steadied with our own. We mumbled our silent prayers, and in the blood we were one. I felt Catherine in my bones, as did Anna. I cried out. It wasn’t working. Anna knew it too. And then we saw it. The light that had pressed against our hand, Mamé’s healing had moved beyond her, so Catherine’s shoulders, neck, head were lit like sunrise, and we watched, feeling the flow slow between our fingers as the placenta leaked and the soft hum of life ebbed away.

‘Oh, Catherine.’

I heard the approach of Erik’s boots.

‘No, stay, please stay.’

The maid knelt beside us. She bowed her head at Catherine’s lap. She whispered her own prayer.

And then the light was gone.

I sat back on my heels. Gertrude collapsed behind us. Heike moaned, the child wailed. Erik was red faced. He turned to us, eyes wild. ‘You killed her!’ He cried. ‘Murderesses. Witches. Get out!’

I was tempted to that door more often than I should have allowed, but I had no will to resist. He offered me something no one else had. Not only his love, which he said flew from him to me like doves on feast days, but words, tumbling free between us, tenderly chosen as hallowed offerings. Marco did not allow me the things I treasured most. Books, he said, were only for the instruction of my soul and the development of my wifely duties. But he'd not yet made me a wife—or so I told myself when guilt gnawed—and so I still retained some liberty.

I took that liberty to visit Luca. I had to get away from the suffocation of Marco's ever increasing restrictions. We walked through the Borgo Ognissanti. Young men—apprentices, journeymen carrying crates, planks of wood or tools—rushed by. Workbenches spilled into the streets amongst the din of yelling masters, hammers on anvil, saws on wood. A woman with a yellow handkerchief winked at Luca as she sauntered past. He turned to me and grinned.

I punched him in the arm. 'You already stink of women.'

'Hardly,' he replied. 'I'm reformed. Though, there's a woman who claims to have escaped from the Convent of Saint Ursula. I suspect it's a story to charge higher rates for the pleasure of her company—a chance with her and I might slip back.' His breath was sweet and fruity with wine, like the kind we used to drink in summer when it would dribble down my chin and he would lick it up.

'Reformed?'

'You don't know everything, little bird.' He strode quickly forward, his eyes on the crowd. He changed the subject quickly. 'Cristina Savelli's trial has finished. Pierozzi has been ordered to pay three hundred florins toward her dowry for the lost hymen.'

I snorted.

‘She’s to be married to a baker now.’

‘Such a waste.’

I skirted around a man, drooling in tattered rags, slumped against a wall. A pungent smell grew ripe with each quick step.

‘Come now. The fall from saint to whore is not so great.’

I punched him again.

He hooked his arm around my neck, pulled me close and pinched me. ‘So lively today!’

‘I can’t help it,’ I said. I was filled with nervous energy. I pulled him against the wall to avoid the stumbling of a cart. ‘Luca, do you think such a thing as sinless desire can exist?’

‘Desire in marriage is not a sin, Lucrezia.’

A boy, quick as a fawn, stumbled into me. His ball rolled between my feet and he blushed. I took pity on him, poor frozen creature, and stooped to pick it up. He scampered away, giggling.

‘Someone’s enamoured,’ Luca said, grinning.

‘But that’s just it, isn’t it? We desire every day, even as children. It can consume a person.’

‘Of course it can,’ he said steadily. We emerged from the clustered streets of the slums and wound closer to the river. The smell of decay grew pungent.

‘But control, Lucrezia, is the key. We must fortify ourselves against those inclinations.’

‘You sound like Marco. Besides, who are you to talk of control?’ I laughed at him. ‘You, who deflowered half the virgins of Florence.’

He scoffed. ‘I told you, I am reformed!’

‘I’ll never believe it.’

‘Well do. I’m a new man.’

‘I don’t like what this banking business has done to you. You should get back to the library.’

‘Why? Are you a sinner, Lucrezia? Do you wish to absolve yourself by knowing that my sins are worse?’

I sighed. Yes, I thought, but how to tell him? I was only beginning to formulate the thoughts that scattered like leaves in my mind. ‘I mean ... I’m asking, is it possible, do you think, for love, for physical love, to be part of our redemption? To allow us access to something beyond us? To God?’

‘Lucrezia, you sound like Papa,’ he shook his head. Then he stopped in his tracks. He looked at me. ‘Have you been spending time with Jacopo?’

My cheeks flamed.

He smiled. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘Jacopo is a passionate man, Lucrezia. He is Papa’s favourite for a reason. But don’t let him fill your head with strange ideas.’

‘Strange ideas? They are Papa’s ideas too, are they not?’ We walked quickly but I could see his mind quickly turning. ‘Luca, I confess I have never been so happy. These are not just strange ideas to me. They ... oh, I can’t explain it. You cannot understand what it is like to feel so unfulfilled. I thought becoming a wife would soothe this longing for something more, but it has not. It is only worse.’

‘I’m sure that when you have children you will have much to occupy yourself with. They will become your passion, I assure you of that.’

‘Luca! You of all people know that simply isn’t true. I want so much in life. I want to feel every part of it. And I believe that I have begun to do so—Luca, God is not what I thought He was.’

He raised an eyebrow at me.

‘God is love and only love. And we can reach Him through love.’

There was a fruit seller, a village man, eyes bleary from his overnight trek to the city. His skin was leathered brown, his teeth crooked mustard stumps. Luca gripped my arm and steered us around him. He had that look as we passed, his tongue flicked to lick the top of his lip, his nostrils flared. That look like I was prize meat.

‘*Bella,*’ he moaned. He turned to laugh with his neighbour. We continued ahead. ‘*Bella, per favore,* I love you.’ He grabbed his crotch, thrust. The men laughed.

Luca turned and grabbed his shirt. ‘Say it again, brother.’ His tone was calm. Chillingly calm. The man tried to pull away. ‘Go on. Tell my sister you *love her.*’

Those bleary eyes glanced fearfully from Luca’s to mine. ‘I’m sorry,’ he stuttered. ‘I only meant it as a compliment.’

Luca dropped him. ‘Keep your *compliments* to yourself or I’ll string you from that crossbeam by your testicles.’

The man’s face blanched. ‘*Porca puttana,*’ he muttered as we walked away.

‘You didn’t have to do that,’ I said when we were far enough away.

‘You speak of love, Lucrezia, but one man’s love is another’s lust, hate, vengeance. Love, desire, they make us capable of transcendence, true enough, but so too can they drive us to wickedness.’

I felt their eyes on me, everywhere, wicked eyes. They fell on flesh burgeoning from necklines and too-short-sleeves. On women in shrouds and veils who moved in huddles. They fell especially on the dark skinned slaves who seemed to draw their gaze like fireflies. But although I felt that gaze as an itch on my skin, I too wanted to fall into it. Desire was all around me, and the harder I looked for it, the more it seemed to erupt. Far down an alley by the rough-stoned San Lorenzo, hidden in the shadows, a skirt bunched around knees. A head nuzzled in the crevice of a neck. A short, sharp thrusting and heaving. The lovers remained undiscovered to all eyes but

mine. Even the air seemed to stink of it, flesh and sweat.

Instead of hiding away behind thick draped fabric, I felt the need to meet that gaze, to lure them, eye to eye, with a flesh that would never be theirs. Prudery was not as commonplace as it had been. Savonarola had burned so that Florentine women could wear their jewels and keep their necklines low. The Medici were returned, along with their grandeur and opulence. We all lived a great sumptuous mockery. We knew each loophole and exploited every double standard. As soon as one fabric was denounced another was suddenly admired; when one kind of button was fined, another took its place. I remembered Sunday mornings at the Santa Croce, my hungry eyes roving across the silks and draperies of the women. The most fashionable were the newly wedded brides. Those women were afforded the freedom of the deflowered. Men too cared for their dress. My father did, my brother too. But my husband? He seemed to me the purest man in Florence. Unlike the priests and bishops who kept favourites from the lowest bordellos to the grandest houses in Florence, he did not seem to want to *touch* at all. If the Pope, called by God to His highest calling, cannot resist the sins of flesh enough to father four, then what could I think of a man unable to father one?

There was a cry. Guards dragged a man by his hair and his screams drew the crowds like flies. They hovered close by, buzzing. The man tried to straighten but he crashed into a woman with a young boy close to her skirts. Luca blanched. He stood stiff, watching eagerly. We were surrounded by chatter.

‘What’s he done?’

‘They’ll take him to the *Bargello* most like.’

‘German bastard.’

‘What’s going on?’ I hissed to Luca.

‘It’s the Inquisition,’ he said, quietly. His eyes were too intense; I’d never seen

him like that.

The man turned and shouted to the eager crowd, ‘Deny the Pope, the Antichrist; turn away from the diabolist pigs of the Roman Church. Salvation by—’

He was silenced by a fist. A knee in his abdomen.

‘Heretic,’ someone whispered. The word became a chant. ‘Heretic. Heretic.’

The Inquisitor, his face hidden in the shadow of a black cowl, brandished a book. He held it high. ‘The Holy Office, by law of Pope Paul III, shall purge its lands of heresy: the evil works of Luther and his dark disciples. Anyone known to be in possession of, to distribute or to publish such a volume shall spend his days in the Inquisitor’s dungeons.’ He turned and spat on the man whose arms twisted in a knot. He tore the pages of the book and they took to the sky like moths.

I turned to Luca for consolation. A foolish girl I was, though I thought so highly of my new studies. I thought I could see everything. But I did see the fervour there in his gaze, perhaps admiration, and it frightened me.

When the moon rises and passes briefly across the little window she sits up. She puts down the pen and rests where the moonlight falls. Passion is a strange thing. How different could things have been if he had known, as she had, that it only mattered to love? How different could it have been had she possessed the patience to understand him?

She falls asleep with the thought resting like a bloom in the middle of her forehead. But there is something dark that arises. She has dreamt the dream before, of that black circling high above. She tries to scramble through it, to climb the walls that enclose her, but the light is too dim and she loses her way. She cannot hear the voices that call to her. She doesn't know how to hear them. They fade, and as they do, she loses her grip and she falls.

When she lands at the bottom there is that man. Bald, heavy-set, with dark eyes and calloused hands. He reaches out, grasps her hair in his fists. In a whisper, almost indecipherable from the void of noise, he says, 'Whore.'

Emma savours these brief moments. To bathe without that tap of hot and cold to bring her to prostate spasm. Steam issues from the water in the crisp air. She likes the way the tiles feel under her feet, the slippery coolness, the occasional drops between her toes. Her heel slides and she grips her chest in a death-rattle lurch. Her muscles seize, the fibres groaning up her legs to that spot in the middle that clenches. It is an odd sensation, electrifying and devastating. It's all over in a moment. She holds herself firm until the rapid ticker of her heart slows to a regular thump.

Emma calls out to Sophie as she pulls a small stool and sits beside the tub. Her toes brush against the clawed feet and she runs her fingers along the top of the water. Where is that girl? She calls again, expecting to hear soft pattering feet on the floorboards of the hall. Emma stares impatiently at the door, letting the warmth seep into her chilled fingers.

'Sophie!' she calls once more, the final time, she tells herself, before she resolves to find her and drag her in by her ear, if she must. She's a cheeky girl; she is probably hiding outside the door, listening to the calls with a grin. She runs her fingers in circles, listening to the ripples. She feels them brush against something willowy; it curls around her finger, the mass of floating yellow under the surface.

She chokes on the syllables of Sophie's name as she cries, lunging her arms into the depths.

'Sophie!' she cries, again and again. But she is not here. The room brightens. Emma feels a rush rip through her body. She shakes her head and grips the sides of the tub. She is not here. She is in the ground at Highgate, buried in a white dress with her china doll named Millicent. Emma puts one foot in the tub and then the other. Her panicked heartbeat slows, but reality dawns too late. Two nurses seize her arms,

and although she is ready to submerge herself and let her private panic subside, they steal her away.

Mamma,

I am very tired and I shant write for long but I love you and you are my very dear Mamma. I try to talk to Papa but he doesnt listen but I go to his dreams instead. Mama you must listen to the good doctor and to yourself. You doubt too much that you are well. I try to come to you as I did but it is hard now as I have to see the others but I will try. I hope that you will be happy with just my letters.

Mamma, you must be careful because our language is not like theirs. We write from always but they don't understand. Please don't be so angry with Papa, he will learn. There is another here who would tell you to quiet but I am trying to keep him away. He is angry. But he is very strong and I am tired. I must see my other Mamas. They need me too.

A rap came upon the door once, and then twice. It surprised me. I had moved my chair close by the window to use the remaining light to finish my stitching, but I faced inward, undistracted by the stillness beyond the window. I thought to answer the door myself but Edward was home and things had to be done the proper way. Suppose it was a client's wife come to call? The new maid was due to begin next week, which should put an end to such embarrassing delays. Finally, Alice's heavy figure passed the drawing room door.

'Miss Emmett for you, ma'am.'

I rose, flustered. 'Susannah,' I gushed, 'how lovely to see you.'

'Charming place, darling,' she said, kissing my cheek. 'John is being such a bore today; I had to get away. It's this weather isn't it? It's claustrophobic. Honestly, one more game of bridge and I'd have done myself in.'

'Thank you, Alice, that will be all,' I said, noticing her face blanch.

'And how are you, my love? Getting along all right? Oh, what a fabulous carpet!' She knelt down at the rug and ran the tassels between her fingers. 'Exquisite! Turkish or Persian?'

I heard the groaning of wood as Edward descended the stairs. I hoped he was still feeling as generous as he had been. Susannah stepped into the hall and took his hand when he reached the bottom.

'You must be Mr Blount. It is a pleasure to meet you at last,' she said. She shook his hand firmly and he looked at me quizzically before nodding.

'Yes, I'm afraid I haven't yet the pleasure of—'

‘Susannah Emmett, though I’m sure I need no introduction. I’m only sorry it has taken us so long to be formally introduced. Your dear wife and I have become such friends.’

‘Ah, indeed.’ He looked at me like he had that day with Gissing.

‘Isn’t he darling, Emma? Now, how about a glass of that sherry I can smell on your lips.’

I balked, but Edward seemed, at least for now, mildly amused.

‘Yes, perhaps a drink.’ He looked at his pocket watch. ‘It is nearly the hour, no harm in an early start.’

‘You certainly don’t seem to think so.’

Though he smiled at her teasing, I sensed his disturbance.

‘And will Mrs Emmett be—’

‘*Miss* Emmett,’ she interrupted. ‘But please, call me Susannah.’

‘Will Miss Emmett be joining us for dinner?’

‘How darling of you to invite me, Edward, I should be delighted. But first, I would very much love a drink.’ Susannah turned and walked back into the drawing room. Edward raised his eyebrows at me as he passed. Patient, willing, but I knew he could easily be pushed too far. It was going to be a delicate balance.

‘You must tell me how the two of you became acquainted. Despite your assumptions, Miss Emmett, I’m afraid I’ve never heard of you,’ Edward said once we were settled in the drawing room.

‘Edward,’ I began, ‘I told you, we met at the circle.’

‘Yes, but what goes on in these spiritualist meetings of yours?’ He wiped his mouth. ‘I am rather suspicious of anyone who claims to talk to the dead. Frankly, all that nonsense should be left to the pulpit or the stage.’

Susannah laughed. ‘Edward, you would hardly suspect your own wife of fraud, would you?’ She drank liberally from her glass.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Emma is one of the most extraordinary mediums we’ve ever seen. She’s only new at it, I’ll grant you, but for someone of her experience—’

Edward’s fingers clenched.

‘Susannah, please,’ I hoped she would note my tone. ‘It is not like that.’

‘Oh don’t be modest, Emma. It’s true.’

‘Is she indeed?’

My cheeks burned. Edward tipped back his drink and poured himself another. I didn’t know how he would react to such news. It was one thing to attend a séance and quite another to conduct one. He sat back deep into the seat. Edward is a man who demands great control in all things. He is careful never to be seen expressing emotions, not even at home. Instead, he would wait and smoulder. And he was smouldering. Oblivious, Susannah continued to add log after log to the fire.

‘Oh, you must come and see her.’

‘I bloody will not.’ His knuckles whitened around the glass.

Susannah sat back, alarmed.

‘My wife is a sick woman and you’ve taken advantage of her in a vulnerable state. Miss Emmett, if you have led my wife to believe, if you have coerced her into thinking—’

‘Mr Blount! Kindly restrain yourself. Your wife came to me seeking comfort, yes, and comfort she has received. We have given her solace and a community. She is respected and admired among our friends. She has useful work to do.’

‘You’ve led her to believe, what, that she can communicate with the dead? You call that useful action?’

‘You had her lying in that bed on opiates day and night. How was she to recover when she could hardly even stand?’

‘Because medical science—science, Miss Emmett, a concept probably rather far from your comprehension—says that a rest cure is the best possible treatment for a woman in her state.’

‘Spiritualism, I would have you know Mr Blount, is at the very forefront of science.’

Edward scoffed.

‘Why then are the likes of Henry Sedgwick, Edward Gurney or William Barrett investigating the phenomenon? Even Alfred Russell Wallace, one of the world’s foremost evolutionary theorists is a spiritualist, and believes, not in God, let’s remember the important difference, but of higher intelligence, higher energy! There is talk of a society being formed especially for such investigations. William Crookes worked with Florence Cook for most of her career.’

‘Wallace has been a terrible disappointment to many of the scientific community. I hardly think—’

‘Well, why don’t you ask your wife herself then? You don’t believe me, and you probably never will, nor are you likely to entertain the idea of prominent men of science investigating the field—’

‘Yes, investigating, Miss Emmett, they’ve hardly proven anything.’

‘Will you stop interrupting me?’

I could only watch on in horror as the argument escalated.

‘Oh, everything’s so black and white with people like you, isn’t it? That’s why you’ll never understand.’

‘Yes, it is black and white. It’s very bloody simple. There is science, rationalism, the rules that govern nature and the universe. That is very simple. And then there is

your lot and your superstition. Your prayers and your relics and your belief in some wishy-washy figure who, if you just do all the right meaningless things in all the right meaningless ways, will point his finger at you out of the sky and make everything better.’

‘How narrow is your mind, Mr Blount?’ Susannah’s voice softened. ‘Do you think Francis Bacon or Robert Boyle could have developed the scientific method or the study of chemistry without the experiments of alchemists and natural philosophers? What was once magic—the mysteries of the universe—has become science, Mr Blount. To the first men the rising of the sun, the turn of the seasons, a heavy fall of rain was the work of the gods, but now of course, we know *scientifically*, that the Earth itself is revolving around a sun as part of a great system of correlating and interdependent systems that stretches, quite possibly, on for eternity.’

‘As science discovers more and more to disprove such notions of magic and mysteries of the universe, as you so call them, we see patterns emerge. Solid, unquestionable rules that govern such things. Rules, Miss Emmett, that cannot be broken. That show, with increasing validity, that such stuff as the spirit, the soul, the everlasting continuation of life are nothing but fanciful stories told to comfort child-minded men and women who never knew any better than to be frightened of what they did not understand.’

‘I feel sorry for you, Mr Blount. For you will never know the comfort of faith and hope. Learned men who thought they knew all once tortured and executed women like us. Rule breakers. Devils and demons, they cried. Rules, Mr Blount, should be broken. Such rigidity only perpetuates narrow-mindedness and ignorance.’

‘Ignorance!’

I sank further back into the chair. My hands pressed flat onto my knees.

‘What do you know of the world of science?’

‘I know enough, Mr Blount, and what is more, I know the spirit. I know that when Emma and I sit in the dark and call on spirit we feel it because it is real. And when Emma tells me that she sits in trance, ink and paper at hand, and scribbles in a childish hand messages of love from her daughter—your daughter—that she is speaking truth. Has she not told you of this, Mr Blount? Has your wife not told you that she is in regular communion with your daughter? That she lives on still, in a world unseen to us?’

Edward went white cold and tremendously quiet. His eyes grew dark.

‘How dare you.’

‘Edward.’ I could hardly raise my voice above a whisper. My hand tapped against the side of my leg as though of its own accord. My chest grew tight.

She stared him down.

‘You will leave this house, and you will not come back.’

Susannah stood statuesque, one eyebrow raised. She turned to me and her face softened. She lent down and kissed me, lips to lips, and pressed her hand across my cheek.

‘Good night, my darling,’ she said. ‘I will see you soon.’

‘You will not,’ Edward hissed.

She ignored him. She gathered her shawl across her shoulders and her heels clacked as she strode down the hall. I heard her at the door. ‘Thank you, Alice.’ The handle clicked, the door brushed across the floor and clapped heavily as it shut. We sat in silence. I did not dare to look at him.

‘Alice!’ he yelled.

She hurried in.

‘I need you to send for Doctor Gissing immediately.’ He turned back to me.

‘Please, Emma.’ He sounded exasperated. ‘Get to bed. I’m sick with worry.’

‘You leave everything to that man. Why can’t you just talk to me? Why can we not have a conversation about how I feel—about how you feel?’

‘Because there’s no talking to you when you’re like this.’

That old panic was rising, the heaving and constricting. But this time I felt a dire need not to sink, shrunken and curled, but to lash like whips.

‘You make me like this! You don’t listen to me. Tell me, how I can be heard by you when everything I do, when all of my purest reactions to this frustration are the very things that signify my madness?’

‘I am listening, Emma, and what I am hearing is very worrying. You are not in your right mind.’

I struck at his chest. He blinked but stood resolute.

‘Emma.’ He was calm, too calm. He was the eye and I was the storm.

I struggled against him. I bit his arm and he gasped and let me go. I tried to push past him but his body was huge, so swollen and vast, and I ran into him like a ram. I butted and butted until he stepped back and I could slip by.

‘Emma what are you doing? Come back here.’

I do not think he expected me to run.

I tore through the door.

‘Emma? Emma!’ He tried to run but he was fat and useless. He stood in the middle of the road, screaming my name.

The winter air was sharp and I had neither coat nor hat. It was said it was the worst winter in recent memory and truly I felt it then. I ran to the Heath where the bare branches of that ancient woodland cast their long dusk shadows across the narrow paths. Fog rose from the ponds and I lost myself to the dark. But I kept on,

running, slipping in the sludge and mud, the frost on long grass that whispered against my legs. Past creeping willows, the crooked oak and naked birch. I stumbled but kept on, darker, darker as the woodland closed. When I emerged at the hill and the great flickering canvas of London spread before me I felt a new wave of determination. Night had fallen, and the mass of December grey fell fast.

Then I saw the tall figure striding through the grass. Somehow, despite the dark, she was illuminated. I tumbled across the vastness between us, down, down, until I fell at her, my hands on her shoulders, short of breath and heaving.

‘My darling,’ she said when she turned. She took my hands and kissed the chilblains ‘Oh my dear, you’ll catch your death. Come, come.’ She took her coat and placed it over my shoulders, wrapped her arm about mine and led me down the hill.

The church was crowded when we shuffled in. Unlike Anna, so reverent within holy walls, I thought God difficult to find among so many people. The three of us sat, Anna, Matti and I, aware as ever that we were intruding. But there was something in the gloom that soothed. In the hushed heads turned to the front, hearts bursting with desperate prayers, as though they'd left their bodies, vacant, behind. When I closed my eyes I felt only myself, my singular presence. Feet on hard wood. Hands on coarse fabric.

The soft hum of a child's whispered hymn floated between the fluted columns. I was not compelled to talk to God. Instead I let the stillness rest in me, tried to listen to that strange language that insisted on being understood. Then I caught a gaze. The single head turned against the crowd was easy to spot. Michel snapped it back to the pulpit, as did I. It wouldn't do to be caught staring in such a holy place, for I did not feel holy then.

'An impossible burden has been placed upon us,' Father Thomas said. 'Though we remain blessedly beyond the cantonment, the chance that we will be called upon to provide for the soldiers — meat, beer, candles — is great. Soldiers are a low sort. They are wont to practise all manner of sin and maliciousness.'

Ursule sat beside Michel, and as though she knew I was looking, she turned. I snapped, winter frozen. I couldn't turn away. And she was empty. Pale, mute. Eyes dark as a raven's.

'The Widow Müller has offered the use of her home for the regular use of prayer meetings, that we might ask God's protection in these troubling times and forgiveness for those sins that have warranted such divine penance.'

The Widow Müller sat regally on her son's other side. Her black gown was tightly laced and hugged her round frame. Mamé had spoken of her. It was said she wore a shirt of hair beneath her gowns, crafted to show both wealth and humility. She was the first to condemn and the first to forgive those unfortunates forced onto the pillory with placards denouncing their shame. If she knew the truth about Ursule, the woman likely to become her daughter-in-law, would she shame her just the same? Would she demand she spend her fortnight in prison? Ursule's purity would make her fall all the more severe.

‘His Grace will see us through the hardships that no doubt will come. We must remain vigilant against the temptation to sin, lest His punishment be ever greater. We are no strangers to these tides of darkness. We have suffered them before. We are surrounded here by heretics and blasphemers, by those who've turned against the true church. But we have always prevailed. And so we shall once more. Let us pray.’

I let myself sink into the seat. Fornication, they would say, for there can be no intention to marry if the act is shared with a soldier. And soldiers cannot help themselves to maidens young or fair. They are seduced.

‘Heavenly Father, allow Your Son Jesus Christ to come now with the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the holy angels and the saints to protect us from all harm. I bind all harm from agents of the Earth, the danger that Calvin's blasphemers and his war have brought upon us.’

Still, Ursule stared. I felt Anna stir beside me. She felt that stare as I did.

‘And Lord Jesus, in Your Holy Name, I bind all evil spirits of the air, the water, the ground, the underground and the netherworld.’

She would not look away. My stomach churned. Anna gripped my arm tighter.

‘I bind in Jesus' name, any and all emissaries of the satanic headquarters and claim the Precious Blood of Jesus.’

Anna's fingernails cut through my dress to draw blood. I felt her arm contract.

'And so too we pray for our sister, Catherine. May she rejoice with you in Heaven. Eternal rest grant unto her, and may Your perpetual light shine upon her.'

Anna's fingers released and her hand fell limp in my lap.

'Anna?'

She grew suddenly rigid. Her arms contracted and her legs kicked. She arched high and the moan that hissed from her slack mouth was deathly.

The parishioners turned in a wave toward us. Father Thomas peered over his pulpit.

She convulsed, violently. I held her arms and Matti rolled his hat and stuffed it between her teeth. The crowd crept around us and still she shook. Erik stood and pointed.

'I knew it,' he cried. 'The Devil's in those girls!'

'What is it? What is happening to this girl?' Father Thomas looked up.

'He has taken possession of them as he did their grandmother.'

'She's not possessed, it's a seizure.' I cried, but I feared no one could hear me over the increasing chatter.

'They killed my Catherine!'

Father Thomas looked desperately around him. His pallid face distressed at his congregation's call to action. He rushed forward.

'Oh Lord, with Your aid I rebuke the spirit in possession of this woman.' He pushed through the aisle and his fat stomach pressed against my shoulder. He laid his hands on her. 'I cast you out, spirits of the underworld.'

Matti had never looked so frightened.

'Go directly to Jesus, do so with no harm to any other in this room, that He might dispose of you according to His Will.'

I looked up at the black robed figure, spittle hurtling and eyes fervent, and cowered. And then there were all those eyes. Hundreds of them, all on us, on Anna, with the whites of her own just visible beneath those violently fluttering lids.

‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,’ he yelled, ‘let this woman be.’

The trembling ceased. There were gasps and hissing through the crowd.

I kissed her hand, traced my fingers along the grooves of her knuckles. They were warm.

Her back softened, her arms fell limp, and finally her head rolled forward. I pulled her into my shoulder.

‘Hush, dear Anna,’ I said softly. ‘It’s all right now.’

But Erik was standing still. Something burned in his eyes. Something sinister.

There was a peddler from the south in the market square some mornings after. A barrel sort of man, hair the colour of rust and a thick beard, near to his collar. He had a wagon and he sat atop it like some lord. A few villagers had gathered like birds at seed, their heads darting and poking to see his wares. The local stalls were a pathetic bunch. A few wilted greens, bread thickened with clay. And no one with coin to buy anything.

Curious, we pushed our way into the crowd. Anna leant heavily on my arm, and some who noticed her standing beside them took a step back. They still whispered demons, as though at any moment she might fall, writhe and Satan himself may emerge from her prostrate form. I stood on toes to see above the backs of all those heads. There was the usual assortment, leather shoes, twine, pickaxes and a few spices that nobody could afford, but the strange new thing was the basket of oranges in the middle.

‘Come up the Rhine from Switzerland, and Italy before that. You would have me sell them below cost? It’s not a short trip, that,’ the peddler said, arguing with a man in front of him.

‘Italy.’ I was reverential.

‘Can you imagine such a sweetness?’ Anna whispered wistfully.

‘And you would eat it?’ I feigned incredulity. Anna was faded still, and despite our attempts to force her to eat, she would hardly touch a thing.

‘I would.’ She smiled. ‘I think it would be the most incredible thing in the world.’

My sister harboured peculiar desires.

‘Anna? Mathilde?’ A girl, startled as a briar hare, approached us through the crowd. The Walder’s maid, Margret. Her cheeks flushed.

‘I need your help.’

As she spoke, I noticed Michel behind her. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to see me. I could hardly focus on the poor girl in front of me.

She stuttered.

‘It’s all right,’ said Anna easily. ‘Out with it.’

She looked nervously between the two of us. ‘My courses have stalled,’ she said. ‘It’s been a month or two.’

Anna sighed and reached into her satchel. ‘Take this,’ she said, holding up a small vial. ‘Put it where the trouble started. That trouble will disappear.’

I was still only giving half of my attention to Anna and the girl. I saw Ursule’s red hair approach Michel. She moved swiftly and, delighted, he kissed her cheek when they met. I forced myself to look away.

‘Oh no,’ the girl said, shaking her head. ‘You misunderstand. I don’t want to be rid of it.’ She placed her hand protectively on her stomach. My heart sank for her. ‘I

want something else.’ With a furtive glance about, she shuffled closer. ‘I saw what you did at my master’s house. What they say about you is true, isn’t it?’

‘What do they say?’

‘You work magic. Real magic.’

‘We simply understand the natural world, as any midwife does,’ said Anna.

The girl shook her head. ‘I saw her at the birth. That light? That wasn’t of the natural world.’

‘Perhaps this would be best discussed elsewhere.’ Anna whispered.

‘It is simple, what I require.’ She smiled innocently then, as though she knew some great secret. ‘I want a love potion.’

My heart sank lower.

‘Master Walder—Erik,’ she smiled sheepishly. ‘Sometimes it seems he cannot bear to be without me. But then there are other days ... I simply want that little love to become real.’

What could this poor girl possibly understand about the nature of Erik’s love? I looked despairingly at Anna. She seemed to share my hesitation. And then I was angry. It struck me so suddenly, lodging behind my ribs so I had to clench my fists.

Anna told her to come by the cottage where the ears of the righteous were far from hearing. That poor naïve wretch. They began to walk together toward the gate.

‘Mathilde?’ Anna asked, as I lagged behind. But I was far too agitated now to follow so simply.

‘Don’t wait for me.’

All the things I’d not let myself feel, that compounding frustration, rage, desire, rose so swiftly, I felt myself split. A new creature, mirrored to myself in every way, stood beside me. One held only potential, the tinder of a flame and a vague unknowable sense of things, and one was boldly new, passionate and furious. She

strode to the place where Michel was bowing, signalling his departure from the insipid Ursule, and I fell in beside him. I did not acknowledge him, nor he me, but he matched my pace, past the church.

I pulled him by the sleeve between open workshop doors. Empty, silent. Wheel spokes and barrow handles, iron rakes and wooden pails—a cooper's yard. Light angled through the open courtyard. I saw him as I knew he saw me.

'Mathilde,' he said, smiling. 'An unexpected surprise.'

'Does she surprise you like this?' I pressed against him as a hoof beat echoed beyond the sandstone wall. There was a motif of Hapsburg eagles on the timber beam above his head. They kept watch for us, one to the west, and one to the east, so that we could forget the outside world in each other. I bit his lip. Heat radiated under his linen, breath short, heavy and oaky rich with ale. I felt like a succubus, and it was a lust only he could sate. I was not mistaken, not for a moment, that he did not share this simple need.

I'd never spent time in the Müller house. It was not my own world and I knew I did not belong. It was a tall house on the square. Morning bustle, women drawing water from the well, Jews hurrying to the synagogue, could be heard passing down below. I spent the night after we'd stumbled from that workshop. Michel had not yet risen and I wandered, noting all the little extravagances that kept our worlds so far apart. Leather-bound books, candelabras, a mirror. At first, the image startled me. I didn't look at my reflection much. I hardly needed to, with Anna looking so like me. Yet, I was drawn somehow to the image of the tall, sharp-boned thing I saw looking back at me in the Müller hall. She was a dark figure, heavy around the eyes, tarnished skin. Streaks against her high cheeks seemed to point beyond her to something hidden. I shuddered. I pressed my hands to feel along the ridges of my eye sockets, as much to

check it was myself I stared at as to press the image into my mind. I could see Anna there, but the more I looked the more she disappeared. I did not share the split that severed the right of the top lip to the nostril, and yet that seemed somehow the least of the differences. My skin was darker and there were freckles like mushroom cups across my nose and cheeks. My hair hung lower, and curled towards my neck. There was a difference too in my eyes. While Anna's were vibrant and sharp, the very same green, upon staring into mine I felt the tug of the world at my feet. It was not even that they were hollow; they seemed capsized, lost somewhere in a tempest. I pulled my hair back and stood straight. I still had all my teeth, and when I smiled I should have been pretty, but there was something ghastly in it.

Another figure appeared on the murky surface.

Michel gathered my hair and stared into the reflected eyes. As his heat pressed against my skin I lost more the impression of my severed half. He filled up the space with being. The body has a way of consuming with all its offerings of cruel distractions. All it took was my hand to crawl down the thigh and find a hold above the knee. And in the sensation of gripping that toned flesh all thoughts of my phantom sister vanished.

'You have to go,' he said. 'My mother will return from Colmar shortly.'

'Come now.' I turned to face him. 'We have time.'

But he stepped away. 'I have business.'

'With her?'

With my hair in his hand, he pulled me close to him, so close I felt the brush of his breath.

'Yes.' He let me go and walked away.

I interrupted something when I entered the cottage. Anna and Matti were sly like barn cats. I'd suspected for some time now that the affections between them had blossomed into something more. I wished I knew why they felt the need to keep it so secret. Especially from me.

'I'm mixing what she wants,' said Anna. She was crushing something in a pestle, Mamé's book open beside her. Matti stood, his arms crossed too casually.

'That girl has no idea.' I sat by Anna and pulled the almanac toward me.

'Love magic.' Anna shook her head. 'But I found it in the book. You wouldn't believe the things Mamé kept in there.'

'So why are you concocting it if you feel so strongly against it?'

Anna nodded towards a small pile of corn on the table.

'Of course. What are morals to a starving man?' I flicked through the wafery pages. Some of the images were smudged or faded, but others were bold, shouting their importance through their author's long dead scrawl. There was something peculiar about it. What we did, Anna and I, never seemed to be the type of thing that needed learning. We'd been born able to perceive things beyond that half sheened veil. Able to lay our hands to heal, with spirit helpers always near. But these symbols and patterns and carefully ordered words seemed too much like doctrine, too careful and precise.

'Mathilde,' Anna said carefully. 'You remember what they all say about Mamé?'

I nodded. 'It was nonsense. She was like us, Anna, that's all. People have forgotten the potential of the earth, of the stars and how to heal.'

Anna pursed her lips and turned to Matti.

'I heard something,' he said. 'Elspeth Stark employed me for some repairs at her house. Just small things. But I came across something in the rafters.'

Anna pulled a sheaf of letters from underneath the almanac. 'It's a strange story,' she said.

But we were interrupted by a knock at the door. The girl, Margret.

'Is it done?' she asked. She was far too thrilled by the idea of such a thing. The heart is something that should not be manipulated by otherworldly forces.

Anna gave her the tincture. Margret glowed. I wanted to hold her, to tell her the kinds of secrets that Anna and I shared, as only sisters can. Sacred things.

'Are you sure that this is what you want?'

She nodded furiously. 'Oh yes, he already loves me, I know he does. And we shall have a child soon, a little brother for Baby Erik. It is only right.'

I sank into my chair. No good could come of this.

Jacopo met us in the Piazza della Signoria where the scaffold had been erected for the afternoon's blood. I still remember each sharp little detail like a painter observing for some macabre fresco. Three crows swooped, beaks wide, above the crowd. The wind that crackled dry leaves, lifting into the dusk and settling grey like ash, stole the breaths from their slack mouths. Only the priest cut through that roar. His voice carried alone down to the Arno where it was lost to the slapping of water on the riverbank. Marco held my hand tight. Three men dragged forward the condemned. From where I stood, behind the tousled heads of noblemen and their wives, his eyes were deep black sockets, his lips chapped white. His knees buckled. Guards held him down, wrapped his arms around his back, placed his head on the wood. He squeezed his eyes. Clenched his jaw. His cheekbones bulged like the already-dead.

They took the screw, the spiralling iron ready. Wedging their fingers between his lips, they pried. He resisted, but not for long. They rolled out the wet, red meat and aimed. The shriek that pierced the marketplace scattered the black birds. They twisted the screw so that the flesh fell upon the straw they had laid for the afternoon's blood. They would spread the square with sawdust when we had all departed, fresh for the morning's merchants. Marco tried to cover my eyes but I had already seen. I pulled his fingers away and held them by my side. His body radiated heat, even in the late autumn cold. They stood the man up, blood gushing from his pitted mouth. Marco was white.

'Heresy,' he said. 'They can take the damning words from his mouth but they can't take it from his deeds.' I was not sure then if it was admiration or condemnation. Jacopo stood on his other side. I'd tried not to meet his eyes; I could

not trust my body not to betray me. His was a dangerous seduction. The terror of it thrilled me.

They did not drag the second man out but marched him. He held his head low. They tied his hands around a pole. From behind the planks of wood separating them from us emerged a man with a crop who rounded on the villain and lashed him. Sodomite, the crowd jeered. The cracks echoed between the closed stone walls, carving the evening air.

Marco spat on the ground. 'Disgusting.' He wiped his mouth. Again Jacopo stirred, flicking his eyes at his brother. 'You agree, surely, Jacopo?'

His eyes could have turned Marco to stone and for a moment both men stared at one another. A whip-crack, a scream, a chorus swell of jeers. Jacopo drew his fingers, stained black with ink, to his chin. Then a half-formed smile, an almost malicious thing, crawled across his face. 'I would not presume to know, Marco.'

The colour drained from Marco's face. He bristled like a horse and pulled my hand. 'We've seen enough of the city's filth for one day.'

'It is no longer to your taste, brother?' Jacopo called after him as we snaked through the crowd that pushed back against us. As we stumbled through that urgent throng, lusting at the blood, I saw the shimmer of the girl. There for a moment, then gone.

The sight of blood seemed to have stirred something in him. He pushed open the door and stood with a lit taper in his hand. It stretched the shadows, enhancing the cleft of his chin, the jut of his brow. The door slammed behind him.

'Marco?'

He placed the taper on the side of the bed and stood before me. He pulled my shift and it ripped. I recoiled.

‘Marco, you look strange. What happened today? You were white as chalk. You still are.’

He breathed heavily, his movements automated, like marionettes at *Carnivale*. He touched my neck, pulled my breast from the torn fabric. Twisted my nipple. I gasped.

I grabbed his hand. ‘Is this how you come to me? It takes blood to raise your lust?’

He glared. Gripped my wrists, his fingers like claws. My breath grew short. I was unsure if it was terror or desire that thrilled me so. But his gaze never shifted, his eyes impenetrable. And so that stir of lust turned quickly to fear.

I began to struggle but he was impassive, so much stronger than he looked. I writhed from his grip.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘There is nothing wrong with me.’ He came toward me again and I scurried backwards. ‘I am coming to you as your husband. This is what you want, is it not? Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted?’

It only took one strong grasp and pull and I was beneath him. I became rigid, but he prised me open. Some passion in him had broken and drove him on and on until I cried out. He stuffed his fist against my mouth until he too cried—a pained cry, unsettlingly desperate. He tumbled beside me as I lay on my back. His chest heaved like he was drawing in all of the air of the world at once. He reached for my hand but I was rigid. I was bruised, raw. This was what I wanted. I’d felt so sure that it was. But my heart was thumping far too hard. My palms were wet with sweat. I looked to my left where Marco lay. He held his hand against my cheek.

‘And now we are husband and wife,’ he said. But with every inch he drew toward me, I felt myself pull away. I looked down and saw, for the first time, that

milky white smeared against the sheet. On the wall the Norman maidens fled their teasing knights. The lilacs and lilies of their flat, painted garden were dull and lifeless.

In the morning we sat to a cold meal of bread and olives. Marco was haggard. The table had become so vast that a thousand oceans seemed between us. He wore only a thin cloak over his doublet and hose, and his beard had grown wild like a mountain man. He had the lean face of one, too. Saint Sebastian, bound and impaled, was hung over the table. Marco stared at the sweet agony of the Martyr's face and grimaced.

'Forgive my passion,' he said. He was meek again, that boy returned. 'But I am glad that it has brought us together finally.'

When he left, my tongue was dry like ash.

I took the little Virgin from the bedside, knelt before her. I was perplexed and hot with anger.

'How can this be marriage?' I cried. 'How could this be what you wanted for me?'

I raged. I hit my fists against the wall, screamed, kicked until my feet bled. I crumpled.

Did she weep for me, the Virgin? For me and all the sins of our sex? I grasped her. Her head was tilted as though listening. But she's not, I thought. She never had been.

I raised her above my head.

She crashed, splintering. Her head scuttled across the floor. Her body was halved, a crack splitting her holy womb. I stopped.

'Oh God,' I gasped, hands at my mouth. 'What have I done?'

*

I stormed through twisted passages in Papa's palazzo.

'Why did you do this?' I cried, entering his study. He looked up, startled. His cheeks and nose were red and he rose awkwardly, unbalanced. There were flecks of peeling skin on the top of his forehead, and his belly distended.

'Lucrezia?' His thick eyebrows drooped. 'Darling, *passerotta*, what upsets you so?'

'How could you do it?'

He shook his head, an old man's confusion.

'How could you marry me to him?'

He took my hand. 'There are some trials, my dear little bird, that we must all face. It is not easy to understand God's plan for us—'

'God's plan?' I spat. 'It was not God's plan, Papa, it was yours.' I realised the terrible truth of my words as I spoke them: 'He's the wrong man.'

'Oh, Lucrezia,' he said. 'I know.'

'You know? What do you mean you know?'

'You have an influence there, can't you see it? There is work for you to do.'

But I couldn't face him. Not like that. Not then. How could he stand there so calm and resigned? Preferring to talk in riddles and obscurities than from his heart. How could he understand what it was to live with that man?

I ran into the courtyard, bloated with betrayal. I leaned over the white pointed the lilies and heaved.

'Lucrezia?' Luca was behind me. 'Come now.' His hands were soft and tender. He drew me to the bench and we sat. The stench of bile saturated the air. 'What has you so upset?'

'How could he have done this to me?'

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Papa.’ I sat up and glared at him. ‘Why Marco? If he knew ... if he knew what kind of man he is.’

‘What kind of man is he?’

I couldn’t respond.

Luca sank back. He pursed his lips. ‘Lucrezia, Papa has not been well. I fear he cannot reason like he used to. He seems confused often, he forgets things. He’s become irresponsible; he went into a lot of debt. Our uncle offered to help, but only if I would follow in his footsteps, join the bank. Papa did what he had to.’

‘And I am to suffer for it?’

Luca shifted closer to me. ‘The Casini family were not our uncle’s choice. Papa insisted that it be them. He knew that it was the right house for you.’

‘Marco said that Papa did the devil’s work. That I am tainted by his sin. I have tried to love him.’ I shook my head. ‘We’ve always been a Christian family, have we not? Who would say such things of us? Papa knows more of God than any.’

‘Papa’s beliefs are unconventional. I worry. Things are changing in Florence. There’s a renewed call to faith. The threat of the north—’

‘What do you mean you worry?’

‘The Inquisition is concerned with hunting out heretical texts—evangelist treatises, scriptural translations and the like—but they may turn their eyes to other more obscure works.’

‘Translations?’

‘Yes, but what Papa translates is not their concern, not yet.’

‘Scriptural translations?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Luther has inspired many to turn the word of God into the word of man. It is not for us to change the language of the Bible. There are talks of an

Italian version in Florence.’ He leaned in, head cocked, brows knit. ‘Lucrezia.’ I could hear his mind tick. ‘Do you know something?’

I shook my head. ‘What would I know?’

I raced to that locked room beside the laboratory. I slipped inside, reached under the pillow to find that secret book. *Genesi*. I gasped. The words were familiar and yet not. I read Latin. I read it often, *Metamorphosis*, *The Aeneid*, Bruni, Boccaccio, Ficini, but this was not Latin and it startled me. The words, deprived of that ancient elegance, burst with sudden intensity as I read them, for the first time, in my own language: ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’

I was at the well in town when I heard them talking. Ursule and Gertrude and two other girls, thin, pale things. Never known work in their lives except spinning and kneading. Ursule held her hand out before them, pink with pride. I hauled my pail and listened, though they were wary of me, casting their eyes my way as though I couldn't see. Old Elspeth Stark walked past and she spat.

'Crazy old bat,' I muttered.

They turned their heads to me.

'Is it the one with the hare-lip?' one of them whispered.

'No, it's the other one. She's worse. See that rabbit paw tucked in her belt?'

They giggled.

'Careful, she'll curse you.'

I looked up and they hushed quick then huddled together and laughed. I drew the water and dropped it at my side. It was hot work, even though the sun had long lost its sting. I wiped my mouth. Ursule had a ring on her finger. It was what she'd been showing off to them, I guessed. My stomach sank. Gertrude poked her belly and laughed, 'Naughty thing,' she whispered. But Ursule was grim. She forced a smile and then she looked at me. I saw that Mountain man mount her and I could have been sick right there in the well. I should have known.

When I was far enough away from them I set down my pail and fell against the wall. A cat leapt onto a wooden barrel beneath a windowsill. I grasped the lip and it hissed.

'Shoo.' I waved it away, but it arched its back, spat. I couldn't let go of the barrel. I doubled over and let the sickness come. It gushed, thin and yellow, hardly a morsel of anything solid in it. The cat leapt away.

‘Hey,’ a woman yelled from the window above me. ‘Do that somewhere else.’

As I pulled my bucket his image came to me again, twitching, then lying there beneath the earth, still and rotting. A second swell rushed up, splashed on the dirt. I hobbled home clutching my belly. A thought came to me on my walk, a panicked thought. It had happened to Ursule and I’d seen enough of it to know. How long had it been since I’d bled? Not since we’d returned, before Mamé had died. There was only one man since then. I stumbled on a ditch in the track. I dropped the bucket by the side of the road and sat, my knees having given out from under me. I pulled them into my chest. I felt dread like I’d never known it. I could hardly feel my arms, my hands, my legs. ‘Oh God,’ I prayed. ‘Oh, please, don’t let it be.’

‘Do you not feel her?’ Anna said, holding her hand to my stomach. She was grinning too wide.

‘You too? With Matti?’

‘They’ll be like sisters.’ She placed her other hand on her own stomach. ‘Born together, as we were.’

She’d taken Mamé’s crystal, the blue agate on string, and held it above my belly. She suspected, she said, when she’d first dreamt of it. She knew these things as though she could smell them, and then I’d come in reeking of sickness with Ursule’s condition rushing as gossip from my tongue and she’d known it as confirmation. The stone turned in a circle. She’d taken my hand and held it above her own. ‘See,’ she said. ‘Two girls, like sisters.’

Matti was sunny as June. ‘It’s a beautiful day,’ he cried, though the moon was rising now, ‘and we should marry!’ He had a bottle of wine and he pulled the cork stopper with his teeth. ‘Cheer up Mathilde,’ he said, and he poured it into my mouth. ‘We must celebrate!’

But I couldn't share that excitement, much as I tried. So I rummaged through Mamé's trunk and pulled out a philtre, belladonna and henbane, the perfect thing to join their revelry. The perfect thing to forget.

Matti's eyes grew bright. 'Oh, Mathilde, what good ideas you have!'

I tipped it back.

The world slid like sludge. I expanded, flighty. When I felt myself grow bigger than my skin I knew the thing had worked. I knew that I was free, if just for tonight.

We ran from the cottage with the moon bright and full, fixed in the sky like a lantern. We bellowed and howled. A wolf responded from a high place thick and far in the mountain. We paused, wide-eyed. We howled again. Starlings, startled, flocked together into night. And then we ran. Down, down, slipping in mud-wet tracks, sliding, tumbling. We emerged by the stream with the sour stink of fermenting fruit hot in the air. We crept, leaping from rock to rock, as children do, shushing each other as we laughed. Don't let them hear. Don't let them see. Because Michel and I had done the same so many summers past, I unlatched Old Walder's cellar door, fumbling, hissing at the shadow of Anna and Matti, the drunken lovers, against the weathered wooden wall. The door came easy and we took just a little from the stores, just enough for the three of us.

'Mathilde?' A voice spoke through the dark. I was startled. I crept across the gate to the man slumped against the wall. It was Michel.

'What are you doing here?' He stumbled as he stood.

'I went to the cottage. You weren't there.'

I held a bottle up. 'We're celebrating,' I said.

'Celebrating?' His eyes were rheumy, his stoop slow. Drunk as we were. He swaggered and pulled me by the waist. I licked his face. He tasted of sin.

‘We’re going to the woods,’ I said as the colours around him warped, contorting as acrobats do. I laughed, a huge belly laugh, and grabbed his hand.

Up, up into the thick forest. Owl hoot, scurries from the undergrowth, a flock and squeal. Shadows of four strange creatures crushing the brush. As we ran, I felt myself rise and split into those two separate beings, and as one ran across the bracken with all the little creatures of the undergrowth, the other lifted, ascending through stripped boughs, clouds of autumnal decay, up to the starlit void. As I watched myself run far, far down below, I rose, twirled in the expansive sky and marvelled at the fluidity of my fleshless self. I plummeted back, coming into body with a tremor.

We emerged in the clearing by the stream with the little Virgin dressed in ivy and sank into the earth. We stopped and marvelled at the stars. So full. So luminous. So unknowably vast.

I pointed to the cross in the heavens. ‘The eye of the bull,’ I said. The star glowed red and bright. I turned to Matti. His own eyes were dazzling. ‘See how it watches?’ I whispered to him. ‘The hunter in the sky.’

‘The bull,’ he said quietly. He launched up, bucking me with him. He snorted and scuffed his feet against the dirt. ‘A beast!’ he cried, and he ran in circles. He let me down and roared. He pulled Anna up toward him. ‘And what does the bull watch tonight?’ he asked.

She threw herself in his arms. ‘A husband.’

‘A wife.’

Michel rested on his elbows, deep in lush grass. He swigged from his bottle. I knew he didn’t see the stars as I did. There was no magic for him there. But I was still dizzy with moon-song, with the forest and belladonna brew. I straddled his legs,

pulled him up. I heard bells, a blasphemous clanging, and a drum pound. ‘Dance with me.’

‘There’s no music.’

I only grinned.

Because I was formless I could dance like fire. I was a spasm of fevered rebellion. And as I danced I felt her in me. That woman with the bow. She was alive—so contagiously alive—expanding me with every sacred breath. Then I thought of the little life that might just then be forming. I thought of that life with Michel. I wanted his flesh, his skin. I wanted to gnaw at him, feel all the hard and soft parts of him. I wanted the deep and rumbling pleasures of him, and the way he could vent a passion that curled like a snake and engulfed me. It could be a contented life, couldn’t it? A life of enough love, enough pleasure—just enough. I couldn’t want for more than that. Then Anna laughed, rich and voluptuous, and I knew that such a life would be so wanting. It was a delirium I couldn’t take.

He was stilted in our dance. He couldn’t move like me, like that woman instructed. I doubt he heard her at all. But he saw something in me, that I knew.

‘Why do I crave you?’ he said.

I touched his nose with the tip of my finger. ‘I’ve got a secret.’ I cackled, reached under his shirt. He shivered. I ran my fingers like claws. He gasped. I leant in low, my lips so close, a tingling proximity.

We went to the place where Matti built a fire. Anna had pulled twigs and branches and was binding them with strips of ivy. And then she held out the earth-spun broom and twirled with it. She whispered to me, conspiratorially, ‘Something to leap over.’ I winked my understanding and rooted through the brush for sweets and tangs and bright, bright flowers. And then I pulled out Mamé’s stone. We held it between us and staring hard, with ecstasy and fire, we called on her. We knelt by the

Virgin and pulled the weeds from her feet and untangled her little veil of moss and ivy. Pulled out the woman with the bow. The wind swept up, whipping my hair, stirring my skirts. It seemed the sign we desired.

We had taken the omnibus at dusk. The scent of mildew from matted straw, the rocking that crashed us into our neighbours, reminded me more and more strongly of my sense of the world. The world as physical, as external to myself. From the dirt on my black-gloved fingers, to the cries of the conductor, who hung like an Italian organ-boy's monkey from the footstep, all of it, every tiny grain and fibre, was part of a world that I was only now once more becoming aware. We entered the hotel through a rabble of dark suited men shadowed in their smoke haze. Hawkins was at the bar with Mrs Griffin. It was Charlotte's big night. Hawkins' little ingénue. She was upstairs, waiting.

'John, Susannah,' he said, rising. 'Mrs Blount.' He took my hand and kissed it. His whiskers tickled the skin above my glove. He lingered there and patted my hand when he stood straight. 'I'm so pleased you could make it. I didn't expect you.' His smile was disingenuous.

'What an exciting evening. Full form materialisation, I hear?' John asked.

'Of course. Tonight we'll see the grand debut not only of the most exciting medium to come out of Hackney since Florence Cook, but of a spirit control likely to rival Katie King.'

John rubbed his hands together. 'Terrific, just terrific.'

'But there is perhaps another exciting new medium in our midst. It is a rare talent, especially for one so ... mature.'

I could not discern if he meant to compliment or insult me. I was surprised to find that I did not care.

'Perhaps we should discuss your talents sometime soon?'

'Whatever for?'

He laughed as though charmed. ‘Back in New York I witnessed some extraordinary things. I was very young then, of course. When I saw Mr Home’s levitation I became quite transfixed by the possibilities of such things. Levitation is, unfortunately, not something I have been able to master. Full form materialisation seems like it may be possible,’ he drummed his fingers on the bar, ‘with the right partnership.’

‘Oh, Emma darling,’ Susannah exclaimed. She gripped my skirt and peered at it. ‘It seems some drunkard has spilled something on you. Come let’s clean you off.’

‘Oh, are you sure? I didn’t feel a thing.’

She led me between tables and benches and pulled me into the powder room. I knew the types who used such facilities, and I had never been one of them. Talcum attempted to mask the stench, and it mingled with an acrid perfume, applied far too liberally on the woman who slunk in the corner. I tried to see the mark on my skirt in the dim light. I squinted as I peered down.

‘Arright?’ the woman slurred. I recoiled. Her eyes were dark, cheeks absurdly rouged, skirt hiked to her knees so I could see each run in her stockings.

‘Don’t mind her,’ Susannah whispered. ‘And don’t mind your skirt, there’s nothing there. Listen,’ she began as she took a cigarette from a tin pulled from her pocket. ‘I have a peculiar feeling Arthur is going to weasel himself into managing you.’

‘I wondered as much.’

‘You can’t let him. He’s become a pimp to that poor girl and her mother. I respect him as a medium, of course, but Mrs Griffin is a fool.’

‘I was beginning to like the idea of public work.’

‘I’m starting to suspect that something’s not quite right.’ She sparked the match against the sole of her boot, cupped her hand and dragged. ‘There are some rumours

regarding why he came to London. Some gossip about a married woman in New York. I don't like to pay much attention to such things normally, but there's just *something* about him.' Ash fell from the tip like black snow.

The lady by the stall banged her fist against the door and yelled. Susannah offered me the little white stick.

'I've never smoked before,' I said, examining the red tip. 'Edward does, of course.'

'Oh, you droll thing.'

I inhaled slowly and waited. She was looking at me expectantly. I handed it back and nodded, but then, in a burst, the burn stung the back of my throat. I coughed.

'I don't mean to alarm you, of course. I'm sure he means very well. I'm just—darling are you all right?'

I was overcome. Susannah laughed, but as the smoke swelled inside me, I *knew*, suddenly, that I would never draw fresh breath again. I could have died there, on that soiled floor, my lungs blackened and bursting. I gripped Susannah's arm to hold myself. My eyes watered. My heart hammered.

'Emma?'

When I looked up at her from behind the blur, I saw, for just the hint of a moment, her eyes change. She became someone she was not. Somebody I knew just as well. Skinny and frail with a mark on her lip.

My choking petered out. I did not die. It was, after all, just a cigarette.

'Breathe, darling. How quickly did you inhale? Silly thing.' She took another drag and then stubbed the cigarette under her boot. 'But perhaps you're right, it is a filthy habit.'

The world had stopped spinning, though she still steadied me with her arm. It was a peculiar sensation. A hint of something, like a forgotten word that lingers on

the tip of the tongue. I could not recall the thing I never knew I was missing. I coughed again and swished saliva through my mouth. The stall door banged and a woman stumbled out. The one skulking in the corner lifted up like she'd been dragged and shuffled in. Then it was just the two of us alone. A tap dripped and water gurgled as the strange and putrid smells dissipated. My breath was still heavy, still laced with something like ash. Susannah looked at me as though she were reading and her fingers played up and down my arm. The cigarette had made me giddy. My every sense was heightened, and so too did everything seem slower, rounder, fuller. My skin tingled.

'Susie, where did you get to?' John was calling from the other side of the door. 'Kitty and Charlie are here, come have a drink. Besides, we'll miss out on good seats if you don't hurry.'

'You're all right?' she asked.

I nodded. She looked down at my lips and all the air between us could have been held in a cup. It was just a moment, fleeting as frost between breaths, but there she stood, and there I stood, and it was all I needed for the world to steady. Susannah pressed her finger to my lips and kissed the digit between us.

'Coming,' she cried. She strode out and John stepped back to let her through. He sniffed the air and pinched me as I passed. 'Naughty girls,' he whispered. I blushed as I turned to him. I'd felt that same flush as a schoolgirl once. My neck had reddened just as quick, that same giddiness had overtaken me. There's something sacred about the secrets girls hold. The way we keep them close, like little birds that flutter within whalebone cages. Those unspoken things give us something worth holding, for unspoken they remain unreal, and only real things can be taken.

We were surrounded by merry drunks—late night girls with too much rouge, young lads with crooked ties and flushed cheeks. I perched on the lip of my seat and listened to stories of misspent youths and the vast disappointments of parents. As a boy, Charlie had set his classroom on fire in an attempt to revive a bird as a phoenix from the ash. John had joined the military, a fact that surprised me, but had spent most of his time running naked on the beaches of the South Pacific. Kitty had brought beetles and frogs to class to terrorise the schoolmistress who'd told her that Bach was far too stimulating for a young lady. She'd been asked to never return and so she never did. She went straight to Piccadilly and the music halls.

As I held the pint to my lips, I breathed against my fingers, just to feel the brush of air and know that it was real. I was conflicted by the admiration I felt suddenly for my friends. It had never occurred to me to break any rules. I did not know that girls like Kitty Harris, born in a large white-front terrace house in Kensington to a barrister and an inheritress, could run away to the music halls, paint placards demanding votes for women with other runaways and march the streets outside Westminster. Or that men enrolled at Eton and destined for the seminary could turn instead to endeavour to conjure, through fire and electricity, Shelleyesque life. That such a man could seek knowledge from Blavatsky with the distinct purpose of proving his father's God wrong, and then go on to attempt to transmute all living things of flesh and mineral in Kentish Town. But they existed and they were here and I was sitting with them, having left the bed in my own home where I should now be resting under laudanum's care until Doctor Gissing could come and, with those cold wandering fingers, reassess my state of health. But instead I had chosen this.

The thought filled me with sudden excitement.

I could choose this. I could always choose this.

She is prostate. She suffers paroxysms and seizures of her strange body with no one there to help her. When she wakes she looks down at herself and wonders how she came to be like this. She laughs sometimes, for wasn't it all avoidable? Be a good girl, she hears, it is a voice far away and hardly remembered. Be a good, good girl.

Her father took her to Blackpool, to the sea. She remembers the waves and the gulls that soared as though they could break the surface and disappear. She saw one pluck a fish from the crest of a wave and she called to her daddy to see but he wasn't looking and nobody believed her. Her daddy told her not to make up stories, not to be fanciful or want attention, for nobody likes a girl who puts on airs.

The walls are padded and it is almost dark, hot and putrid, and her sweat is sprinkled like the squelch of an orange across the floor. She is naked, having shredded her bedclothes sometime during her fit. They lie bunched in rags on the floor near the window that isn't a window, a small rectangular thing that lets in a needle of light. She expects the pads to be hard like stone, for that is what they look like, and she is surprised to find they are not. She can hit her fists upon them again and again and she cannot bleed. She laughs. They've taken so much she can no longer even cause her body to bruise. But it is her body, hers alone, and if she wants to make her skin bloom then she will. She throws herself at the wall. She falls to the ground, which unlike the wall is hard and cold, picks herself up, and throws herself again.

The walls of the palazzo had been stripped. The Madonna and Child once watched the dining table from a niche, but now the wall stood bare. Tapestries crumpled in the corner, and white sheets hung across the Annunciation frieze. The fabric ripped and pulled from hook to hook. Ludovico was perched on a stool beneath, his arms, draped in black, folded across his chest. He looked sullen. I met his glare.

‘Marco?’ I wrenched up my dress and scrambled up the stairs. I pounded on the study door and it opened. He was there with three men, the black pack, who turned and stared at me.

‘Lucrezia, please, we’re busy.’

‘What is this?’

‘Lucrezia.’ I looked around. There was a pile of paintings resting against the wall, a collection of statues huddled in the corner.

‘Marco—’

‘You must go; I will talk to you later.’

He closed the door in my face. I pounded my fist. ‘Marco, I demand to know!’ The door didn’t budge. I turned and looked at the hall. A patch of brown signified the absence of Saint Jerome. Saint Peter too was gone. A little bronze figure, a gift from Papa. Downstairs I found more of the same. Saints and Madonnas were absent from their pedestals and niches. And all the while Ludovico stared. I marched toward him and he stiffened.

I grabbed his shoulders. ‘What has he done?’

He hardly moved.

‘Tell me!’ I shook him. But he was defiant. ‘Why will you not speak to me? You’ve barely uttered a single word to me since I came to this house. Are you mute?’

Are you stupid?’

His breath quickened. His lips pursed. But still he did not speak. I went to the window and looked out down to the street. Three crows squalled and squawked and landed on the tiles of the roof below. They turned their beaks up to me. They know, I thought. Like the three cloaked men, they’ve been waiting.

The laboratory was destroyed when I arrived, flushed and short of breath. The smashed glass of flumes and flasks, and the clay chips of vessels and jars scattered across the floor. The owl had been knocked from her perch, the alligator teeth broken into fragments. The smell of sulphur and acids. A silver puddle of mercury. And no Jacopo to be seen.

A note on the table, scrawled in haste, its meaning hidden in the symbols of our secret language. *I’ll find you at the river.*

When Marco sat me down that day to tell me of his conversion, his eyes brewed like a storm.

‘I need you to listen,’ he began, ‘I need you to listen very carefully.’

The three black crows stood behind him. Ludovico hovered in the shadows.

‘I think you may know what it is I am to tell you.’

I did and it terrified me.

‘Marco, please.’

‘I want this to be a Godly home, Lucrezia.’

‘It is.’

He paused. The men behind him shuffled closer. Ludovico stood still, but somehow he seemed the most threatening.

‘It cannot be with such blasphemy all around us.’

‘Marco, it is not blasphemy.’

‘The Lord said do not worship false idols.’

‘Marco—’

‘We will live purely, Lucrezia. We shall be baptised anew.’

‘Baptised?’

‘We shall be born again as servants of Christ.’ He knelt on the ground and clasped my hands. ‘We shall rise from the fire repurified. We shall be clean.’

‘Marco, please—’

‘We shall be clean.’

The black men swooped.

I tried to arrange the pieces of the Virgin so they would sit together again. Frantic, my hands shook. I wept. ‘Forgive me, Holy Mother, forgive me.’ But they wouldn’t go. Her head slipped from her cracked and slanted neck.

I need you more than ever.

The girl appeared again. I could hardly see her through the gleam of my tears. She came toward me, hurrying, her little feet pattering. I reached out for her, but as she met the veil between our hands she vanished, and I was left alone with the shadows trapped between ceiling beams and walls that encroached like a tomb.

They took us to the river in the dark of night. The torches were extinguished where the streets widened and met the sharp bank.

‘Shh.’ They glanced about with quick eyes. The crows kept us covered in their black cloaks so we disappeared into the darkness with them.

It was a cold rush, sudden and suffocating. When they held me down I could have wept. Under the water time seemed to slow. I became both weightless and

heavy, as divine as a prayer. Their words garbled and distorted through the murk and so I knew that they were not real. It was their intention alone that held me there, and so long as it was not mine it would remain as fluid as the river. Do not leave me, I said to the Virgin, and as a face seemed to appear through the reeds and rushes, I knew that she would not.

I emerged from the riverbank shivering, water rushing from my thin shift. Marco surfaced beaming. The hope that he held in his puffed up chest cast a light around his eyes, closed, his face the most at peace I had ever seen it. I wondered if this would mean the change he thought it would, if we could return home like secrets in the night and whisper into bed. He rose from the water like a titan. But on his back deep rivers of welts, fresh upon new scars, spread from the base of his spine to his neck. I reached lightly to trace my fingers along the red river veins. ‘What is this? Have you been—’

He spun and took my hand. He kissed my forehead and his lips were like ice. The cold air cut the back of my throat. I shivered. Marco pulled me closer. He was warm somehow. He was soft. I pressed my head into the soft hollow of his neck. He swept the wet hair from where it clung on the back of my neck.

‘Let’s go home,’ he whispered.

‘What shall I do?’

We sat by the river where the colours of the wool mills of the Borgo Ognissanti swirled as rainbows in the water.

‘He has not changed the truth that’s in your heart, Lucrezia. Faith is intention and intention alone. He can never take from you your inner world.’ He kissed my hand. ‘Hold fast. We will find a way.’

‘I need you to know ...’ I said.

'I know,' he said. 'I do too.'

The child,' says the bailiff. The tower is cold now. Snow has drifted through the slit and rested on the ground in a strike like lightning. 'How did you bring forth the demon in her womb?'

Father Thomas looks despairingly at the ground. His lips purse. His eyes cannot seem to steady. Mathilde hangs limp, swinging, just as the dead do. She opens her eyes and rests them on Father Thomas.

'Was it the incubus with which you fornicated?'

She can no longer answer such questions. The incubus, she thinks, that demon. She remembers a demon. He comes to her as a man does. He tells her that she's beautiful. He brings her a rose. He makes goose bumps prick along her skin and he takes his hand to the sweet place.

'In what guise did the Devil present himself to you?' The Bailiff's voice is angry now. Father Thomas grimaces. The watchman, red and beady, casts his eyes away.

Mathilde lifts with all the strength of her feeble bones and because the girl is waiting, just behind the Bailiff, she gains the gall to speak.

'I knew the Devil.'

The Bailiff grins.

'I knew him well. He could not stop for want of me and I could not stop for want of him.' She spits and blood spots the white on the ground. She thinks on the fair haired demon and his trembling hands. The Devil made her feel her skin like fire. He made her blood run fast. 'The Devil gave me life,' she says. 'And the Devil took it away.'

In the cloisters of bent boughs, a chorus of twittering cicadas, winged flutter, little acorn deaths, a bouquet of sage, and a moon, luminous and full, man and wife stood together. The fire plumed from its incensed kindling and moths flocked as I stood at that burning altar. I rested my fingertips on the couple's joined hands. My two great loves. My sister, and now my brother. I removed the cord from my waist and bound their hands together, once around, and then again.

‘Do you take this woman?’ I asked of him.

‘I take this woman.’ He grinned.

‘And do you take this man?’

‘I take this man.’

I took the forget-me-nots, pale as morning sky, and slipped a knot in the stem. I gave it to Matti.

‘With this ring I thee wed.’ He placed it on her thumb.

‘And with my body I thee worship.’

‘For fair or foul.’

‘In sickness and health.’

‘Till death.’

‘Till death.’

A little silence passed in leaf flutter.

‘Is that how it goes?’ Matti asked between stifled laughter.

‘It is for us,’ Anna replied.

‘And so,’ I declared, ‘in the presence of the Holy Mother, of the moon, the creatures of the earth and sky,’ I giggled, as did they, ‘I declare you man and wife.’

Anna threw the broom down, took Matti's hand, and they leapt over the strangled wood.

Michel was staring, hot and eager. I could hardly hold myself still. I was weightless, swollen, tipping.

Matti picked up his new bride, threw her over his shoulder as she squealed. 'Excuse us,' he said, leaping towards the thicket. 'It is not official yet.' Her giggles dispersed into the trees.

And then I could let myself plunge. And drunk as we were on wine, on moonlight and bright stones, and that fever so fervent the air was bloated with it, we led one another away. We fell into moss, soft as duck down. Goose bumps puckered on the backs of my thighs as they met the air. He stroked the cave of my belly, raked the ridge where my ribs struck the surface. He was gentle in those moments. I felt every fibre tense, every slight tension of muscle flex, and my blood course under the skin. Even my hair, the dry and brittle mass he wrapped sometimes in his fists, that he pulled and tugged and washed himself in, delighting in its smells, its softness, seemed to prick alive with each little audience with his touch. I never felt more present than with his hands on me. They reminded me that I was here, on the earth, in my skin. And the proof of that presence, of the corporality he gave me daily, was now growing in me. And because I felt all of those trembles, and all the silent rushings that hovered just at the surface, waiting, until that rupture, when it came it consumed all of me. And I laughed aloud, like always, and I clenched until, with one final release, he too fell back in simple relief.

We sat side by side. There was a raven in the tree. It turned to us with strange eyes. It rose, its long wings stretched, the blackest I'd ever seen, and landed by our feet. Quickly, I drew in my legs.

‘Careful,’ he said. He leant forward and held out his hand as though to coax it. It swayed as it moved, the black sheen shimmering. It pecked the tips of my shoes. ‘I don’t think she likes me.’

‘No.’ He laughed. ‘Shoo,’ he said, and threw a stick. But the bird hovered. ‘Oh, you’re all right, aren’t you?’ He reached out his hand and the raven came to him. ‘You never told me,’ he said, as the raven considered the hand, ‘what is all this for, this strange ceremony. A wedding?’

‘Anna is expecting.’

He laughed. ‘Ah, that’s a way to trap a man, to be sure. You’re taking pains to avoid such a thing, I hope?’

The raven flocked. Its wings beat heavy, startled, just as a scream ripped the air. I looked to the forest.

‘What was that?’ I hissed. That was when I saw it. A glint of something white and blue, hinted in shadow. Such colours did not belong in the forest. I grew panicked, quick with dread. The same dread I’d vomited on the byway. A hint in passing shadow.

There came a howl. I stood quickly.

‘Do you see?’ I whispered.

A howl again.

‘Do you hear?’ The air was sharp and cold. Careful, careful. Tread soft. I crept forward. A branch cracked under heel. The white figure moved sideways through slanted shadows.

‘Do you not see?’

‘What should I see?’

A step. Another. ‘There,’ I pointed. The white was glowing. ‘It’s moving.’

The light grew brighter. I grew puzzled as the form drew nearer. I could have sworn it looked like a girl.

‘Anna?’ I called.

And then there was another noise. A crash. The sound of heavy boots. Cries. Lights—yellow, orange—flickered in the thicket.

‘Anna!’ I cried again. There was a scream. The voices were rough, loud, but I couldn’t make them out. I watched the orange glow flicker between dark trunks. I turned back to where the strange white form had appeared and saw that it was gone. I ran toward the sound of a second scream. There was no doubt this time it was Anna.

I emerged back in the clearing, the fire glowing humbly in sparking embers, and around it, shrouded in heavy cloaks with dying lanterns, four men. The watchman, the bailiff, Father Thomas and Erik Walder. Anna and Matti were shivering, hardly covered, their arms protectively around one another. I turned behind me to find I was alone.

‘There she is,’ the watchman said.

‘Told you there was another,’ added Erik.

I looked from one man to the next.

‘What is happening? Where is Michel?’

‘What is all this?’ the bailiff asked. He approached the fire and looked down at the empty bottles, the crude bunch of bundled herbs, my little stone in the lap of the Virgin and the light that refracted in blue. The same blue seemed to stretch through the wood, so each skinny, jutting branch became some leering sprite. Soaked in mist, the forest snapped. He picked it up, he marvelled at the little thing in his hand.

‘Examine this,’ he said, placing it in the hand of Father Thomas. ‘Are there any others here tonight?’

Michel, I thought to say, but I didn’t. Their grave faces hinted nothing.

‘Was there any other of your party here tonight?’ he repeated, louder.

Matti and Anna shook their heads.

‘It’s witchcraft, I told you all. They killed my Catherine. Used her blood in their rituals.’

They looked together at the little broomstick lying by the fire.

‘Arrest them,’ the bailiff said, simply.

‘What? Why?’ I protested feebly. The watchman came toward us.

Anna fell back into Matti’s arms. Her whimper filled the forest. And still the acorns thumped on the ground. An owl hooted. The watchman drew my hands behind my back.

‘Mathilde!’ Anna rushed forward but the bailiff blocked her way. Her face was bone white.

‘We weren’t doing anything, nothing against the law.’ Matti shook his head. He reached forward for Anna protectively, to pull her back to him. ‘We were celebrating, that’s all.’

‘We can see that,’ the bailiff said. He picked up one of the bottles and sniffed. ‘And where did you get all this? I did not realise you had such an extensive cellar, Matthias.’

Matti stumbled. ‘No, I know—’

‘You stole it? Or conjured it perhaps?’ the voice was so stern. So bereft of emotion.

‘What? No, of course not.’

‘This is a strange scene, Matthias, I am sure you understand.’ Father Thomas added, gently. ‘What was this celebration?’

‘An unholy ritual.’ The bailiff turned to Father Thomas. He shook his head.

‘A betrothal, we wanted to celebrate merely, that is all.’

‘Even if it was such a ceremony, Kramer, it would be binding still in the eyes of God,’ said Father Thomas.

And still the watchman held my arms.

‘Take them to the tower, we’ll settle this in the morning.’

In a small room above the dining hall, rows of chairs were set before a wooden platform. On top was a tall cabinet, a black curtain across the front. We squeezed between knees and chairs and sat close to the centre aisle. The gas dimmed. As Arthur walked onto the platform a hush swept the audience, a palpable shiver of expectation. Arthur revelled in it. He rubbed his palms together.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he began with a great sweep of his arms. ‘Good evening. I am Arthur Hawkins and it is my great pleasure to introduce you tonight to a most remarkable young woman. She will demonstrate to us one of the most incredible feats you are likely to see in this, our most marvellous scientific age. From her mother’s kitchen in Camden, proof that the most delicate flowers are to be found in the roughest terrain, I proudly present Miss Charlotte Griffin.’

There was a smattering of applause. The waif from Camden emerged. She curtsied and stepped sideways out of the light.

‘Miss Charlotte is—I’m sure you all appreciate—of a very delicate constitution. She has been meditating these last few hours, preparing herself as host for the spirits. I really feel I must reiterate: the feat Miss Charlotte is about to perform is one of the most exhausting acts a medium can accomplish. But of course, such a thing comes with the greatest reward.’ As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, Arthur’s form appeared more clearly. His teeth shone ghostly white and his cheekbones were shadowed, sinister. He grinned too strangely. I felt unsettled.

‘Miss Charlotte, please.’ He gestured towards the cabinet and like a puppet on string, she followed the line of his arm. Mr Hawkins asked for a gentleman of reason and intellect to inspect the panelling, the chair and ropes. John’s eager hand was ignored in favour of another; a man whose vest was hardly able to contain his bulk.

He twirled his white moustache as he checked it inside and out. Being satisfied, Mr Hawkins took Miss Charlotte's hand and let her inside, where she sat on a small dining chair. He held out a handful of ropes to the gentleman.

‘Please tie Miss Charlotte by the wrists, feet and waist to the chair.’

The man seemed taken aback, but acquiesced. I shuffled forward in my seat to see better. She hardly seemed to move. How could a person remain so still? Another man was called up to check that the medium was sufficiently secure. The scene began to make me uncomfortable. Her wrists looked childlike and frail bound in those thick ropes. I wondered if the twine would burn. I turned uneasily to Susannah, but she did not seem similarly afflicted.

‘Do you think it's too tight?’ I whispered. ‘Imagine it, allowing yourself to be bound in such a way. Suppose something should happen.’

Susannah patted my knee. ‘It is perfectly normal, my dear, I assure you.’ She tilted her head. ‘Arthur has everything under control.’

Mr Hawkins placed a tambourine and a harmonica on a wooden table like the one in Susannah's parlour. He grinned conspiratorially at us all before he walked to the edge of the stage. The faint lights dimmed almost to darkness. There was just enough light to make out forms and shapes—just enough to cast shadows.

‘And so we begin.’ Mr Hawkins strode to the far wall. There he remained, his visibility and distance a reminder to his audience that he could not be complicit in fraud.

It is difficult to explain the melodious sounds that began to seep from indistinct pockets of the room. First, there was a light but distinct jingle, like the approaching bells of far off carollers whispering over cold, snowy nights. The tambourine rattle lacked any recognisable beat or rhythm, but when the hum of the harmonica joined the ghostly composition, the sounds morphed into something almost recognisable.

Nervous giggles from the crowd. The gaslights flickered and shadows danced on the walls. The table began to rock. I could hear stifled gasps. And in that concentrated stillness, alert and uncertain, I began to sense another *him*. Just as Mona Griffin's long dead suitor had come to me those few weeks past, I was becoming aware of a new he, another long dead man, standing in the dark behind me.

My blood ran cold.

I reached out to Susannah and she ran her fingers along the ridges of my palm, tracing circles in my skin. It tingled. If I concentrated on her, the way her heat radiated, then I could ignore *him*. I could make him disappear. I thought about the way our thighs met, side by side, how her chest rose and fell so slightly and how her breath didn't make a sound.

From the corner of my eye I noticed movement, slight and slow, emanating from the cabinet. A white figure caught the faintest sigh of a breeze, floated forward. Murmurs rippled across the crowd. The figure glided down the centre aisle, closer. My little panic turned to hope. A girl, they whispered—those who could see her more clearly as she passed—a girl. She was little, pale as a napkin. Her long wispy arms reached and stroked the hands and shoulders of her audience. A gasp carried through all the room. I sat straight. She looked so like her. A pale blue ribbon around her waist. But it wasn't, it couldn't be. There were no short ringlets, no curls or apple cheeks. The dark curtains of hair fell open to reveal a face. My heart dropped so quickly it could have swallowed me into the cavern it carved.

The dreamy figure stooped and laid a kiss on the cheek of a gentleman.

'So cold!' he whispered, laying a hand to his face.

She floated forward to caress the cheek of a woman in mourning. She produced a flower from the ether and with a curtsy presented it to the gentleman next to her. No, it clearly was not Sophie. And yet—

The figure drew closer, slowly, but with each short step her face, the face so arguably not Sophie's, did, it seemed, begin to change. It was as though she was layered, like she wore a mask. I could surely not be the only one who saw it. I looked at Susannah—her eyes were narrowed, squinting. She looked as puzzled as I felt.

'Remarkable,' said John. He sank back in his chair. When I looked back to the girl I saw that indeed, her face was changing. It was subtle, like an optical illusion. I was sure that if my eyes were to shift focus that pale dark haired girl would reappear. Instead, she seemed to grow younger, apple cheeked and rosy.

'Sophie?' I whispered.

'Mama.' She smiled. Her hand reached out, slowly, slowly, and just as I thought my heart couldn't bear it, she took mine. 'Oh Heavens, Sophie.' I pressed my face against her hand, cold and soft, and kissed. Her fingers held tight to mine. Tighter, tighter. Then they squeezed, hard. 'Sophie?' I looked up. I gasped. It was not my daughter. It was not even the girl. It was the man. That man who had lingered behind me in the darkness. He crushed my hand and I screamed.

Susannah grasped my arm and tried to pull it back. John too reached across to me. I could hear chairs screeching across the wooden floorboards. Hurried gasps and cries. Somehow, through the girl's soft features, the form of a brute appeared. It seemed a wonder that she could contain the bulk of him. Though the face had changed, jawline heavysset, cheeks puffed and red, and the head bald, the figure was still in every sense female. I'd never seen anything like it. Then his mouth opened, he rasped horrid, his lips quivered as though trying to find the power to speak.

'Murderess!' The palimpsest face was a haze.

I tugged my hand but it would not come. Even the texture of those hands, so suddenly soft and cool, were rough now and calloused.

'Emma?'

I tugged and tugged again, and still his tirade continued. 'You killed her! Murderer!' The figure clutched its chest. Heaving. I could see nothing but that red, red face. I felt like I was drowning, draining into some whirlpool. I shook my head. No, no, no. I clawed at my arms.

'Murderess,' he screamed, 'murderess!'

I was faint as gossamer. I was silk unravelled. He pulled me.

The dark shapes of frantic shuffling, screeching, running, men and women cleared the room. Susannah tugged at my hands.

'I'm sorry,' I cried, 'I'm so sorry.'

Arthur tackled the spirit. The figure landed on the ground. Still he cried, 'I cannot breathe! Vile, vile woman. Whore! Witch!'

Susannah and John pulled me up. A man flung open the cabinet door.

'She's gone!' he cried. 'Miss Charlotte is gone! It's her, there, on the ground!' He pointed to the figure struggling under Arthur's weight. Her slim wrists fought hard against his, punching, wailing. And then, just as suddenly, her head fell back. The mask slipped. She was Charlotte again. John and Susannah pulled me toward the door but I kept my head turned back to watch. Arthur looked up at me. He glared.

They carried me down the stairs. All those eyes watched fearfully. I was trembling. They sat me in the nearest booth and I slumped in the corner. I could still hardly see the world. But some unbidden guilt gnawed far below the surface of my skin. My stomach clenched as if razors scraped the insides. Murderess. Witch. The words were haunting. John pushed a glass of water before me.

'Emma, what was that?'

'I don't know,' I said. I shook my head. My mind had never felt so crowded. I was crying but I could not feel it. I looked at my trembling hands.

Sophie chokes. Darling, darling. Be not afraid. She coughs again. Blood on her palm. Her pain is tangible and it moves between us. My Sophie. Her face is drawn, white. Red on her cracked lips. Her eyes are bloodshot, raw. She no longer cries, but whimpers. The bath water swishes. I cannot bear it. It will be over soon, my dear one, it will be over soon.

But then another image, so unlike the first, overcame it. I see a man and I strip him bare. I hold him in my hands and squeeze. I squeeze until his eyes burst and his blood bubbles. Ghastly. I could not imagine where such a thing could come from. But as horrified as I was, the inkling of glee in that moment, in the joy of such power, was not strange to me.

There was a commotion from the corner of the room. Benches and chairs screeched. Arthur was descending the stairs with Charlotte tucked under his shoulder. He held his arm out protectively. 'Let us alone, I insist.' He pressed through the crowd. They shouted at him, questions, demands, accusations. What happened? they cried. What went wrong? Was it fraud? Was it pretence all along? He came through the crowd quickly and led Charlotte through the door. As he turned to leave he looked at us, Susannah and I, side by side in the booth in the back corner of the room. He mouthed something that I could not make out. Then he turned. But before the door closed, I saw him hesitate. He looked back and pointed across the heads of all those people. But this time it was not an accusation. It was a direction. I leaned forward and peered more closely. Two men were behind him, dark in cloaks and hidden by the shadows of their hats. They stepped through the door and into the light. I gasped and sunk low. My heartbeat struck up again, that most fearsome rhythm.

'Quickly,' I said. 'Come.' I crawled from the seat, low, face hidden.

‘What is it?’ Susannah peered down at me. But she knew something was wrong. I scrambled from the booth and took her hand. I was thankful then for the crowd that had followed Arthur, harassing him, for they provided cover.

‘Edward,’ I said, as I pulled Susannah across the room. ‘And Gissing.’ We scrambled back up the stairs to the empty room. I looked around, exasperated. Why had I not thought to look for a back door? Now we were trapped here should they ascend. I stood by the wall and paused there a moment, listening. I could only hear the distant rabble below.

The gas lanterns had not yet been dimmed, so we could see the once mysterious instruments of trade. The cabinet sat on the stage. I could now see the flakes of wood peeling from the edges, the strips and stains—the very ordinariness of it. The wood was thin and cheap, ropes were strung lazily across the chair. There was a slipped knot on the ground.

‘It really was fraud. That spirit control was no spirit, only Charlotte.’ I held up the rope before Susannah.

She sighed. ‘Perhaps at first, but something happened to her. She may not have manifested a spirit, but she was certainly overtaken by one.’ She stroked the wood panelling. ‘But it’s just all so ordinary, isn’t it? Can you feel it?’ she asked. ‘Can you feel the power here?’

Perhaps I could. Or perhaps it was Susannah herself that made my skin feel like an ice bath. The slightest shift of air lifted the hairs up and down my arms.

‘Tell me you feel it,’ she said.

I felt everything.

Then I heard the tread of feet echo on the stairwell. Susannah pulled me into the cabinet and drew the curtain across. Her soft breath tickled my nose. Our crinolines

pressed together. She placed her finger on her pursed lips. The footsteps drew closer. I could hear just the thump of blood in my ears.

The tread passed from the far corner of the room to the opposite.

‘Emma?’ There was a pause, two voices mumbling.

‘She doesn’t seem to be up here.’

I recognised Edward’s voice. I squeezed my eyes shut. If you cannot see them, they cannot see you. An infantile response. I became aware of the sounds of my body. A gurgle like a drain, the hiss of air like far off rain. Our bodies are not for silent working; like factories, they constantly crank on. Only in death are we truly silent. My pulse thumped in a rhythm that synced with Susannah’s. Her fingers brushed against my own. They say the cabinet is a conduit for energy. The narrow space and wooden walls act as charges. They collect the medium’s energy and help it spark, like a tinder box. The cabinet soaked up our energy too. It threw our heartbeats, our slow sighing breaths into the wood.

‘They’re gone,’ I whispered. But still we did not move. Susannah’s hands ran up to my waist. She gripped the sides of my bodice.

‘Emma,’ she whispered.

Her head hung down, so that I could feel the loose strands of hair against my cheek.

‘I expect it may shock you ...’ she trailed off. ‘But then perhaps not.’

‘I know,’ I said.

But I did feel something like shock. Shocked because I never thought myself capable of the immense feeling that was expanding inside me.

‘Emma, please, forgive me, but I must.’ She hooked her fingers under my chin and tilted it up toward her own. Pressed her mouth to mine. She tasted like French

summer wine. The world fell away, scattering like petals dashed in a flurry of wind. I was not afraid then; not of anything.

‘I’m sorry.’ She pulled away. She traced her fingers along my collarbone, against the lacing on my chest. I took her hand and guided it to my neck. I needed to feel her on my skin.

When Edward first kissed me his rough beard had scratched my chin, his moustache tickled my nose and I’d nearly lost myself to laughter. But I was young. My first kiss had made me girlish, giggly, hardly at all like I felt in that cabinet.

She whispered something in my ear and still now, in this dark and unforgiving place, it is what keeps my soul from descending to most wretched depths. She whispered, ‘My love, my twin flame, together we’ll burn out the darkness.’

But then the footsteps returned. A thudding, harder, much harder now than before. They came directly toward the cabinet, to where we stood together in the dark, with our hair and mouths entwined.

The doors opened.

‘Who are you?’ Lucrezia asks when the girl returns.

‘Sophie,’ she says.

Lucrezia remembers that name. She remembers Jacopo reading to her of Wisdom. Of the woman who lurched the world into chaos, and who could bring it together again.

There she was, in the folds of pages pressed and pressed again, in the scrawled script of her lover, copied from the mystic Hildegard, Sophia.

I am the Supreme and Fiery Force who kindles every living spark....As I circled the whirling sphere with my upper wings (that is, with Wisdom) rightly I ordained it. And I am the fiery life of the Divine essence: I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And, with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life.

The girl closes her hand upon the book.

Lucrezia gasps. ‘And is it you?’

A childish giggle. ‘No.’

‘But then ...?’

The girl kneels down beside Lucrezia. She cannot take the pen, but she gestures to it. ‘Go on,’ she says. ‘Keep writing. I’ll be sure Mama remembers.’

Marco had taken me to my first secret gathering when he was still fresh with his new hope. It was important, he'd said, for me to understand how necessary it had been to convert. How much the Roman Church stank of sin and corruption.

'The nepotistic Popes, Paul, and Alexander before him, they happily forgive your sins so long as you'll pay for your indulgences.'

The entrance was dimly lit and quiet. There was a man slumped on the landing, a flask in one hand and the other resting on his codpiece. I tried to look away. The man groaned.

'But Grace is by faith alone.'

He sat up, spread out his hands. 'Please.'

'A man does good for love of Christ, not to earn his way to Paradise.'

His mouth fell open, revealing pitiful black stumps. Marco stepped around him. We ascended the stairs. We entered the room, a gloomy place, musky and stifling, peeling paint and creaking boards. It was a small group, mostly men. They spoke a soft babble. There were only a few candles and the shutters were bolted shut. I understood the secrecy, the need for discretion. Though arrests were not frequent, they were devastating. Torture, banishment, execution. Nobody wanted to be caught. The men turned to look at me as Marco and I entered.

A wiry man with thinning hair called the attention of his peers.

'We need only look to Saint Paul,' he said, pulling his fingers through his thinning hair, 'who shows us that God gives righteousness by faith to those who believe He has chastened through Christ all our sins, and that in Him we are forgiven. By faith alone.'

The crowd assented in cups and mugs that clanked on wood.

There was a voice from the back: ‘But in Scripture too we find justification by charity, forgiveness by works. What of that? What of the clergy, who renew us through repentance? Why do we do good, if not for Grace?’ A few heads turned to look to the source.

‘Bah, Galatians?’ A rough voice from the darkness. A man sat, sturdy, beside the preacher at the front of the room. ‘Fools,’ he said. He stood. Several men began to mumble to one another under their breaths. ‘Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, they show us the merits of Christ. To understand the tyranny of sin is to understand the righteousness of Christ and our deliverance by Him from the curse of sin, death, the devil and hell. Every man is his own ministry, and the Word belongs to him.’

‘Bernadino Occino,’ Marco whispered, glassy eyed. He stared in awe. The name was dust to me. But Marco held him in his sight, and like a schoolboy to his master, nodded in muted acquiescence.

‘The unrighteous sinner does not become purified by his works. To be acceptable to God he must purify his heart through faith. The works that follow shall be praised by God and commended by Christ, for they shall be the testimony of our faith, by which we are saved.’

He pulled a book from the folds of his cloak. He kept it by his heart. ‘I have received this from Venice.’ His fingers danced on the cover. ‘Written by our friend, Don Benedetto.’

Marco turned to me. He pulled his own copy out from the cloak at his breast.

‘These are dark times for us, friends.’

Marco’s fingers traced the stitching along the leather.

‘The Inquisitors are hunting us down like dogs. The Antichrist has us in his sight.’

The crowd jeered and hissed at mention of the Pope. I peered nervously around

the room. I held rosary beads in my pocket. I ran them between my fingers. The men in the room were becoming rowdy. Their fervour heated the December cool.

Hail Mary, full of Grace,

‘They will hunt us and burn us and chase us from their cities,’

The Lord is with Thee,

‘But we will fight.’

Blessed art thou among women,

‘Our northern friends are praying for us,’

And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus,

‘And we will not stop,’

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

‘Until the true faith prevails,

Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,

‘and Rome falls, and with it, the Antichrist, Paul III.’

They stomped their feet, they yelled, they bellowed.

Amen.

I thought of a moment, brief and stolen, beyond the city the day before. Jacopo held me. The dappled sun brightened the winter greens. A hare burst from the undergrowth.

‘Say no longer that God is invisible,’ Jacopo recited. ‘What is more manifest than God?’

The hare darted around our feet toward the copse at the bottom of the hill.

‘He has created all that you may see it through being. For that is the miraculous power of God.’

The hare caught in the brambles. It struggled to free its foot.

‘For nothing is invisible, not even the incorporeal.’

The hills rose, a vista of cyprus trees and olive groves that chase the stone walls along rough paths. Below, the city sprawled like a tapestry.

‘The intellect makes itself visible in the act of thinking; God makes Himself visible in the act of creating.’

The hare broke free, and rushed into the undergrowth. Jacopo chewed a strand of grass and tickled my neck.

‘And isn’t the world wonderful?’

Marco pulled me from my reverie with the sharp tug of my hand. The men in their black cloaks filed out, their new secrets tucked under their cloaks.

He held my arm for the long walk home and he pulled a rose from a pot from a store front along the Ponte Vecchio. ‘It lives,’ he said. ‘Just for you.’ He twirled it between his fingers. I had never seen such a smile on his face, not since our wedding. I took the rose. I sniffed the petals, wilted in the winter cold.

‘Thank you.’ I said, but I feared him. His passion was too zealous. I remembered my father’s stories of the things that happen to men when such fervour burns so bright. In the torchlight of a passing soldier, I could see the flames that consumed the free thoughts of men and the destruction that could have befallen this city. What would Marco do should he discover that I did not intend to leave my faith? That I would venerate the Virgin and her litany of saints always, for there was nothing that stirred that passion for me in his so dry religion. Is God truly too perfect to forgive? I could not accept, as Marco did, that our fate is already decided. That we honour God because he has chosen us for the task. But he was my husband and I was bound to him. I had to stop on the street. I sat on a stone bench by the river.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, sitting beside me. He placed his hand on my leg. I looked at it as a rose petal fell and landed on top. In the moonlight it looked almost like a drop of blood. My realisation was swift.

I held my stomach, for I thought I would be sick. I couldn't cry before him, I couldn't let him see. I stifled a groan.

'Is it—' he leaned in close to my ear to whisper, 'is it Eve's curse?' He looked as though he disgusted himself just by saying the words.

'No,' I said. And then I realised.

If I ever needed the aid of the Virgin, it was then.

How can a place remain so deathly chilled, even in the midst of summer? The night was still, silent and aching. Wine throbbed in my temples. I thought I'd be sick. Anna was weeping against the wall. She still had her forget-me-not, pale and withered, on her thumb. Cracks spread like lightning strikes from the ceiling to the windows, tiny slivers that let in nothing but bitter frost. It was my first time in the tower. It's strange to think that once I did not know the dimples of each brick, the number of them along each wall, and how the strip of light moved, inch by creeping inch, from one side to the other. But it was summer then.

She slept finally. Her breath was shallow, her face thin and hollow. Had she eaten at all? I couldn't think. Her cheeks were sunken, thick black under her eyes. Sometimes I felt Anna so close in my bones it was like we were one. Mamé told us two calves with demon heads on one shared neck were born many years past. Such wretched beasts, their lives were short for the farmer cried devil and the labourers were quick to kill. They kept the heads for strange spectacle, stuffed with clay and bits of sticks and bone, on a cart by the churchyard. When Agnes Stark burned, they blamed the demon calf on her dark crafts and burnt the remains that morning. Two beings are not supposed to be fused so close. Unnatural, the priest said, demonic. The smell of those twin killings lingered for days.

She squeezed my hand and moaned.

'All right, my sweet?' I asked.

She dug her head into my shoulder and I held her there like she was a child.

'We'll be out of here soon,' I said. I hoped.

'We did nothing,' she whispered.

'Hush. I know.'

I rocked her and stared up at the ceiling, lost in the dark. Where were they keeping Matti? In the other tower? In stocks, in the cold?

Anna rolled her head strangely. Her face was bunched and her lips turned down. Then she vomited in a puddle beside her. I pulled her hair back, whispered comforts. But as I spoke, a strange panic told me otherwise. And it came so suddenly. Even as she rested back against the wall and a bitter stench laced the air, I felt the need to check her.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked.

She nodded, but didn’t open her eyes. It was just the drink, I told myself. No need to panic. But it was impossible to quash that voice once it rose. I checked her breathing and wiped her mouth. If only I had some water. There was nothing more to do but wait.

But still that warning voice kept on.

She waved me off. ‘Try to sleep,’ she said. ‘They can’t keep us here long, surely.’ Her voice was strained. She rested her head once more on my shoulder. I closed my eyes.

I felt like I’d slipped through time. I woke, startled, to her frantic, shuddering frame.

‘Anna?’ I held her by both arms. The dark obscured the menace of it. I couldn’t see if her eyes were shut or rolling in her head, but I could see liquid pool between her lips. Her neck bent unnaturally, her arms seized and like a whiplash, her leg struck out. I lost my balance. Then the panic was real.

‘Anna, oh, please, Annie.’

A beastly gargle. Fetid wine, half-digested with bile, ran down the sides of her mouth. I tried to pull her, to move her head so she didn’t drown in it. But she was seized hard and heavy, and her neck wouldn’t budge.

‘Anna!’ Desperate, desperate. My hands trembled, my eyes watered. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t act. I tugged her arm so she fell sideways and vomited onto the stone floor and then she began to convulse again. The whites of her eyes. That demonic gargle. I tried to clear her mouth but it kept coming. I pleaded to Mamé, to the Virgin, to the woman with the bow. *Tell me what to do.* My vision blurred. I called for light to fill my hands, that healing light. But it hadn’t saved Catherine. Don’t think such thoughts—banish the dark. Mamé come close. Come into my skin. Work through my hands.

She gasped. She choked. Her back arched, her neck bent in that demon splay. I held my hands to her chest. Weeping.

A final desperate plea. Holy Mother, Mamé, anyone.

And then she was still.

I don’t remember how they found me. Shivering. Rocking. They wheeled her out in a cart. Matti was waiting in the street by the gate. He watched it pass—covered, brown linen, rolling unsteady over the dirt. He saw me alone then looked back to the cart. I descended the stairs, crossed the street. There was a blanket over my shoulders—the watchman’s kindness. I fell into him. ‘She’s gone,’ I said, simply.

The blade, when I placed it to my lip, was sharp. Cold. A hare rustled from the ferns. That huntress, the woman with the bow, Diana, was before me. I’d dug her from beneath the tumbled stones of our little shrine. Tears blotted the dirt by my knees.

Anna, I pleaded. I sought her with the moon bright above me. Three votive candles and the blue stone, perfectly centred, in the flickering triangle. Come into me. Take your place beside me, inside me. If I could call on Mamé and the spirits to

guide my healing hand, why then could I not call Anna into my body? I no longer felt the flesh that housed me. I asked again.

But Anna did not come. Nor did Mamé, or the spirits that I knew. The light of that strange spectre appeared again.

‘What do you want?’ Grating, coarse, the cries tore my throat. Black birds, startled, flocked.

I fell forward to the earth. Clutching the dewy green. I ripped up the earth and it blew away behind me.

I hardly felt when I sliced it up, lip to nostril. The flesh parted like butter and the blood came like milk. It pooled on my tongue. I licked the new split and as my heartbeat quickened and my breath grew short, I fell back and into my own deep fit I seized.

Mamma be cheerful because you only need to listen. The good doctor will help you.

You can use this writing to talk not only with me. It will help you to understand.

I love you very much Mamma but I must go to the others I will try to come soon but I may not. Be careful Mamma, and listen to your self. There are many who love you, do not forget. She especially sends you her love.

She comes to in her own room. Her body is limp and sore from throwing herself around and now that her anger has abated she feels calm. She dreamt of Mary, a strange vision, for she knew nothing of the woman. But she is familiar. She stretches and yawns, and as she does so, her hand slips underneath her pillow. It comes upon something strange, something that crinkles and rustles. She grabs at the strange thing and squints at it. Her head still throbs and her ear rings in a high pitched frequency so she shakes her head and rubs her ear and then she opens the envelope that she's found in her hand.

The sound of my heartbeat was unsettling. It was all I could hear. I'd been alone for some time. Alone for the sake of my nerves. No ifs and no buts, he'd said, no, not anything but bed. Bed without supper. Nothing that wouldn't be told to a naughty child. He had paced that first night, up and back, again and again. A remarkable calm. Nothing to be done, he'd said, nothing to be done. Up and back, up and back. Nothing to be done.

My legs were sore from lying still; my back ached where it curved. My underarms were dank, my hair lank and greasy. I did not care to move. I pretended to sleep when I was awake, and when I slept I dreamt of sleeping. A nesting doll of somnolence. I hardly knew when one day ended and the next began. I climbed inside myself and when I felt any sense of familiarity, of comfort, I climbed within again. It was a way to feel of myself and yet not of myself. In numbness I was distant, and in distance I was almost free.

Nothing to be done. I stared at the wall with eyes still as marble. I watched the colours of the room transform. Patterns emerged—strange, illuminated patterns—that shifted in the damask wallpaper. I thought I'd seen a face, supplicant, divine: Saint Anne, sudden and blue, her features obscured as though chipped away.

In that void I came close to amniotic calm. I bathed in eiderdown and pillows and submerged so the world was distorted— it gurgled, strange. After some days with only myself and Jane—the new maid, my keeper—I began to sense that familiar restlessness. I thought of the night I'd run and laughed at myself. It seemed so very far away.

It perplexed me that I could let myself end up here again.

And yet I could hardly do anything else. Old patterns were too difficult to dispel.

Jane arrived in the morning with tea and bread and jam and I asked her for a pen and ink, something to write on. She hesitated because she was under such strict orders with me, but I suppose she thought there could be no harm so she fetched some. I used the breakfast tray as my desk and hurried a letter to Susannah. But I found myself caught on the embossed insignia in the centre of the paper. E.B of Hampstead. Such a thing to be struck by. I could hardly pull my eyes from it. Is it a silly thing, I began to wonder, a frivolity? Did Jane have personalised stationery? Would her cards come from a particular paper shop on Bond Street, as mine did? I tapped the nib on the page. I coloured over the E.B. I scratched it so the page tore a little. But what need would she have for paper? For a little E.B on the top of the page? But of course, I laughed, it would hardly read E.B. She had her own name, quite different to mine. An ordinary name for an ordinary girl. I stopped again. What made Jane so ordinary? I knew nothing about her, not really. I summoned her to the side of the bed.

‘Tell me, Jane. Do you write often?’

She seemed bewildered. ‘I did at school, ma’am, when I went. My mama told me to write her now that I’m here. I haven’t yet, I’ve been meaning to, only ...’

‘And what do you intend to tell your mother when you write her?’

‘That I am well, I suppose, and to ask after the little ones.’

‘No reflections on your new life here? On the differences from where you’ve come from to where you are?’ I grinned then, teasing.

She only shrugged a little and drew her hands to her skirt.

‘Would you say you have a developed and complicated inner life?’

‘I—I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Are you capable of such a thing, Jane?’

She hesitated. Poor thing. Her hair was tied up but I could tell it was thin. She could only be fifteen if a day, but she was pretty. Blue eyes, straight teeth. I wondered if she had a sweetheart.

‘Do you have desires? Ambitions? Do you wonder about your place in the world? About God? About the universe?’

She looked at me for a bit. ‘Sometimes in church,’ she started, ‘I wonder how big God is. How big Heaven could be.’

‘When I was a child, I dreamt of a Heaven with tall marble arches covered in vines, wisteria, ivy, a blue sky that never darkened—a beautiful place, exquisite—and at the feet of all those arches and towering columns, bodies, heaped one upon the other, for all eternity. There was no consciousness in this Heaven, just lumps of dead things preserved forever. Does that not strike you as strange?’

‘I suppose, ma’am.’

‘And now here I am,’ I smiled pleasantly at her. She twisted her skirt in her hands. Poor thing. ‘Do you know why they keep me in this bed?’

She looked toward the door. She seemed to puzzle at something. Finally, she shook her head. ‘No, ma’am. Not properly. Only that you are unwell.’

‘Unwell. Yes.’ I laughed. ‘So very unwell.’ I scratched again at the page.

‘Would you send a letter for me, Jane?’

‘I would have to check with the master.’

‘Of course, yes, of course. I assure you it will be well. It is only a friend. A dear friend. To tell her that I am recovering, you see.’

She nodded. I felt the nib pierce through the page again. I tore it up. ‘If only I had some different paper!’ The lines were pale blue and seemed to blur together.

‘Really,’ I said, ‘it is insufferably flimsy. I might as well write on gossamer.’ I threw

it down. 'Do I need my initials in the centre of the page, Jane? Is my signature not enough?'

She took a hesitant step back. 'Perhaps I shall see if Mr Blount has any paper?'

'No, no, no,' I said. I reached my hand out across the tray. 'No it is fine, Jane, it is fine. I am only being silly. I am only being a silly, silly creature.' I felt my spine arch of its own accord. A strain ran up my back. I shivered. I hunched back over the tray. 'Wait there a moment, Jane, just hold there. I must write this letter and then you must send it for me. It will only take a moment.'

'Of course.'

I scribbled hastily, line after line. The page tore. I ripped it, tossed it to the side and started again. When I finished I felt a flood of relief. It had become somehow in the writing a most momentous task. An urgent task. I asked for an envelope and seal and when Jane brought them over I stamped the little pale blue rectangle and kissed the place where the lip sealed.

'Take this and post it immediately.' I held the envelope out to her, but just as she reached for it I snatched it back. 'No.' I hugged it to myself, 'I shall take it myself. Yes, I shall take it myself. I need a walk. This room is stifling. Couldn't you open the window?'

'It's snowing outside, ma'am, I don't think ...'

I set the tray aside and tried to stand.

'Mrs Blount, I really think—'

'Oh, hush. Did Edward tell you to ensure I do not stand? Do not walk? Did he command you watch over me? Are you a little *spy*, Jane?'

She looked like she might cry. Poor thing.

'I told her,' said a voice from the doorway. Gissing was standing half in shadow.

'It's all right, Jane, I'll see to Mrs Blount now.'

I was overcome with a sudden, most dreadful panic. 'Jane,' I hissed, 'you must send this letter. Do not let him have it. You must do it yourself, now, do you hear?' I could hear him coming closer. 'Please!' Her eyes darted from mine to his, over my shoulder. She took the letter and straightened. Her face was creased with worry.

'Thank you, Jane, that will be all,' he said. He seemed only shadow when I looked at him. It must have been the way the dull winter light cast his form in silhouette. And yet the rest of the room did not seem quite so dark. Jane curtsied quickly and hurried out of the room.

'You've upset the girl,' he said when she was gone. 'She can hardly be expected to understand your condition.'

'Who are you to say what she does and does not understand?'

He paused and pursed his lips. Then, he placed his black bag on the table and its two sides fell open wide, like a jaw about to snap. 'Now, Emma, tell me, how have you been sleeping?' He pulled out the speculum.

‘Where were you?’ I was standing at his study door. I’d pushed past the maid when she opened the front door and left her protests behind me. He tensed when he saw me. Told me to shut the door. My hair hung limp. It was warmer in the room than it had been outside. I walked to the mantle, picked up a candlestick. The handle was delicately carved. I considered the other ornaments. A bowl with two peacocks, an almanac bound in leather and Saint Sebastian with an arrow in his chest.

‘Mathilde,’ he said. I didn’t turn yet. There were eagles carved into the beam above the doorway. I heard a creak from upstairs. He pursed his lips when our eyes met. He was at his desk, parchment stacked loosely before him. He put down his quill.

‘Mathilde, please,’ he said again. He stood quickly and approached. He took my chin in his hand. ‘What happened to your face? Oh God, did you...?’

I pushed away his hand. ‘Where were you?’ I asked again.

‘I’m so sorry about Anna.’

My breath was rapid. ‘Where were you?’

‘Mathilde, I’m marrying Ursule.’

A pause. ‘I know.’

His breath held the silence. ‘Then you know why I couldn’t be found with—’

‘No.’

He walked to the mantle and examined the candlestick.

‘I have to marry her. You don’t understand.’

But I did. ‘She’s with child.’

‘Yes,’ he said, simply.

‘Do you love her?’ I didn’t expect myself to ask such a thing, nor did I expect the sadness that lingered as I waited for his response.

‘I do.’

I bristled. She must have tricked him, seduced him, made him believe it his. He wasn’t supposed to love her. That sadness turned into rage. Could he have loved me? The child that really carried his blood?

He clenched the candlestick. ‘It was always her. You’re a distraction, and that is all. I don’t know why I can’t help myself around you.’ His agitation was sudden. He threw the candlestick against the wall. It smacked and rebounded, rolling across the floorboards.

‘I couldn’t be caught there with you, Mathilde.’ He strode toward me. ‘Do you understand what you are to me?’ He loomed. His rough stubble had grown to a thick and unkempt beard. ‘Do you understand *who* you are to me? My father owned a quarter of this village. Your house! You’re a bastard, a beggar. You sell trinkets and herbs to keep from starving. It was always going to be Ursule.’

I was frozen. There was something happening in him, something I hadn’t seen. How could I have deluded myself into thinking I was the centre of his world? I was nothing. I was always nothing.

‘I never expected you to marry me.’ My thoughts of our future life suddenly seemed so childish. All we had ever been to one another was warm flesh. Parts that came together in the dark. And I’d pretended that his touch was more than that. It comforted me in warm nights. And it had been fun. We laughed together, we teased. But it was never love.

But then I remembered the thing that might be growing in me. A new body to come from the meeting of ours.

My mother had died for such a sin.

And then I couldn't control my breath.

'I only wanted...'

'Wanted what, Mathilde? What *do* you want?'

'I don't know.' I screamed, suddenly. There was noise in my head, buzzing. I clasped my hands over my ears. There was nowhere to go from his shadow.

'Mathilde, come on now, please. You don't know how hard this is for me.'

Through tears he was distorted, shining. Huge.

'It's hard for you?' I wiped my nose with my sleeve. 'Michel, I ...' I faltered.

But I couldn't say it because to confess the thing would make it real. But if I kept the words, held tight, they would stay mine. There was little power in it, but it belonged to me.

'You what? Speak, stupid woman!'

He grabbed me by the arms and my head struck the wall.

'Stop it!' I battered against him. Futile. He was too big, too powerful. All the rage that surged under my skin found itself trapped there. I was powerless to the will of my flesh. I sobbed as my petty fists dissolved in his. How could my body have done this—this betrayal—while his remained so perfectly intact?

He held me up against the wall. His arms were bulging, muscles alert, screaming with potential. I tore at him, scratching, flailing, kicking. He held me back without a hint of exertion. His jaw tight, chest proud, hands flexed. I pounded against him. That body could do anything it wanted, and I could hardly make a mark.

'Look at yourself.' He dropped me and walked away. '*This*, Mathilde, this is it. Is it any wonder I could never marry you? You're wilful, wild. You're an animal. What kind of man would put up with you?'

'Ha!' Rage forced itself into laughter. My blood was too hot in my veins.

'Wild?' I stood so I looked up at him from just under the tip of his nose. My hands

itched to grasp at him, unlawful creatures, but with all my will I held them back. ‘I don’t recall such wildness ever being to your distaste, Michel. In fact,’ I slid my hand down so it brushed, lightly, against his trousers, ‘I think it was rather the opposite.’

His cheeks were inflamed. He pushed me away. But I stepped forward again, and this time, I stood resolutely.

‘You hate what you love most about me, Michel. I make you feel something you aren’t supposed to feel. And you hate that I feel it, too. Relish it, Michel. It’s what we are.’

He flung me back. I hit the wall again, hard. This time I didn’t crumple. ‘You can have your wife, your family, your wealth, but so long as you pretend you don’t need people like me to make you *feel* something, you may as well have nothing.’

He struck me.

‘Whore,’ he said, in a deadly whisper. ‘How dare you presume to know what I feel?’

I wiped my mouth. Blood on the sleeve. I was dizzy, clouded. One step. Two. ‘Because, Michel, you are too much like me.’

The last of the tapestries was burnt in the courtyard with the books of saints and poetry. He told me I had no need of them. Such stories were blasphemous distractions from the true Word and besides, nothing so ill fits a woman as trying to be clever.

I was careful to hide the pieces of the Virgin in a little box that I stowed by the privy in the tiny room beside my bed chamber. I would not let him take her as he had the others. I added Jacopo's gifts, the *Hermetica*, my journal, his letters, imbued with poems and sonnets. I grew more fearful each day. The rooms of the palazzo were growing desolate and bare, and not just for want of idolatry.

'He is planning to run north with the rest of the evangelists,' I said to Jacopo in the cradle of the casement bay. 'He has packed his most valuable possessions.'

'I'll find out what I can. Be patient. Do not give him cause for alarm. I know his hiding places, I will try to uncover his secrets.'

I too knew the places of Marco's secrets. In the strongbox I found a bundle of letters.

The first was thick, held together with fraying string. It looked as though it had been tied and untied a hundred times.

My love, I read. Please. I scanned the page. You know you can never love her as you love me. I've seen how much this pretence hurts you. You cannot do it, and you are withering. There were smudges on the pages. Dried tears. I turned to the next letter.

I cannot stand to watch you any longer. To share a roof but no longer share a bed destroys my soul. I didn't expect the jealousy like a stiletto to my chest. It took my breath. No wonder he was shrinking into clothes that hung from him like

curtains. No wonder he could not bring himself to touch me.

‘Oh, Holy Mother.’ I whispered. Quickly, I unlaced the second bundle. But the hand was not the same. They were far less handled, and I was surprised to find that they were addressed to me.

My little bird, Papa wrote. How I have missed you in our home.

He wrote of Luca’s learning, of the strange way his once easily distracted mind focused so quickly on his new vocation.

He is not the boy he once was. I am proud of his dedication, but it is not without some concern. He is like smoke, drifting from one idea to the next. Containing him is no easy task. He has become more devoted to our Lord and for that, I suppose, I should be glad. But I do fear the tidings of such fervour.

The earliest of the letters were dated some months before. I grew uneasy. He had been keeping them from me.

I’ve heard troubling rumours. The page was crinkled and hard to read. I pressed it flat against my dress. There is talk of a heretical circle here in Florence of which your husband may know more than he lets on. Be careful passerotta. Remember what they did to the Piagnoni. I saw the flames that licked the face of Savonarola. I remember too well what religious passion can do.

The rest of the letter was illegible. Folds had smeared the ink. It looked as though the paper had been scrunched and balled. The next letter was marked only a week before. The scrawl was rough, much more difficult to read. It was almost like a child’s handwriting.

Other members of the Platonic Academy are discussing the northern evangelists. There are secret works circling the city. You know I do not hold as strongly to the Church as some of my associates, but I have charted the stars. I have seen dark things for you my little bird. Jacopo understands. Keep your wings closed for now,

and if he tries to take you away, fly with him. We will come for you.

There was one final letter, but the hand was different. It was Luca's.

Lucrezia, please you must come. Our father's condition has worsened. He has taken to bed, and I fear that he shall never leave it. Come, sister, at once.

I stuffed the letters into my dress and tore from the room. My slippers sighed on each quick descending step until, at the last stone lip, I tumbled. I landed at the feet of Ludovico. He merely sneered at me.

'In a hurry?'

I shouldered him as I stood, surprising him so he just caught my arm. 'What are you doing?'

But I tugged quick and made toward those giant palisade doors.

'Lucrezia, you're not to leave.' His footsteps behind me. 'It is a place of filth and sin out there, and your husband wants you far from it.'

He appeared suddenly, like an apparition, between me and the doors. He reached his hand across the latch.

'Get out of my way!'

'I told you that your husband wants you here and here you shall stay.' His eyes were glassy beads and I could see myself reflected there. Me, and all of my wild rage.

'Surely, Ludovico, the sin and filth beyond those doors can be no worse than that within,' I hissed, withdrawing the letters from my bosom and throwing them at his feet.

Startled, he flinched. Glanced down, the slightest quiver in his lip.

I took the moment and stomped upon his foot, and as he gasped and pulled his leg instinctively toward him, I made my break and ran.

When Fiorina came to the door, her face was ashen. She took both of my hands and her lip began to quiver.

‘Oh, *bambina*,’ she said. ‘Come, come, quickly.’

She pulled me into the courtyard. There was a porter boy with a wagon of poultices. He dropped a bundle by the staircase. Fiorina tilted her head. ‘You’re here in time, come, let’s see him.’

She led me upstairs to Papa’s chamber. Luca was by the bedside. He stood quickly and held me tight.

‘Lucrezia,’ he whispered. ‘He’s sleeping.’ He turned to the bed.

Papa was like chalk. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He had been grey as long as I could remember, but now the grey had turned to white. In the few weeks since I had seen him he’d been transformed into an old man.

‘Papa?’ His hand was clammy, cold. There was a rustle in the shadows behind me. A tugging at my skirts.

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘We do not know.’ Luca sat beside me. ‘He has been ill for some weeks, but not like this. We sent a messenger to you two days ago.’

‘I did not receive it. Marco has been keeping my letters. I found them this morning. I’m sorry.’

Luca paused and shook his head. ‘It doesn’t matter now. You’re here.’ He took a cloth from the bedside and wiped Papa’s face. ‘Fiorina has been attending to him, while I have been ... well.’ He swallowed. ‘Attending to Papa’s affairs. It is almost certain ...’ He could not hold my stare.

‘Lucrezia, we tried to tell you. I even went to your house myself. I was turned away at the door,’ said Fiorina.

‘If only I had known.’

Luca dropped his head into his hands.

‘Luca?’

He shook his head. ‘Please Lucrezia, not now.’

I reached out my hand but he pushed it away.

‘Where are your beads?’

I reached my hand to my neck. ‘Oh. I no longer wear them,’ I said softly. I hated to have to admit it.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Papa gasped. I turned to him and saw him shudder.

‘Oh, Papa.’ I fell on him and as my arms reached either side of his, and I felt the ebbing of his heartbeat thrum through his neck, I saw my mother appear beside him. She shimmered in white.

My mother took my father’s hand. Papa groaned softly, as if the air was compressed from his chest by force. I looked to Luca. He was not the bull, not now. He knew then, as did I, that Papa’s life was ebbing. Mother drew him to her. She grew bright and held out her arms. She plucked his soul from his chest like a ribbon, swift and quick up into the sky. Luca’s fingers crushed my own. He gasped and trembled. Papa was gone.

‘He was waiting for you, *bambina*,’ said Fiorina, softly. She held a cloth to her eyes. My own tears threatened but they would not fall. I thought of the life I knew to be growing inside me. It seemed too strange that as one passed through the veil and up through the stars, another should be falling through those same heavens, preparing itself to enter into this physical world. How could I tell Fiorina now, how could I tell my brother? That as our father passed from this life to the next, his grandchild, the bastard of an alchemical scholar, was waiting to be born.

‘Living beings do not die. Being composite bodies, they dissolve,’ Jacopo had whispered, soft in cushions in the croft of his lab. ‘This is not death, but the dissolution of a mixture.’ He read softly in the candlelight. I rested my head against his beating chest. We were so full of each other’s warmth that the tallow and flame were sufficient in the winter air. I kissed the skin above his navel. The tuft of hair tickled my lip. ‘If they are dissolved, it is not to be destroyed, but to be renewed. Contemplate then the beautiful arrangement of the world and see that it is alive, and that all matter is full of life.’ He rested his book on his chest. Jacopo smiled with his eyes. It lit the room. ‘It is beautiful like you. And like you, it is full of life.’

Those nights I lay cocooned and absent. The world far beyond the thick shell of my skin. I could listen to just myself, my heartbeat in my ears, the whistle of my nose, the gurgle in my belly. I spent days in silence. I watched my ribs protrude and could hollow my belly like a cave. I would press my fingers there, the part that would soon begin to rise, like ovened bread, expanding while the rest of me wasted. I could tell my limbs when to stretch, how to stand, my bladder when to release or hold. And yet I could never have a face that did not daily remind me of Anna. I could never shed this skin for something better, something full, well fed and curved. I was trapped in here. Stuck with myself.

Father Thomas came by one day. I don't know how long it had been. The sun seemed high enough when he arrived, and I supposed it must be midday. He brought dark rye bread and sat at the table. He told me that despite the temptation, I shouldn't grieve too heavily for my sister. That she was called to God to serve. Five decades of the rosary each day, to aid her soul through purgatory, would serve my grief the better. I hardly listened. It was the first time I had risen from my bed except to attend to the ablutions, coming fewer and farther between, that daily reminded me of the independent functions of my flesh.

'Have you eaten?' he said kindly, taking a knife to the bread.

He still felt guilt for what happened in the tower.

What a pathetic man.

He looked around for something. He stood, glanced in the butter churn, rifled through cupboards, all of them bare. He pursed his lips.

'It shall have to be served dry,' he said.

‘What did you expect?’ The churn had been dry for months. I chewed the bread slowly and because my mouth was so parched, I choked and spat little crumbs across the floor. He looked at them dismally, poured a cup of water from the pail by the hearth, sniffed it, and then sat it before me.

‘I do not think it is wise for you to remain out here, alone—God only knows what could happen to you.’

His eyes rested on the withered herbs, gathered like strung birds from the rafters. He smoothed down his pleats. His chest rose and fell as he worried at something. I could see the cloud of it around him, black and hazy, like ash rising.

‘I need to speak to you about what we saw that night. A painful subject, I know. I am concerned for your sister’s immortal soul—and for yours. There are things being said in the village ... Things that you and your sister do—did. What I saw that night, Mathilde—’ He shook his head. ‘It is my duty to remind you of the temptations of Satan. You must fortify yourself against his influence. I fear you know him too well. You can return to Christ. I will help you.’

‘What if I don’t wish to return, Father?’

There was a barely perceptible shiver as he spoke, and his gaze shifted to the candles and charms along the hearth mantle. In the centre was the little idol, that ancient woman, so very clearly not the supplicant Virgin. Mary stood beside her, a strange sister. Father Thomas frowned. ‘Erik Walder has made a formal complaint against you. The bailiff will not return for some weeks, but Mathilde, I must recommend—’

‘Erik Walder, the Bailif and yourself, Father, are responsible for the death of my sister. Shall I too make a *formal complaint*?’

‘Mathilde, what happened in the tower was a terrible thing, but the fault belongs to no one. Some things are God’s will.’

‘You seemed to think her taken by the Devil only weeks ago.’

He shifted uncomfortably, then stood, gathering his hat and beads. ‘I shall pray for you, Mathilde. May God take pity on your soul.’ The door fell heavy behind him.

Suddenly famished, I ripped into the loaf with my teeth, tearing chunks away like a wolf.

Though I’d like to say I returned to the village because I’d no other choice—it being market day and my belly, though shrunken now, needed feeding—I admit that I was curious. Matti joined me as he wouldn’t let me go alone and we held each other on the walk. I’d not been back since the day of Anna’s burial. Matti, myself, Father Thomas and the ravens, who perched along the church roof and flocked when the sexton packed the earth onto the body, had been the sole attendees.

‘You sure?’ Matti said as we approached the churchyard.

I nodded. A large group emerged from the church doors, smiling, patting each other and laughing. The Widow Müller came first, not so solemn dressed in blue. Then her son, Michel, and Ursule.

They looked happy.

I moved forward and Matti gripped my arm. ‘You didn’t say you were going to *speak* to them!’

‘Look,’ they whispered in huddles.

‘Can’t believe she came.’

‘Wretched thing, look at her, all bones.’

‘Walder swears she did it.’

They fell back, giving wide berth as though I was diseased.

‘Mathilde! What are you—’ Michel began, startled.

‘I came to give my congratulations.’ I said, remaining calm. I saw Matti from the corner of my eye looking round him, nervous. Ursule recoiled. I could see the little lump showing already under her dress.

‘Ursule, I wanted to—’

‘You don’t have anything to say to her, Mathilde. Get away.’ Michel held his arm out protectively. I could see the congregation watching. All those eyes.

I ignored him. ‘I only wanted to say that I’m sorry.’

Her face was white. She took Michel’s arm, held him close.

‘I should have done more. Helped you.’ I glanced at her belly, but she hissed at me.

‘Shut up, Mathilde.’ Her eyes darted across the crowd. ‘There’s nothing ...’ she faltered. ‘There’s nothing for you to say to me.’ She leaned forward. ‘Please.’

‘Mathilde, I think you should leave.’

More whispers. They rose around me as the wind did, hurried and close. He knows, I thought. He knows what I did—what I didn’t do—and like her, he hates me for it.

I tried to leave but I had to pass all those people, all those staring eyes.

‘Mathilde?’ I could hear Matti hurrying behind me.

‘Did you do it, Mathilde? Did you curse Catherine? Use her blood for your worship?’ It was those girls from the well, Ursule’s friends.

‘Bet she did, just like her grandmother. Agnes Stark burned for her.’ They cackled. ‘And she’ll burn too.’

I hurried away. Matti’s footsteps were close behind me.

‘Mathilde, please.’

‘Go away!’ I cried. I was beyond the churchyard, stumbling into the narrow street. Clouds swept the sky bringing a chill so sudden I pulled my shawl tight across

my shoulders. It was rough, scratching, hot. Everything became too heavy. The sky growled too low, the tree branches swayed too deep. Autumn was coming and yellow swept the flagstones. As the leaves shook from the branches, I felt the urge to run. The leaning, half-timber houses lurched over the street; the shadows swallowed by cloud now loomed like ghosts. I ran.

‘Mathilde?’ Father Thomas was calling after me. ‘Mathilde!’

I wanted to scratch away my dress. To run, bare and alone, deep, deep into the woods. As I tore through the gate, I let my shawl fly from my shoulders up, up, far away.

Luca buried Papa after a funeral procession that led through the slick streets from the palazzo to the Santa Croce. Children stopped with their *calcio* balls tucked under their arms and from the rooms above women crossed themselves and closed their shutters. The winter chill cut like glass and I walked arm in arm with Fiorina. Tears would not come and I did not know why. She drew me close to her chrysanthemum skin. My husband walked on my other side, his brother by him. Ludovico drew hauntingly at my heels. I felt the hiss of his breath down my collar. I know, he seemed to whisper, I know everything. But I knew too.

We arrived at the church to lightning strikes. On the horizon, the clouds billowed like the sails of an approaching fleet. There were petals littering the ground, left over from the livery and textured cloths of the procession of Medici two days before. I could almost hear the trumpets and the drums as they marched toward the Santa Maria del Fiore to place their offerings to the infant Christ.

Sitting in the small gathered crowd of white bearded scholars and young initiates in the endless echoing church, I could have sung a hundred masses for my father. Ludovico's eyes stayed close so I could not blaspheme. But I said them in my mind, and when the service ended, Papa laid in the sunken earth amidst the rest of the faithful Cellini, I sang my own song to the Virgin. Luca stood distant and apart. He looked painfully at me but never held my sight. Marco ushered me away to the gates as soon as the dirt was piled on the coffin. Fiorina followed. She knew, as mothers always do, that soon my belly would swell, and when we said goodbye, she gave me a knowing smile.

‘With death comes new life,’ she said. ‘And with new life, new hope.’ She

grasped my hands before Marco led me away.

Papa said that when we die our souls travel up through all the spheres of the heavens to meet with that great mystery of nature and meld with the great divine. That through the vast infinity, past Jupiter and Saturn, Neptune and Mars and all the icy wastes of the far far away, we barrel like fireflies flocking to the great light. He said that nature made love with man, and from them came fire, spirit, the soul and the mind. We travel up, he said, to be reunited and then, and only then, will we know of everything and nothing, of all that has and ever will be.

That night Jacopo stole to my bed and we wept together in the dark. My father, his teacher. He pressed his hand against my stomach.

‘It is true?’ he asked in hardly a whisper.

I nodded.

‘And then our union has created the greatest work of all.’

‘But it can never be ours.’

He ran his fingers across my taut skin. My form was changing already. My breasts were heavy, freckled with goose bumps. He touched them and they grew firm for him, transforming, as I was. ‘Then we shall have to ensure it can be so.’

We lay together and when the sun began to rise he took my face in his hands, kissed me, and told me to prepare myself to run.

The next night, as I waited for the tell-tale chime of the midnight bells, Jacopo did not unlatch the shutters, but barrelled through the chamber door and rushed to the bedside. He clasped my hands.

‘Marco is fleeing, and he’ll take you with him.’

We had feared such an event, but we did not think he would go before us. Most of the evangelists were leaving Florence. Some were banished, many fled. They went

north through Padua to Venice, to the northern towns over the Alps in Germany and Austria where Roman arms could not reach. Some went south to the sympathetic courts of Naples and Sicily, where Juan de Valdes, the Spanish voice that had ensnared the Duke of Ferrara, offered sympathy and sanctuary. But some were not convinced that it was beyond reach of the Inquisition. We had divined the unfolding of events as an inevitability as clear as the patterns that emerge from a tapestry, but we had not enough time to prepare.

‘Marco knows your heart is not one of a reformer. He knows you are too much like your father to dream of leaving this city. It’s not just the Church he’s pulling you away from.’ He paced, hands on hips. ‘It’s everything.’ He picked up the book beside my bed, *Metamorphosis*. I’d hidden it from Marco’s flames. ‘It is this.’ He waved it in my face. ‘He claims to be a humanist.’ He scoffed. ‘New eyes, new interpretations, perhaps. But they’re not interested in knowledge.’

‘Do you know where he plans to go?’

‘Venice. He has friends there. From there it is easy to cross to the north.’

I would not allow myself to be taken to a foreign land, where the unforgiving winters bring more than light flurries and the women turned out from their convents make hasty marriages to the converted clergy or face a fate on the streets.

I heard a shuffle by the door. We turned. Ludovico peered at us. He slipped into the midnight shadows and disappeared.

‘He knows everything,’ I whispered. ‘Do you think he has told Marco?’

‘I don’t know about Ludovico.’ He frowned. ‘He has ... his own reasons for keeping things to himself.’

I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat. ‘Let’s go now, immediately. We’ll go to Luca, he will help.’

Jacopo looked unsure. ‘Lucrezia, your brother is changed.’

‘I will not allow our child to be born in the lands of those who would so willingly destroy the images of our faith. And neither would Luca allow that for his nephew, for his niece. Jacopo, he is my *brother*.’

He looked once more toward the door and he nodded. We took almost nothing and crept through the palazzo, through those palisade doors and tore through the streets.

Those who know better than I say that the soul of an unborn child arrives when the foetus, developing from its animal form, connects with the Divine. It is in the first signs of quickening, when the child kicks and squirms, that a mother knows the soul is present. But Artemisia, growing wild in the fields and picked from the roadside, like any weed, and taken with wine or milk or inserted as a pessary, can stimulate the bleeding that cures the ailment of an unwanted child.

I didn't stop until I came to the secret place. The air scraped my chest like a knife. My mouth tasted of iron, of blood. I fell to my knees. I dug my hands into the earth and uncovered the most secret idol.

This body had betrayed me. But this body knew things deeply.

It instructed me.

I was dizzy with colour. Sky heavy, grey, except for where the sun sank into the horizon. There, through the little patch of blue, gold spread like glass. The forest was washed in it. It lit up the leaves in yellow.

I heard a crack from the treeline, boots in bracken. I looked up and there she was. I held my breath. I saw for the first time her full form. Her strange dress, bright eyes. She came between the low ferns and sat at my side. Took her hand and placed it on my belly. She smiled and laid her head on my lap, wrapped her fingers around my hand. I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. But she filled me with something I hadn't felt for such a long time. It wouldn't matter what I did now, because she was already there.

When the sun was gone, she stood. She dusted her cream and blue dress as though there were prickles and thorns caught in her skirts, turned and disappeared into the woods.

The courtroom is not large and the crowd seems to tumble from the pews. Mathilde sits in the box, head drooped. The strappado has left her unable to move some parts of her body. Her wrists are swollen and have not healed, and her shoulders can hardly bear the weight of her arms. She looks at the faces in the crowd. Matti and Margret sit in front. Margret's belly is sunken now, and she holds an infant in her arms. Matti, blessed Matti, sits forward eagerly when their eyes meet. They look as though they glisten, as though he might be crying.

Ursule is the first to take the stand.

'It began in the graveyard,' she says, 'when she charmed my father's chicken.'

Even though it hurts so much, Mathilde cannot help but laugh. Her broken ribs, still raw, ache.

'The chicken?' she mumbles. It is a silent laugh. 'All of this for a chicken?'

'But I saw too that day her jealousy,' Ursule continues. 'The way that she looked at Michel, my husband.' She turns to the crowd and Mathilde follows her gaze. He sits in the middle toward the back. His hat covers most of his face, but it doesn't cover his eyes.

'She has always been jealous. She would do anything to keep us apart. She even tried to ...' Ursule falters and looks down at her hands.

'It's all right, Frau Müller, your testimony is very important. When you are ready, please continue.'

Ursule stares at Mathilde and makes her broken bones rattle. 'The monster of my womb, she implanted it there by way of an incubus. A demon in the form of a man.'

Mathilde gasps as though she's choking.

'A demon in the form of a soldier.'

My dear love, I hope that you are well. It has been impossible to get letters to you as your husband has been quite forbidding. A strange correspondence—I trust I am not too cryptic—suggested a Doctor Barrett, and indeed he proved to be a friend. As much as I wish to expound upon my feelings and the devastation of your being so far away from me, I must get straight to particulars. I have appealed to Edward on your behalf, and Gissing too, but they remain resolute in their desires to keep you away. They have shut up your body, but they do not shut up your mind, your spirit, and your creativity. Emma, I must remind you of the great wealth that resides inside you. Rediscover yourself, Emma. You are abundant and infinite: we speak to each other in blood, in milk and tears and ethereal shifts in the very fabric of time. They cannot keep us apart.

- S

‘Emma, what happened?’ He takes her arm to examine the bruises. ‘Gissing told me you were a danger to yourself. He wants to increase your therapy—hydrotherapy and perhaps even a hysterectomy. I have talked him down for now, but I cannot guarantee he will not act without my notice.’

‘I could not tell that cell from the place of my dream. I felt the deepest impulse toward self-destruction. I felt I had no will over my body. My bindings became as terrifying to me as chains—truly, I thought they were. I believe we’ve shared that dream, Doctor. Of the strappado and a scream.’

‘How can that be?’ Barrett frowns in puzzlement. He takes a book from the shelf and spreads it open on the desk.

‘And so you hurt yourself?’

‘I needed to prove that my body was physical.’

‘Have you had any other dreams? Any of such significant meaning?’

‘There is one, Doctor. I first told it to Gissing, but he dismissed it. Prescribed me laudanum.’

‘What was the content of the dream?’

‘The Virgin,’ Emma says simply. ‘A statue, broken through the middle. But lately she has been accompanied by another. There’s a second woman, brave and strong. When I wake from those dreams I feel powerful. Immense—at least until I remember where I am.’

‘Who is the woman, Emma? Do you know her?’

‘I feel I do, but I do not know her name. She is ancient. Powerful.’ Emma smiles. ‘I wish I knew more of her. She carries a bow most times. She’s a huntress.’

Barrett flips eagerly through his book. He stops. Runs his finger down the page.

‘Yes,’ he mumbles. He turns the page up. ‘Is this her?’

There she is, the huntress and her bow, a diadem of a half-moon resting on her head. She is regal and elegant. All that Emma longs to be.

‘Yes,’ she says, reverent.

‘It is Diana,’ he says. ‘Goddess of the moon, the hunt, and of women.’

Mamma I am so pleased that you are well and that you know now what to do. Dress well and speak to the good Doctor. I have spoken to the other medium Susannah and she is pleased that you are well and she sends her deepest love. She waits for you as her brother does and they are both very cheerful and so am I.

I was hounded by visions. Horrid, awful visions. I saw that man who spoke through Charlotte in the room above the pub. The man who made her face transform in that most grotesque and ghastly manner. But he was fully formed now, and I could make out all the features of him. A bald head, a fat, squashed nose, broken no doubt, in a hundred different bouts. He wore a leather apron with black dusted down the front. A blacksmith, a cooper.

‘Murderess. Witch.’ Again and again he spoke, just as he had through Charlotte’s soft tongue. I was fitful. I saw Sophie then too, in white. ‘You killed her,’ he said. Those dreams were hazy and imperfectly formed but there he loomed, and gnawed at me. Gnawed at the truth that I heard in his words. In and out I swooped from one dull dreamscape to the next and yet he followed me there. Always at my tail. He chased us both, Susannah and I, through the winding labyrinth of London. Always crying, always bellowing, Murderess, Murderess. We came to the woods, a thick and unknowable darkness, rotten boughs and startling, clawing limbs. We stopped at a roadside slick with mud so thick we could have drowned. And there, deep beneath the rain soaked dirt, we dug up a little idol. And when we held her out, that ancient marbled thing, the man stopped. He turned and looked at us with eyes that grew from red to dull earth and he disappeared like the rain. Instead, Sophie stood before us, arms outstretched. But as I reached for her, I was overtaken by some great shadow. The shadow of a bird, a raven. It swooped. I saw its black eyes and pointed beak come toward me and then I woke.

The window was open and the wind rattled the glass in the sill. It blew my papers around the room as though a great tempest had risen within the bedroom. I was still groggy, confused when I awoke, and still haunted by that raven, the black

sheen of its coat. One of those thin blue sheets of paper struck my face. It stuck there, adhered by the wind, and when I tore it away I read the word, clear as sin, *Murderess*. I gasped. I felt my blood drain as there rose within me the most profound horror. I looked at another page, flickering wildly under the corner of the coverlet. *Witch*.

I scrambled from bed. My legs were still dull but I hobbled to the window and slammed it shut. The papers dropped to the floor like dead things from the sky. I gathered them all where they landed, handfuls of them, stuffed in my fists. I tore through them, one after the other, *Murderess*, *Whore*, *Witch*. The walls closed in, those ephemeral layers of damask and floral vectors stripped themselves bare until just wood and brick, like prison walls, engulfed me.

I ran from the room.

I hurried down the stairs and across the landing. I could hear music, a small band, carols, coming up from the floor below. Voices too, mingling together into some strange song. I stood at the top of the stairs. There they were, black suits and gowns, laughing, drinking. The Christmas party. Edward had held it without me. How long had I been sedated? How many days had passed since that night in the pub? The room with the cabinet.

I felt their eyes as I hurried down the stairs in just my nightgown, white and billowing. I trembled, clutching those sheets of ghost-written paper.

‘She’s made an appearance after all!’

‘A Christmas ghost?’

They laughed. ‘Which ghost, I wonder?’

I stumbled as I hurried. My feet were bare, my toes numb. I was suffocating in all those people, but I could not return upstairs. I turned into the drawing room. Each face in its turn seemed to meld into that hideous, ghoulish man. He watched me

through all of them. I fled back into the hall, down toward the kitchen, where the warmth of the stove and the smell of cooking would surely find me. But I was stopped in my tracks, a hand on my shoulder. I turned. I could not discern the face that spoke to me. The insistent voice.

‘I simply must know, Emma,’ the voice said. ‘You could have ruined me.’

His face finally formed itself into one I recognised. Arthur Hawkins. Though he spoke, the drum that pounded from my heart to my ears prevented my hearing properly. I was distracted, hurried, but he gripped my arm.

‘I insist that you tell me, Mrs Blount. There are some who would never forgive such an interrupt—’

‘What are you doing here?’ I suddenly felt the incongruity of the situation.

‘You invited me here.’

I searched, troubled. I must have. I must have invited them all, before Edward had met Susannah. I remembered suddenly, licking the stamps, addressing the envelopes. Yes, of course, I had. Edward wanted to expand our circle, he wanted to fill the home with people so his associates would see how social and worldly and important a man he was. So if Arthur had received his invitation, then surely ...

I pulled my arm from his grasp and darted.

‘Mrs Blount? Mrs Blount, I insist.’

I hurried back along the hall and into the parlour. The room was lit in orange, the fire roared in the corner. There was the smell of warm spices, cinnamon, cloves, and mistletoe. I looked across all the heads of people crammed together in conversation. Then I saw the two of them, standing by the fireside.

‘Susannah, John!’

They turned to me, surprised. I took their hands.

‘Emma, oh thank goodness, look at you. Edward said you were quite ill, but we had to come, of course...’ John began.

‘We didn’t believe him,’ Susannah interrupted. ‘Oh, how have you been, you look frightful.’ She rubbed my arms, tucked hair behind my ear. ‘My darling, what did he do to you?’

I felt I could faint. I gripped Susannah’s hand and John wrapped his arm around my waist.

‘Easy, my love,’ he said as he steadied me.

I could feel eyes at my back. And I could see John and Susannah glancing hurriedly over my shoulder.

‘It was him,’ I said, ‘the man from the demonstration. I dreamt him, and then ...’ I opened my hand and let the scrunched wads unfold from my palm. They bloomed and opened. *Murderess, Whore.*

Their faces blanched.

‘Emma, what is this?’ John held the paper up to the firelight.

‘Mrs Blount, truly I must insist.’

‘They were all about my room when I woke, I’ve no idea.’

‘Mrs Blount, please.’

‘Arthur?’ John looked over my shoulder.

‘What do you mean they were about your room?’ Susannah asked.

‘You must tell me what happened. What did you do to my medium?’

‘Arthur, this is hardly the time or the place—’

Arthur squeezed between myself and John.

‘Arthur, really,’ Susannah reached out to him but he pushed her hand away.

‘Listen, Mrs Blount—Emma—whatever you did, could you do it again? Poor little Charlotte has taken ill, bless her soul. If you were interesting in seeking—’

‘Mr Hawkins!’ John pushed him aside.

Gasps rose from the gathering, and all turned toward us.

‘Unhand me,’ Hawkins pushed John back so he stumbled too close to the fireplace. John roared. I gasped, my throat closed and my chest squeezed. John took Arthur by the collar. ‘Leave,’ he screamed, ‘you should never have come. We’re done with you; do you hear? Manipulative fraud.’ He tossed Arthur into the crowd. A woman shrieked and stumbled as glass smashed to the floor.

‘What on earth is going on?’ Edward stood in the doorway. Gissing pushed past him and helped the ladies to their feet.

‘Mrs Blount, what are you doing from bed? You are unwell, you shouldn’t be here.’

‘Emma?’ Edward pushed through the crowd. His expression was difficult to discern. It was not malice, not anger. Disappointment. His cheeks were flushed with drink and they burned brighter with each step.

‘What is happening in my house? Who started this fight?’ He looked at John and squeezed his eyebrows close together. ‘Do I know you?’ he said. ‘Who invited you?’

‘Your wife,’ Susannah said. Edward turned to face her. I was still holding her hand. His face turned from concern to spite. He sneered. ‘You,’ he said. He shook his head. ‘Have you not done enough to upset her?’ He snatched my hand and pulled me close to him. ‘Have you not done enough harm to this family?’ He placed his hands on my shoulders. ‘Emma, please, come back to bed. You aren’t well.’

The room was darkening, spinning. I was all of it and none of it. The damask began to peel again, revealing the rotten beams beneath. Edward guided me through the crowd, those faces, all of them staring, whispering behind gloved hands. I could no longer be sure which of them were real, which of them were guests, and which were the dead. They were everywhere.

‘Forgive us, please,’ Edward said again and gain. ‘She’s most unwell.’ Gissing followed behind. I was not well. Poor thing.

‘Perhaps it would be best for you three to leave,’ I heard Gissing say. I turned back. I realised in that moment what was occurring. I was letting myself be taken. But I could not stop it. I pulled against Edward’s grip. I tugged and tugged again.

‘Emma, please!’ Edward’s voice was desperate now. The faces crowded in.

‘Edward, let me go.’ I tore away from him through the crowd. I fell upon them both, Susannah and John. But Edward and Gissing, one on each arm, led me back. Back, back, up the stairs, along the landing, back to the place where that dead man waited to call me murderess again.

Time had passed because it must, and the last of our meagre supplies were gone. Winter left us empty and there was nobody coming now for poultices or potions. But I remembered that the cantonment was not far, only two villages, and soldiers had more coin than famine-stricken peasants. I was supposed to feel shame for that kind of living. Not simply for selling something as sacred as this form, but for daring to seek it out. I never waited to be approached. It was not common enough to warrant any permanent situation in a tavern croft or dockside corner. God gave men strong arms, to lift and carry and build, and wise minds to lead and judge and know. And what did He give women if not this form? This form capable, in such extraordinary measure, of bringing those strong and wise men to heel with as little as a smile in faded light. For isn't that what they are afraid of? Is that not what brings down that hammer, with swift and terrible justice, each time a woman is banished from her country, like my mother, for opening her legs to some swineherd or bailiff or councillor? For if they cannot control that mind, those strong arms, for such a feeble creature as woman, what hope of salvation have they in the eyes of God?

I knew it would only take a single accident, a minor rift of fortune, to turn rumours to accusations. But I no longer cared. I was content to keep myself apart, going to the market only when I had need. And Matti hadn't left me. He was my single friend in all the world.

But it couldn't last.

Margret was at the doorstep. Her cheeks were red blooms, spotted and veined. She sniffled.

‘Oh, Mathilde,’ she moaned. I had hardly a chance to approach before she dropped into my arms. ‘He dismissed me. He said his reputation couldn’t be dishonoured by continuing to employ such a lewd girl as me. He said he didn’t know what kind of men I’d brought into his house.’ She gasped. ‘I never loved any but him.’ Her weight dragged me down. ‘How could he do this to his own child?’

She was so skeleton thin that the round thing that grew from her seemed like some great boil. It bullied her strange stance, as though her skinny legs would snap under the weight of it.

I saw in her my own mother. A face hardly remembered. A young thing, stick-like, stone tumbled and dry like bone. It was sudden, the way she came to me then, in a way she never had before. On my back my skin pricked in lines, sharp as lashes. Ten strokes. I saw her howling in the market square and all those eyes watching. I could feel her creeping in me. Our anger was searing.

‘Come, come child.’ I said. I pulled her in, stroked her hair. I gave her Anna’s things, a dress, a comb, worn leather shoes. I took her to the pallet and pulled the blanket to her chin. When she slept, I saw my mother again. She and Mamé both. They—we—fused, and paced across the echoing floor.

We saw Erik as though he stood before us. We saw him take her, pushing, heaving. His sweet words like syrup, his huge and trembling hands. And Catherine, great with child and heavy in confinement, her sex driven away by her maternal state.

We devoured the crisp stillness. Margret was still but squirming. She was silent and she screamed. She was all of us. Our anger was not our own. We saw Erik in the ether and we stripped him bare. We held him, vulnerable. We clenched and squeezed him, fat and naked, till his eyes burst and his blood boiled and bubbled, erupting

from every orifice. When all we held was his empty skin they stepped back, they shed, and I collapsed.

When Erik fell that day in the market place and struck the ground so heavy, I knew it was my doing. Never had anything terrified me more. As the crowd drew around his body and the cries rose for a doctor, a healer, I ran. I'd watched him pass with his father, Old Walder, and felt the heat of my hatred funnel toward him. His heart had stopped, they said. Matti told me back at the cottage. An accident of nature, a common enough end. A heart exploding in the chest. I vomited in the bed.

Mamé's almanac was open on the table. I rustled through the pages, tore them in my fury.

I thought she'd taught me to heal. It was all I'd ever wanted.

I took her agate stone on string and sat before the open almanac. Tell me your secrets, Mamé. I lit a bouquet of sage, fanned the fire high in the hearth. What did you do?

I settled myself to call on the spirits. The huntress: the Goddess. When she came, she was overwhelming.

I held the agate above the almanac and it began to circle. The arc grew wider, faster, in its whirling dance. I flipped each page and above the stone revolved. I got to the last, furious, when the agate stopped still. I looked closer. Ran my fingers across the parchment. The finest of indentations, hardly perceptible. I took the almanac to the fire, held it before the flames. As the pages heated, so much so that I feared they'd catch alight, the script emerged. A fine scrawl, French. Mamé's hand.

For binding the will of one to another.

And then lower, with the words scratched, struck through.

For the discovery of an unfaithful lover.

I could hardly read the next. It was written in a rushed and slanted hand. Hardly legible.

For revenge:

That she should feel the fire that burns my own heart. That she should know how this pain feels, the heat of passion, and the fires of lust.

She had done it. She had cursed Agnes Stark to burn on that pyre. Such passionate revenge; had she meant it to be so awful? Had she known the true consequences of her rage?

And had the same fate struck me? My fury had killed Erik Walder, and for that I was no better than her.

I tore the pages from the almanac and fed each to the flames. I watched them burn with hot tears. I thought of all that I had done, all that love turned somehow to sorrow—Catherine, Anna. I couldn't even help Ursule. I *would* not help her.

I'd seen that man mount her like an animal in the forest and I'd what had I done? What kind of dreadful creature had I become?

‘Don’t take me back, don’t let me back in there!’ I fought hard but their grip was too tight. My legs kicked, seized, contracted. They dragged me. I could not bear the darkness, the thought of what awaited me inside. Guilt. *Murderess*. I saw that man clutch his chest. *Murderess*.

They dragged me to the bed and I tumbled from their grip. I crawled up into the corner, back against the wall. I pulled up the sheets.

‘What is all this?’ Edward picked up the loose papers at his feet. Shapes of something flew around him. The ghost of the wind, howling.

‘Let us alone,’ Edward said.

‘No, Edward, I must insist.’

‘Please.’

‘She is violent, there is no saying what—’

‘Gissing, please!’ His voice ripped through the dark things. The doctor stood there, seething. When he turned, the bottom of his coat hung low and pointed. He swooped from the room.

‘What is this madness?’ Desperation in Edward’s voice. Resignation. Humiliation. ‘What is it?’ he thrust the page into my face. He wrapped his hands around his head. ‘My God.’ He paced, back and forward. He shook his head. ‘What else will I find, Emma?’ He pulled out the drawers of my desk. I could only sit there with my knees tucked into my chest and watch. He rifled, pulling out page after page. My letters from Sophie. The words she’d scribbled through my hand.

‘Please, Edward,’ I said finally, somehow.

He threw each page over his shoulder as he flicked to the next. How could he even read it? Surely, the words must have been nothing more than hazy scribble.

‘There are seven spheres, or circles, each having several degrees. Man, being capable of progress, and subject to certain spiritual and moral laws, can ascend these spheres and find himself closer to God.’

‘Please, Edward.’

There was a thump at the door. Fists pounding. ‘Emma? Edward?’

‘Go away!’ he yelled. He grabbed my chin in his clumsy hands and wrenched it up.

‘These are the ramblings of a madwoman!’ I could smell the alcohol on his breath. I reached for his hand.

‘I should have cancelled this damned party. They laugh at me, Emma. They asked me if I know what goes on in those meetings of yours. What with all those trances and possessions. That they’re little more than an excuse for ... for,’ he stuttered, as though hardly able to contain his rage, ‘for deviance and flirtation. That you’re little more than a whore!’ Spittle flew from his lips and his face turned purple.

‘Please, Edward, it’s not like that.’

‘Isn’t it?’ He looked suddenly as though he may cry. I’d never seen such a thing. It made the room brighter somehow, less frightening. All those spirits stepped back into their places behind the wallpaper. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a little blue envelope. My heart stopped. He sniffled. Very quietly, almost imperceptibly. But there was a tear hanging there, in the corner of his eye. ‘Jane gave this to me,’ he said. ‘I believe I hardly need tell you what it says.’

A brick thump to the pit of my stomach.

He unfolded the flimsy paper. ‘I’ve never felt so ardent a longing.’

I was still.

‘What happened to us, Emma?’ He sat on the edge of the bed and rested his head in his hands. I was taken aback. I expected him to roar.

‘How can two people understand one another so little? I wanted you with passion, Emma, when we first met. I cannot say why. Nor can I say that it was ever truly for love. You are a fine jewel. I needed to possess you. But you never let me.’

‘Edward, you never tried to know me.’

He dropped his head.

‘And I never tried to know you. We are strangers to one another. But must we remain so? And must I belong only to you?’

‘Emma,’ he said, lifting his head to look at me. ‘That is not what I—’

There came again the bang at the door.

‘Leave us be,’ Edward yelled.

‘Edward, please, help is arrived.’ It was Gissing’s voice this time.

Edward looked at me with sad eyes. ‘Emma,’ he said. A little tear ran down his cheek. ‘I am so sorry.’

Luca was surprised to see us. Panicked even.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ he said.

‘What would you have done?’

He was the bull again now, headstrong and tempestuous. Though he still had a small, lithe frame, he had filled out. Even his neck seemed thicker. It didn’t suit him.

‘Luca, I only came to say goodbye.’

‘What do you mean?’

I tasted salt on my lips. ‘Marco is planning on running—north, over the Alps. I cannot go with him. I need your help.’ I took his hands. ‘We are leaving for Pisa, and from there we do not know.’

‘Oh, Lucrezia.’ He ran his hands through his hair. ‘I warned you about him.’

‘No, you didn’t, not enough.’

‘No.’ He turned to Jacopo with eyes like daggers. ‘I warned you of *him*.’

‘Luca, please. You must know I do not love my husband. I tried and I failed.’ I looked at Jacopo. ‘I fell in love with another. I think Papa suspected such a thing would happen all along.’

‘Papa was an old fool. He let himself be lost in magic. He lost the true way. He lost the Church.’

‘How can you say that?’

‘I say it because it is true.’ His hard voice was foreign to me. ‘There are allowances for such superstitions, but the Inquisition will soon drive all the reformers from Florence and then where will they turn? Heresy, some will deem it. How can I hope to bring this family honour? When my one connection to society has become a reformer. A reformer! And taken my sister with him.’

‘Luca, when have you ever cared for honour?’

He turned away. Jacopo tried to approach but I held him back.

‘How do you expect me to respond? Do you want me to have him arrested? Do you know what they will do to him? They will torture him—the rack, the strappado. You can’t imagine what such things do to a person.’

‘You’re one of them, aren’t you?’ I thought of him in the marketplace that day. The way he looked at that Inquisitor, that look almost like lust in his eyes.

‘I am,’ he said. ‘And so trust me when I tell you that you do not want that for him.’

A bang echoed from the courtyard, pounding, harder and harder. My heart leapt to my mouth.

‘Please, Luca. Forgive me. I know I have sinned greatly.’ I couldn’t believe it had come to this, that I had to beg my brother—my dearest brother—for aid. I looked towards the entranceway. ‘But this is a question of faith. Whose marriage is more valid in the eyes of God? One signed on paper, never consummated—not willingly—’ I stumbled.

Luca glanced at me as Jacopo pulled my hand. I could see a servant move towards those two huge doors.

‘Or a unity of souls, of equals.’ I spoke quickly. ‘You were a scholar once, Luca. You know that men have forgotten the darkness, the celestial. Men like Marco value only the sun—the Christ. But the true Godhead is a unity. Jacopo understands the barriers between us, and works to transcend them. Marco is not capable of that. Neither are your Inquisitors. Don’t let yourself become like them.’ I stepped towards him. ‘You are not like them, I know you’re not.’

I could hear the wooden door bolt thump. Jacopo grabbed my hand insistently.

‘Come, if he will not help us we must run. That’s him, we all know it.’

I turned to him one last time. 'Please, do not make me go with him.'

He glanced at the door, then back at us. 'Don't let them in,' he cried to the servant. He ran to the doorway.

It was too late.

'Is she here?' Marco's voice was like thunder.

Jacopo pulled me towards the back entrance of the room.

'Go through the servant's entrance,' Luca hissed. 'Go to the stables, get the horses—they know you. I'll find you in Pisa.'

I reached out as Jacopo led me away. '*Grazie*, Luca.'

'Quickly!'

I heard the scuffle as we ran. A chorus of boots—he'd brought men. I hardly needed to guess which. And as we flew through the passage at the back of the palazzo and emerged in the cold, in the wet laneway, thick with mud and putrid with rotting scraps, dog's snuffling noses and scrawny, hissing cats, I heard the clash of metal, a cry and then those heavy boots pounding.

Lucrezia misses the stars. She misses the slap of water on the riverbank, the swaying of tree branches over terracotta walls. She misses the chiselled stone of the faces on the Orsanmichele, and David in the Piazza della Signoria. She misses the faces of the Virgin and Child in the tabernacles on street corners, and the soaring campanile of the Santa Maria della Fiore. She misses Fiorina's harsh morning voice, pulling her from her bed, and Luca's spidery fingers tickling. She will never see them again.

The pain is abating and she knows it is almost time. She knows because her mother has appeared, standing next to Sophie. But she has not finished. There are things yet to be said, to be transcribed. What if Marco should discover her, pen resting against the parchment, her transgressions scribbled for all of Florence to see? Would he burn her words as he burned the rest? For she has sinned, and she no longer knows if she can be forgiven. She didn't mean it, she thinks, all those terrible words. She understands now that it only matters to love. Whatever that love may be.

She rests the head of the Virgin in her lap. She says her final Hail Mary. She needs the strength to bear her through it, through these last hard words. She hopes most of all for her brother to find them. To know that she tried to be the woman he wanted her to be. That it was an impossibility that even the daughter of the great Casini could not overcome.

She hears footsteps.

I knew Michel would not have come were he not desperate. He was accompanied by his mother and Father Thomas. All of them wary. Matti, Margret and I had spent the winter bunkered deep. We'd hardly seen a soul these long drawn months. Frost had withered the vines. As the leaves had finally fallen to brown litter, and the last of the pumpkins and turnips had been harvested, rationed and then taken by the militia, we continued to hunger. Hunger like nothing I'd known before. Winter in the valley was not so cold as other parts afflicted by rinderpest and soldier-plague, but I'd never felt it in my bones like that before. It was true suffering.

As I approached, the Widow Müller sank back into the shadows of an oak. The tree was naked except for the mistletoe, bright green, clinging to a desperate branch. She hugged a cloak around her and clasped her son's arm in the crook of her own. Matti and Margret appeared behind me. The shadow of that large bump cast desperate on the matted, withered ground. The Widow turned up her nose.

'Michel, are you sure?'

'There is no one else,' he said. It was true. Agatha Reuther was dead, along with so many others.

'I can't,' I said.

'You must,' said Father Thomas. 'The poor girl may die.'

'No one knows birth like you.' Michel's voice was steady. 'Besides, you owe it to her, don't you?'

We stared at one another.

'We'll come,' said Margret.

'No,' I said. 'I'll go, but I'll go alone.'

Matti grew wary. He shook his head. ‘Don’t do this, Mathilde,’ he said. ‘You don’t need to.’

‘Yes, I do.’

Snow heaped on the eaves and the flakes shook down when the thumping cartwheels rattled timber frames. Faces appeared in windows and lurked by open doorways as we passed. It was as though they marched me in chains. Elspeth Stark hissed when I walked by.

Ursule was in the birthing chair with the hearth fire roaring. The air was scented with spiced ale. She grew tense when she saw me and made as if to crawl away, but the back of that high chair stopped her.

‘Hush, child,’ said the Widow. ‘She’s all there is.’ But she glared at me too. ‘Do what you must,’ she said.

I hardly knew how to move, but Ursule’s cries fixed my mind to the room and to the nature of my work there. I tried to remember how to begin, but the ritual seemed so far away. The scar from my lip burned hot. I trembled for lack of Anna.

I fought through the aching hours of that long labour. Mamé kept threatening to pierce the veil. Each time the glimmer of her appeared I had to close myself to her. I abhorred the vision. I begged her to leave me be. Not to taint my hands with her dark works.

And where was Anna? Why could she not come as Mamé did?

No ritual. No secret blessings. But still I transcended myself, in the way my hands moved of their own accord, my mind was higher, freer. And that’s when I saw her again. That girl approached through the gauze of hearth flicker and she watched from the corner.

Ursule screeched. Red faced, swollen.

‘Push, girl, you’re almost there,’ the Widow said. She held Ursule’s hand protectively.

Her cries were deathly. The thing that was clawing through her ripped her in its wake.

The child emerged. My heart stopped.

Ursule sank back into the chair, gasping.

The child did not cry. It did not move or make a sound.

A deformed creature, a bulbous head and sunken eyes, with a chest that protruded round and yet sharp. I’d never seen anything like it. I pitied the dreadful thing.

The Widow’s hands flew to her face.

‘What is it?’ Ursule moaned. She tried to sit up. She rose above the crescent of her own rounded belly and she saw the thing I cradled. ‘A monster,’ she hissed. She looked at me sharply. ‘What dark curse did you bring upon us?’

I felt my own blood pull. Down, down. Into my own soft flesh I sank.

We crossed the Arno and headed west through the Porta San Friano and into the hills. The trees grew thick and crumbling houses dotted the countryside. I held Jacopo close as we galloped. He turned frequently to ask if I was not hurt or injured, if the child sat inside me well. She did. I knew because I saw her running beside us. She chased us between the copses and appeared, shining, in the reflections of water pooled along the roadsides. We kept away from the main roads and so the path was narrow and perilous. The sky too did not want us to run, rumbling a protest that turned the tracks to mud. The horse sank into the sludge, bucked, and I was thrown.

I landed in mud so thick it drank my arms to the elbows. Rain melted the brown that dribbled into my mouth, my ears, and nostrils. I choked and Jacopo's arms pulled until, with a slurp, I emerged. But as he tried to move me I felt a tremendous seizure deep in my belly. I grasped at him.

'The child!'

He lifted me, draped across his sturdy arms, and as he trudged through the mud to the wet grass of the nearby hill, I cried out. That fear was an agony that ripped me in two. I could no longer feel my legs, my hands, my feet. Only that little bump and all of its chaos.

'It'll be all right,' he said, frantically. '*Mio Dio*, it will be all right.'

He pulled his cloak around me, wiped my face. His eyes were like rivers and in them I could have drowned. But then there was another lurch, like a lightning bolt to my womb. I lost any concept of pain or fear, there was only that moment, and only that child. The apparition appeared in the trees. She came forward and sat beside me. Jacopo looked at the place where she rested, on the swell of my belly, and gasped.

'I think ... what is—?' He pointed.

‘Hush,’ I whispered. She filled me with calm. ‘She’s here to help.’

But he was frantic still. The horse shook his mane so thick flecks of wet pelted us. He whinnied, tramped the earth. He could feel our agitation. I breathed through gritted teeth, eager to stop myself from slipping into panic. It was all I could do to keep from screaming.

The sun was resting low and at any moment it would disappear.

‘We should have stopped,’ he said, again and again. ‘We could have stopped at that chapel. I knew we should have.’ He wiped his tears.

‘We said we would go on through dark. We don’t know how far behind us he is.’

‘Is it worth it?’ he cried. ‘To lose our child to him?’

It was a question I couldn’t face. ‘Luca would have thrown him off. You know he would have. He’d never have told—’

‘We don’t know that. They had weapons. They were not there to negotiate.’

‘What could have made him so violent? He’s never been a violent man, has he?’

Jacopo only looked at me.

The longer that girl remained there, the more the pain eased. Jacopo sat beside me.

He kissed my hand. ‘I don’t know what to do.’ I clasped his fingers. He was stillness and he was a tempest.

‘Is it true, what you said?’ he said softly. ‘That you think us a union of equals?’

‘Of course.’ The pain was abating. I had hope—a little flicker of it—that the child would be all right.

He took a ring from his finger, engraved with an image of Hermes clipping his wings to his ankles. He took my hand, unfurled a finger. ‘I love you for all time.’ He kissed it, then me. He placed his hand softly on my belly.

‘How do you think it is—she is?’

‘I can’t say. The pain has abated, mostly. There is no blood. If we are steady and I rest, I think she will be well.’

‘We can pray.’

And so we did. Held together, with the sun half dropped on the horizon and the moon rising in his stead, we spoke our words together, our divine words, that flew like sparks and rested like calm between us.

The horse whinnied. Rose high on its legs. There was hoof-beat beyond the tree line.

‘Hush!’ Panicked, Jacopo raced to calm him. But then we heard footfall, the crunch of boots creeping closer.

Marco and Ludovico emerged from the trees.

‘There you are,’ he hissed. He was saturated, hair limp across his face, his clothes clasping his skinny frame.

‘Stay away from her,’ Jacopo warned.

‘That’s my wife. I advise you stand aside.’

‘So you can run north, take her to a life without her family, without her language, her faith?’

‘Lucrezia’s faith is my own, she was baptised alongside me. It may take some time for her to learn the expectations of our ways, but I have no doubt that in time she will come to see that justification by faith is the only way to God.’

‘The *only* way to God?’ Jacopo inched closer to him, so they stood nose to nose. ‘What made you choose such a path, Marco? You could not accept the absolution of your sin through grace, through works?’ He glanced at Ludovico, who bristled.

Marco hissed. He glanced from me to him. It was as though I could see each and every hair rise on his skin. But then he broke away.

‘I only wanted redemption, to love her as any husband should. How can you hope to understand the torment of my soul?’

Ludovico glanced sideways at him and then to the ground, and for the first time, I saw there some hint of sadness.

‘And I will have my redemption!’ His voice was hoarse. I couldn’t tell if his face was wet with sweat or tears or rain, but suddenly he raged.

‘Whore!’ he screamed at me. I still clutched my belly, a tightness growing there. A rawness. ‘How could you debase yourself with him—a heretic, a pagan fool!’ He turned to Jacopo and lunged. They grasped at each other, hands and arms flailing, like children fight. Jacopo landed a fist and Marco stumbled back, bleeding. Marco turned to Ludovico, slowly, measuredly. He nodded, and like a dog at command, Ludovico ran at Jacopo. He withdrew a stiletto, a slim and shining thing, silver in the risen moon. I shrieked.

Marco pulled me up roughly. ‘Careful,’ I cried, clasping my belly. His realisation turned his face to stone. He hauled me towards the trees and as he did I heard a scream. The horse whimpered, kicked and bolted. I pulled against Marco. All I could see were bodies fumbling in the dark. The two men toppling over one another. Then a cry. Ludovico pulled himself away. He held his face and ran toward us, unsteadily. I realised as he neared that blood was gushing from his sockets.

‘I’m blind!’ he cried.

‘Won’t you stop for him?’ I cried to Marco, but he only pulled me on. ‘You love him, don’t you? Tell me you do!’ I was desperate for him to stop. On that hill where the little girl sat lay Jacopo. The lump of him, heaving with his own trail of red.

But he didn’t stop. He pulled me beyond the trees to where the horses waited.

‘Are your sins better than mine, Marco?’

I struggled as he bound my hands. Once around and then again. But try and try

as I might, my strength was no match for his. But I had one weapon left.

‘You accept Christ into your heart, proclaim to him your undying faith, and what? Your sins are redeemed?’

He wouldn’t look at me. He shoved me toward the horse. I choked on my words, but still they spilled from me.

‘Who is worse in the eyes of God, Marco? An adulterer? Or a sodomite?’ I spat.

He turned me fast so we stood, eye to eye. As I watched the vein of his temple thump, the back of his hand appeared at the corner of my vision and struck. I fell to my knees with the force of it. Then I saw Jacopo, that still and silent form, half submerged in sludge beyond the tree line. My body grew limp with grief. Marco threw me across the saddle like a sack.

I saw the trunks of Cyprus trees drowning in the mud and the thick wedges of wagon tracks and horse hooves stuck in the clay. But I could hardly bear to look, to see that we were travelling back through the paths I had fought so hard to gain. And so I closed my eyes, let the harsh bump and rhythm of the gallop serve as the reminder of my transgressions, and as the hint of what was to come.

When Marco pulled me into the palazzo and threw me to the flagstones, he demanded to know the father of the child. ‘Jacopo?’

I clenched my teeth and let all my rage and love out. ‘Yes.’

His eyes flared, and then there was his foot, his heel, his guilt and shame, his betrayal and his redemption, and it landed, squarely, in the swell of my stomach.

Now that she is done, Lucrezia lets the girl step closer.

‘Thank you,’ Sophie says. She walks to the bathtub and looks in. Strokes the hardly formed cheek of the girl she could have been.

Lucrezia feels light envelop her. Her mother wraps her up, and her daughter takes her hand. As she moves further from her body she can hear the click and scrape of the door from faraway. She sees Luca enter and stand over her body. He kneels beside her, picks up her limp hand and his cry cuts through the infinite in between and travels up with Lucrezia to the stars. And as she turns away, to follow her mother and daughter into that deep mist, she sees the face of Jacopo waiting for her on the other side.

The crowd is large for such a dismal day. Rain has washed away the last of the snow and the mud tracks are slick. She'd come to the hill in a cart followed by the chanting crowd. Ursule and Michel at the front, their arms draped across one another's shoulders.

They pull her through the deep sludge so that the mud drags her frail body deeper, deeper into the earth. They bind her. Arms hidden, wrapped tight and fast to the stake, she looks across all those faces. Elspeth and the Widow, Michel and Ursule. Margret holds her new babe in her arms. Her face is wet and she sobs. And then she spies Matti. Gentle, suffering Matti.

The white-sails of the mill turn on a distant hill. A lark settles on a bare tree branch. The wood pile is lit.

Tomorrow they will collect her blackened remains and store them for the spring to fertilise the new crop. The villagers are hopeful for the coming year now that they know the cause of their despair. The few surviving cattle will bring forth new life, a new herd, and the new crop will be abundant. There is little doubt of it now.

The flames rise but Mathilde can hardly feel them. Though it should be an agony, she remembers how to remove herself from her body. Matti had come to her in her last hours. He'd bought her a phial, belladonna and hemlock, and the watchman was kind enough to look away as she tipped it back.

Father Thomas cannot meet her eye. He tried, she thinks, unable to blame him.

She knows that the flesh from her ankles is beginning to float away as black on the wind. She wonders if her ankle could still crack. She would turn her foot if she could. She looks down, hardly lucid, and imagines what it will feel like to move from one state to another. Now she is a body, trapped there inside herself, but it is a form that can only last a little longer. Soon it will be something quite different. Formless.

Limitless. She is looking forward to inhabiting an undefined space. To existing as just a thought. A memory.

She cannot think anymore. She is too hot. Water pours from her forehead, her armpits, her chest. But it cannot cool her. It can only rise as steam. She begins to cry. She screams, finally. It echoes through the valley and chases the birds from their perches. She screams until her throat closes up, filled with smoke, and she chokes. She is drifting now beyond consciousness. It is a relief.

Mathilde sees Anna standing far behind the trees with Mamé. And as the fire begins to crackle, and her senses drift like the embers up, up into the beyond, she is overcome. Her love is infinite and eternal. Her love will arrive, again and again. And as this thought sparks, so that she can shuck her body like wheat chaff, she rises.

Emma wakes from a dream of dying. A quiver, not unlike any other, and a spasm from her core. A sensation that she left her body and rose through the air as dust. Waiting for her was a figure, and when they met they entwined, one creature formed together—twin flames, material and divine.

‘Doctor, you slipped that letter under my pillow, is that correct?’ They tour the grounds, for she is no longer under his direct care.

He inhales sharply, glances left and right. ‘Please,’ he says, ‘that is our little secret.’

‘Then are you willing to help me? To truly help me?’

He nods, lips pursed, a furtive movement.

She looks nervously about her, takes a deep breath. ‘Please, understand that I am speaking to you as one rational creature to another. I cannot hope to get better here. You must, for any hope for my recovery, allow me to acknowledge that these desires are real. And you must believe in me.’ She clasps his hands. ‘These fantasies—these dreams and visions and automatic transcriptions—they are part of me, they are what drive me. They alone are the key to my recovery. To my freedom. As much as I wish I could walk out that door of my own accord I cannot. You must give me leave to do so.’

‘It is not that simple, Mrs Blount. Doctor Gissing, your husband—I could never convince them. Even if I tried, they do not understand these things as I do. I could lose my position, they could undermine my research.’

‘Then don’t tell them.’

He sighs, runs his hands through his hair. 'I don't know, what you are asking of me is ...'

'Is it really so much?' she asks, shaking her head. 'Is it really so much that you give me the chance to try?'

Gravel crunches under her feet as Emma strides across the broad driveway. The carriage is black and regal, curved with two brown stallions at its head. She can hardly contain her excitement. She has no luggage, only what she wears. She needs nothing else. Barrett holds his arm and stops before the door.

'Quickly now,' he says, 'while the nurses carry her bags to the front.' He smiles at her.

Gissing is by the front door with Potts, helping Mrs Wilcox, the newest unfortunate of the asylum, to ascend the front steps. They have only this moment, stolen and precise, to hide her away in the disembarking carriage.

'Thank you,' she says, and she kisses his cheek.

He squeezes her arm and he opens the door.

Emma stands at the bow watching the water rush and tumble beneath the iron hull. A white wash, frothy and thick. A gull soars above the ship and Emma delights in its arc across the blue sky. A signal of their imminent arrival. And true enough, she can see the bare glint of land on the distant horizon.

‘There it is,’ Susannah says, appearing at her side. She places her arm across her waist.

‘Italy,’ Emma whispers. It is a reverent word, a thing to be treasured. ‘I can’t believe we made it.’

The sea is calm; hardly a ripple breaks upon the blue. Emma cannot remember the sea looking this way, so serene, gentle and welcoming. Not quite like that tempestuous wash of her childhood, but familiar in its vastness. She’s never felt so much like diving in.

‘If it keeps up like this I may get to keep the contents of my stomach today,’ says John. He hasn’t taken kindly to the sea. He is pale, green almost, but he smiles as always.

‘But what an adventure. I’ve been reading about the movement in Italy. They call it spiritism, but it’s much the same so there’s a good chance for work. They believe in reincarnation though, did you know? Can’t wait to get stuck in. Brilliant stuff, just brilliant.’

‘I’m sure the thought of all that food and wine and sun has nothing at all to do with your enthusiasm,’ Susannah teases.

‘Of course not, I’m a professional my dear, through and through.’

‘A professional toff.’

He laughs. ‘Well, the women may prove something of a distraction.’

Susannah turns to Emma, entwines her fingers within her own. ‘Not to me.’

Emma lets the little blossom that expands in her chest reach into all the parts of her. She trembled when she thought of it, for hadn’t it all been worth it? All of it, for this infinite love.

‘I think I shall go below,’ Emma says. ‘I feel such a pull now that we can see it—I never thought I would. You know it is the strangest feeling, like I’m coming home. My fingers are tingling. I must write.’

‘Of course,’ Susannah says. She smiles brightly. ‘You must.’

Emma goes below deck. A cavernous place, deep and twisted with narrow passages. But it doesn’t frighten her, even in the dark when the ship rocks and throws her against her will. For she never feels as out of control as she once did. Even if she up, trace her fingers for guidance along a wall and find her way.

She settles at the tiny desk, wedged between two beds in the cabin. There is a little window, just enough to light up the paper which rests on the wood before her. The gentle rock of the ocean makes it easy to send her mind away, to fall into that familiar state of bliss. Only this time, instead of ascending, emptying herself to be taken over, she feels herself go inward—deeper, deeper. She lifts the pen, rests it against the page, and begins to write:

I married Marco di Nicollo Casini the day after my sixteenth birthday.

Exegesis:
Developing Practice-led Feminist Mythology of the Third
Generation

Introduction

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.¹

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Women are writing, and the air is heavy with expectation:
What will they write that is new?²

Julia Kristeva, *Women's Time*

In her essay, 'Women's Time' (1981), Julia Kristeva discusses three different movements, or 'generations' of women in feminism.³ The first generation sought legal equality with men and to insert themselves into history by denying their femininity. The second generation (post the 1968 cultural revolution) advocated for sexual difference and the recognition of feminine identity; however, Kristeva accuses this group of risking 'inverted sexism'.⁴ The proposed third generation is a 'corporeal and desiring mental space' in which the hierarchical dichotomy between man and woman is dissolved.⁵ This generation includes the parallel existence and intermingling of all three generations, and so draws on the concerns of the past, but with a view towards the deconstruction of gender binaries in order to give women a position in which they can enter history on their own terms, and not as defined by men.⁶ This thesis is a response to Kristeva's 'third generation', in particular, how women can 'enter history' as subjects through a feminist revisionist approach to the body and the sacred.

¹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976) pp.875-893; 875.

² Kristeva, Julia, 'Women's Time' trans. Alice Jardine, Harry Blake, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981) pp.13-15; 32

³ *Ibid.* pp. 13-35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

The issue of the female subject position became prominent in the works of the French Feminists of the 1970s and 80s, namely the ‘holy trinity’, Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.⁷ They react against the binary exclusions that associate masculinity with activity, rationality and the mind, and femininity with passivity, emotion and the body, resulting in the cultural repression of women.⁸ Instead, they advocate the acknowledgement of sexual difference and the bisexual libido: that both active and passive desire exist within the unconscious of both genders. This deconstruction does not mean to collapse man/woman into an androgynous whole, as this would erase difference, but acknowledges masculine and feminine principles as existing on a continuum without privileging one over the other.⁹

Kristeva’s ‘third generation’ embraces the past with a view toward the future, and rather than contributing to ‘generational conflict’, the path I have taken has arisen organically from practice-led research and as such, follows not only the important theoretical foundations of the French Feminists, but also the Anglo-American school of feminist revisionism, with a third-wave concern for multiplicity of experience.¹⁰ These branches are distant, and while this thesis is concerned with

⁷ I refer to the ‘holy trinity’ of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray as the ‘French Feminists’ for the purposes of clarity and in accordance with their grouping by Anglo-American Feminist scholars such as Jane Gallop and Toril Moi; however, they are not reducible to one another. Jane Gallop’s *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan, 1982) was one of the earliest and most important importations of the trio from French to Anglo-American readerships. Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* similarly grouped the three together as ‘the holy trinity’, particularly in regard to their theories of feminine language. While what they share in common is more important for this thesis than where they diverge, it is important to note the differences in their standpoints. While Cixous and Irigaray reject patriarchal and phallogocentric culture, Kristeva works within it, and even praises it. Kristeva also does not agree that writing is sexed (though her view perhaps overlooks Cixous and Irigaray’s ‘feminine’ writing as one *not* restricted to biological sex), and she accepts, rather than rejects the Oedipal structure. For a concise examination of these differences see Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling The Double-Bind* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) pp.163-181; Oliver, ‘Preface: French Feminism in an American Context’ in *French Feminism Reader* ed. by Kelly Oliver (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) pp.vii-x

⁸ I will further these terms and their significance in the next section.

⁹ Irigaray, Luce, ‘Sexual Difference’ in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp.161-177; Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.34.

¹⁰ Snyder, Claire R., ‘What Is Third-Wave Feminism?’ in *Signs* Vol.34, No.1 (2008) pp.175-196 p. 176-182.

where they overlap, it is important to acknowledge their differences. In her criticism of the first two ‘generations’ of feminism, Kristeva writes from the context of French Feminism and its associated philosophical, linguistic and psychoanalytic schools.¹¹ Kristeva, as well as Irigaray and Cixous, as decedents of de Beauvoir, are broadly seen to apply philosophical, linguistic and literary theoretical approaches to critique how identity is formed in patriarchal structures. It is, of course, impossible to define an entire history of Anglo-American feminism, but, as a counterpoint to the French School, Anglo-American criticism tends to address political and social institutions in terms of women’s repression and how women’s identities can be redefined by women.¹² For the purposes of this thesis, my discussion of Anglo-American feminism will concentrate on contributions to feminist revisionism, namely Adrienne Rich, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Alicia Ostriker, who attempt to deconstruct cultural understandings of women by studying and rewriting women of the past. It is also important here to note that while Kristeva’s ‘generations’ may seem to coincide generally with the history of Anglo-American ‘waves’, these terms are not collapsible. However, their concerns and chronology generally overlap: the first ‘generation’ and the first ‘wave’ are concerned with women’s attainment of equal political and legal rights; the second ‘generation’ and ‘wave’ are concerned with women’s difference. It is the third ‘generation’ and ‘wave’ that are most distinct. My use of the term ‘third generation’ is therefore positioned within Kristeva’s paralleling of the previous ‘generation’s’ with the present — in my case,

¹¹ Namely, as Alice Jardine notes in her introduction to the text, “‘the Three H’s’” (Heidegger, Hegel and Husserl) to the generation of the “Three Masters of Suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) and most important, beyond.’ ‘Introduction to Julia Kristeva’s Women’s Time’, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981), pp.5-12; p.7

¹² Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1985) foregrounds the distinction between French and Anglo-American feminism, and is attributed with not only coining the term, ‘French Feminism’, but bringing Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous to an Anglo-American audience. See also: Gambaudo, Sylvie, ‘French Feminism vs Anglo-American Feminism: A Reconstruction’ *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, (2007). Vol. 14, No.2, pp.93-108

including both French and Anglo-American — in order to develop a subject position for women within the Symbolic Order. It aligns the metaphysical and post-structural approach of the French Feminists with the cultural and social change that concern Anglo-American feminists, primarily here, the literary artefact as revisionist fiction. These intersect in this thesis' two primary concerns: the dissolution of the masculine/feminine binary through the bisexual unconscious, and a revisionist re-mythologising of female archetypes.

As a revisionist text, my novel responds to the question of what can 'perform the function of religion—and "woman"—with the least religiosity' in a world where the Law of Judeo-Christianity is coming to an end.¹³ For Kristeva, it is in 'literary creation that woman's desire for affirmation now manifests itself.'¹⁴ Kristeva's positioning of creative 'women's time' against masculine 'epic time', the 'largely male-authored tradition of the historical novel, which seeks to grab the event through an epoch defining narrative of watershed dates,'¹⁵ aligns her with the concerns of Anglo-American feminist revisionist scholars. As Kristeva states, identification with the imaginary through creative practice,

bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.¹⁶

Thus, this thesis attempts to acknowledge the feminine in both women and men, and show how its repression is damaging to the individual and to Western culture. In order to employ the unconscious as a healing space for both the individual and

¹³ Jardin, p.11.

¹⁴ Kristeva, 'Women's Time' p.31.

¹⁵ Apter, Emily, "'Women's Time' in Theory', *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol.21, No.1 (2010), pp.1-18; p.4.

¹⁶ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p.32.

society, I align the French Feminist concept of bisexuality with a Jungian feminist approach to the unconscious. Jungian theory offers an alternative to the masculine imaginary. Additionally, Jung's concept of the anima and animus — the repressed masculine or feminine within each individual — along with his assertion that the feminine must be culturally acknowledged, provides a framework through which to imagine a fictional gynocentric alternative to patriarchal histories. My aim is to create a feminist revisionist text of the third generation, one which seeks to deconstruct patriarchal binaries by returning my characters to their bodies and to the sacred. The creative component of this thesis is the testing ground for these ideas, and as such, remains a lens through which to *imagine* a potential for the reclamation of female subjectivity through narrative, and is not intended to be definitive about psychoanalytical, feminist, or cultural 'truth'.¹⁷

The exegetical component of this thesis offers a textual analysis of my own novel, *The Material and the Divine* alongside Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen*. I first discuss these two texts in relation to feminine approaches to time and space. This draws on Kristeva's notion of cyclical and monumental time as the feminine alternative to masculine linear time, and examines how this is used by female characters due to their Other position within patriarchal culture.¹⁸ It then examines characters' relationships with space, particularly their restriction by, and subversion of, the Gothic home, asylum, and tower. I then demonstrate how the characters attempt subjectivity by examining maternity, and through writing.¹⁹ Feminist

¹⁷ Part of this 'testing ground' involves incorporating ideas that may seem on their surface to be uneasy bedfellows, in particular, French Feminism and Jungian Theory. I do not take the whole of Jungian theory on board in my thesis, rather, I have selected those areas of this thought most relevant to returning the feminine to consciousness through the Sacred Feminine, and his approach to the unconscious which allows for the reframing of archetypes, and access to the bisexual unconscious. I will unpack my use of Jungian feminism further in this introduction.

¹⁸ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', pp.16-17.

¹⁹ This will draw on Irigaray's concept of matricide as discussed in 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *The Irigaray Reader* pp.34-46 and Cixous' *écriture féminine* in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' pp.875-893.

revisionist fiction aims to transform cultural understandings of women through revisiting cultural, mythological, or religious images, and consequently, my final discussion deconstructs the cultural myths of the virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric/medium.²⁰

My novel uses reincarnation as a framework through which to examine resonances in the repression of desire of women in three historical settings: Victorian London, Late Reformation Alsace, and Renaissance Florence. Emma, diagnosed as a hysteric after the death of her daughter, finds autonomy in the spiritualist séance; Mathilde is accused of witchcraft after aborting the child of her former lover; and Lucrezia, whose mystical visions lead her to an affair with an alchemist, is devastated to discover that her husband has secretly converted to Protestantism. Reincarnation offers a framework through which to extend the consequences of repressed desire, as it is internalised by each woman based on her experiences and, with each 'rebirth', emerges through the unconscious as unrecognised impulses, neuroses and complexes. These arise as dreams or impulses to both act on desire and internalise it for fear of patriarchal reprisal. The novel is multi-voiced, with a cyclical structure that seeks to blur the boundaries between each woman, and as such, detach her from linear time. In this sense, it draws on Kristeva's concepts of both cyclical and monumental time, and on Cixous' *écriture féminine* in its use of fluidity and multiplicity. I have also used the metaphors of the Female Gothic as a framework for the novel, particularly the use of restrictive space, ambivalent maternity, and spectrality to represent repression in the feminine unconscious.

²⁰ Feminist revisionism is generally attributed to Adrienne Rich in 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' in *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1972) pp.18-30; See also: Ostriker, Alicia, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,' *Signs*, Vol.8 No.1 (1982), 68-90

Why Now?

Revisionist approaches to women's writing have been a concern of feminist critics since the 1970s, particularly since Adrienne Rich's assertion that the act of entering old texts from new critical directions is necessary to change our cultural concepts of sexual identity. She states that 'until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.'²¹ Writers such as Michèle Roberts, as I demonstrate in this thesis, as well others such as Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, and Kristeva and Cixous, have continued to write in this tradition over several decades, repeatedly representing and subverting pervasive cultural myths of women, female bodies and desires, maternity and spirituality.²² Thus, while the revisionist movement is far from new, I still feel compelled to contribute to it, for the problems of language and the representation of the 'images of consciousness we are just coming into'²³ feel as real to me still as they must have to women forty years ago — so real, I began down this path before I learned of what my foremothers had written. As Rich observes, there is still 'the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored.'²⁴ While the core concerns of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, namely women's subjectivity, female bodies and the sacred, may not seem as radically subversive as they were forty years ago, they remain relevant to contemporary feminist revisionist writing. Indeed, all three continue to publish on these themes today, expanding on their foundational texts, as well as developing

²¹ Rich, p.18.

²² Beyer, Charlotte, 'Feminist Revisionist Mythology and Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's Recent Poetry', *Literature and Theology*, Vol.14, No.3 (2000) 276-298; Cavalaro, Dani, *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2011); Keating, Christine C., 'Unearthing the Goddess Within: Feminist Revisionist Mythology in the Poetry of Margaret Atwood' *Women's Studies* Vol.43 No.4 (2014) pp. 483-501; Royon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition: Transforming American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Wilson, Sharon Rose, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993).

²³ Rich, p.19.

²⁴ Ibid.

them in their own revisionist fictions.²⁵ However, the French Feminists are often accused of essentialising women's experiences. In her introduction to her translation of Kristeva's text, Alice Jardin notes that Kristeva's use of a 'metalanguage' may provoke 'strong reactions' from Anglo-American readers who reject her use of universalisms such as 'historical time',²⁶ and this remains a point of conflict in feminist scholarship, particularly for writers, like me, who have come into feminism during the third wave.²⁷ Claire Snyder writes that third wave feminists 'rightly reject the universalist claim that all women share a set of common experiences, but they do not discard the concept of experience altogether.'²⁸ The deconstructionist approach of Kristeva and Cixous to the collapse of a unified or universal 'woman' and the plurality of female voices echoes these concerns. Their use of universal language responded to the need for women to articulate their differences for themselves, something that, at the time, had not yet occurred. As Diana Fuss suggests, essentialist concepts can be used strategically by oppressed groups to form a sense of solidarity and identity, a position found most prominently in Irigaray's work.²⁹ Furthermore,

²⁵ Kristeva's *Hatred and Forgiveness* trans. by Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) continues her explorations of language, the abject, female sexuality and the sacred, particularly after the French Senate's adoption of male-female parity. *This Incredible Need to Believe* trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) explores faith, religion and the sacred in contemporary culture. *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila* trans. by Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) integrates her philosophical and psychoanalytical work in a revisionist exploration of St Teresa, particularly St Teresa's experiences of *jouissance* and embodiment/disembodiment. Irigaray's *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) expands the ideas of *Speculum of the Other Woman*, particularly the pre-Socratic roots of culture, language and sexual difference. Hélène Cixous' *Eve Escapes* fictionalises her relationship with her dying mother and in the style of *écriture féminine*, fluidly engages with philosophy, psychoanalysis, language and desire.

²⁶ Particularly as they do not understand the evolution of the phrase in the French context. Jardin, p.8

²⁷ I will offer a distinction between the use of the terms 'waves' and 'generations' in the preceding discussion. Snyder, 184. See also: Heywood, Leslie, "Introduction," in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 1-24; Dicker, Rory and Alison Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the Twenty-First Century* pp.9-10. See also: Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.106-111; Jones, Ann Rosalind, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Écriture Feminine"' *Feminist Studies* (1981) Vol.7, No.2, pp. 247-263; Gilbert, Sandra M. 'Introduction' in *Newly Born Woman* trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

²⁸ Snyder, 184

²⁹ Fuss, Diana, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989); "Essentially Speaking": Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence', *Hypatia* Vol.3, No.3 (1989) pp. 62-80

their writing responds to philosophical traditions that came before them. As Kristeva demonstrates in *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010), the ‘universalist principle’ descends from ‘the One unity of Intellect and Being’ of Plato’s metaphysics, and ‘two thousand years of politics have been inspired by this universality.’³⁰ She goes on to say that, ‘it is here that the female aspiration to parity in republican universalism has emerged today. As speaking, thinking beings, women participate in this sacrificial universality.’³¹ Recently, the notion of any ‘essence’ of human nature has been widely rejected by scholars and feminists, but I want to emphasise that this does not make French Feminist and contemporary concerns incompatible, so long as we speak of women’s experiences, rather than ‘woman’s experience’.

Snyder writes that third wave ideas about identity ‘embrace notions of contradiction, multiplicity, and ambiguity,’ as does Cixous and Irigaray’s *écriture féminine*.³² Cixous maintains that it is impossible to write about all women and that while it is important for women to write the feminine, this voice is *not* biologically restricted, nor does it tell a single, unified story.³³ Furthermore, she rejects the term *écriture féminine* because of the constraints of the binary exclusions that it implies.³⁴ As my novel is a revisionist historical fiction, my characters experience the binary limitations that concern the French Feminists; however, I am not as restricted in representation of female desire as women writers of the past.

As a writer of the twenty first century, I write in a context where positioning the female as subject is no longer as subversive as it once was. As women, we have ‘rooms of [our] own’, and the anxiety of authorship perhaps seems less relevant for a

³⁰ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness* trans. by Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) p.51.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.52

³² *Ibid*, 187.

³³ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p.876.

³⁴ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.106.

woman who, legally, shares equal rights with men.³⁵ Despite legal parity, however, sexual equality still has a way to go. As Gilbert and Gubar attest, Western literary history is overwhelmingly male, and while in the thirty-seven years since the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) the range of female authored texts has grown, women writers are still largely underrepresented in our three-thousand-year-old literary history.³⁶ The current literary landscape, and debates therein, reveal that despite the number of female authored texts rising beyond parity with their male counterparts, and the fact that women read more than men, female authored novels are far more likely to be critically dismissed compared to their male counterparts.³⁷ Similarly, studies and popular commentary highlight that men and boys read more books exclusively by and about men, while women are more likely to have no preference, or balanced preferences.³⁸

In an essay about why she initiated Australia's Stella Prize, Sophie Cunningham discusses the 'humiliating and distressing' statistics of the critical

³⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own: And, Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Gilbert & Gubar, p.51.

³⁶ Gilbert & Gubar, p.47.

³⁷ Cunningham, Sophie, 'A prize of one's own: Flares, cock-forests and dreams of a common language.' *Kill Your Darlings*, No. 6 (2011) pp. 9-20. Pew Research reveals that 82% of American women read at least one book in the past 12 months, compared to 69% of men: Pew Research Centre (2014) 'A Snapshot of Reading in America in 2013' <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/a-snapshot-of-reading-in-america-in-2013/>> [accessed 30/11/2015]. Steven J. Tepper finds that women are twice as likely to read fiction, and men are more likely to read history and current affairs, concluding that reading *fiction* in particular is more generally a "feminine" activity: Tepper, Steven J., (2000) 'Why Do More Women Read Fiction?' *Poetics* Vol.27 pp.255-275; Summers, Kate, (2013) 'Adult reading habits and preferences in relation to gender differences.' *Reference & User Services Quarterly* Vol. 52, No.3, pp.243-249; Weiner, Jennifer, 'If you enjoyed a good book and you're a woman, the critics think you're wrong' *The Guardian*, 25 November 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/24/good-books-women-readers-literary-critics-sexism>> [accessed 27/11/2015].

³⁸ Kate Summers more recent study similarly shows higher numbers of women readers of fiction to men. She also highlights the gender preferences of male and female readers. Of 60 authors chosen as favourites by male participants, 57 were male, and 3 female; for female participants, 44 male authors were chosen as favourites, with 19 female authors. Men are far more likely to prefer fiction titles with male protagonists (24 out of 29 participants), by contrast, the majority of female participants indicated no preference for protagonists' gender, while 6 indicated a preference for male, and 4 for female, p.247. See also: Blanchard, Bethanie, 'The Stella Count: why do male authors still dominate book reviews?' *The Guardian* 26 September 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2013/sep/26/stella-count-male-authors-dominate> [accessed 26/11/2015]; Tuffield, Aviva, 'Female authors help broaden men's horizons' *The Age* 23 September 2014 <<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/female-authors-help-broaden-mens-horizons-20140922-10k5x4.html>> [accessed 26/11/2015].

reception of female authored texts, and states, ‘You can make it illegal for women to be beaten. You can make it illegal for them to be raped. But legislation can’t force men — or indeed women — to find the style in which women write, and the things that they write about, gripping or important.’³⁹ Catherine Nichols similarly demonstrates the pervasive gender bias in publishing. After assuming a male pseudonym and submitting her work to fifty agents, Nichols found that ‘George’ was ‘eight and a half times better than me at writing the same book’. Not only were there far more positive responses, they were faster, more enthusiastic, and even rejections were ‘polite and warm’ where they had not been before: ‘my novel wasn’t the problem, it was me — Catherine.’⁴⁰ Recently, Jennifer Weiner coined the term ‘goldfinching’, named for the ‘yes-but-is-it-art interrogation’ of Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Goldfinch* (2013), for the process in which ‘a popular and previously well-regarded novel and, more importantly, its readers, are taken to the woodshed’ by critics who dismiss the popularity of texts by, and liked by, women.⁴¹ In another recent essay, ‘On Pandering’, Claire Vaye Watkins discusses her experience with gender disparity in critical literary circles, but particularly, her personal revelation that she had spent her professional writing career ‘pandering’ to the ‘white male literati’, whose validation dictates the cultural importance of literary work.⁴²

Contemporary cultural images of women, particularly regarding sexuality, remain similarly problematic. Current feminist concerns with rape culture seek to undermine the demonising of women through victim blaming. The Angel has

³⁹ Cunningham, p.17.

⁴⁰ Nichols, Catherine, ‘Homme de Plume: What I Learned Sending My Novel Out Under a Male Name’ *Jezebel*, 4 April 2015, <<http://jezebel.com/homme-de-plume-what-i-learned-sending-my-novel-out-und-1720637627>> [accessed 26/11/2015].

⁴¹ Weiner, n.p.

⁴² Vaye Watkins, ‘On Pandering’ *Tin House: the Open Bar*, 23 November 2015, <<http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/41314/on-pandering.html>> [accessed 26/11/2015].

become the woman who walks the streets with flesh safely hidden from the helpless male gaze, while the Monster — returned to her early Judeo-Christian titles, whore, temptress — has no one to blame but herself when she is attacked. Alison Healicon and Courtney Fraser agree that contemporary rape culture relies on gender binaries and essentialism that deny female agency and blame women for their own victimisation.⁴³ Kate Harding similarly notes that in contemporary culture the focus is on whether or not a woman was ‘asking’ for rape by her clothing and/or behaviour.⁴⁴ This is an issue which has been written about frequently by social commentators such as Clementine Ford and Roxanne Gay who highlight the way media contributes to the demonising of women in rape and sexual assault cases.⁴⁵ The old dichotomy, Angel and the Monster, is alive and well in 2016.

While reading Vaye Watkins’s essay, I could not help but see the similarities between her concern for women to write themselves and Cixous and Irigaray’s *écriture féminine*. Her language, particularly, demonstrates that *écriture féminine* is still alive and necessary in the contemporary literary world:

Let us use our words and our gazes to make the invisible visible. Let us tell the truth.
Let us, each of us, write things that are uncategorizable, rather than something that panders to and condones and codifies those categories.
Let us burn this motherfucking system to the ground and build something better.⁴⁶

Cunningham similarly states that we need to return to ‘retro political activism’, to ‘bring flares back’ and ‘instead of exercising howling restraint’ to choose ‘the path of

⁴³ Healicon, Alison, *The Politics of Sexual Violence: Rape, Identity and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) n.p; Fraser, Courtney, ‘From “Ladies First” to “Asking for It”’: Benevolent Sexism in the Maintenance of Rape Culture’ *California Law Review* Vol.103, No.1 (2015) pp.143 – 145.

⁴⁴ Harding, Kate, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What we Can Do About It* (Boston: De Capo Press, 2015) pp. 1-3; 11-13; 32-35.

⁴⁵ For examples of these see: Gay, Roxanne, ‘The Careless Language Of Sexual Violence’ *The Rumpus* 10 March 2011 <<http://therumpus.net/2011/03/the-careless-language-of-sexual-violence/>> [accessed 30/11/2015]; Ford, Clementine, ‘Is our attitude towards sexual assault getting worse?’ *Daily Life* 17 February 2015 <<http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/is-our-attitude-towards-sexual-assault-getting-worse-20150216-13gg7t.html>> [accessed 30/11/2015].

⁴⁶ Vaye Watkins, n.p.

joyful celebration, of action.’⁴⁷ For me, this is a call for the explosive and joyful feminine voice in the 21st century.

The rupturing of binaries and the subversion of archetypes can be achieved by speaking as a twenty-first century woman who has inherited the anguishes of her foremothers, but through their struggles is also equipped with the tools to emerge as a subject in her own right. I have arrived ‘at the beginning of a new history,’⁴⁸ but informing me are millennia of women: women who have been underrepresented, misrepresented and almost completely unrepresented in their own right. Women who have battled against their instinctive, sexual and spiritual natures to preserve an ideal crafted about them by and for men. My desire to explore the side-lined position of a particularly female spiritual experience in a historical context draws on Cixous’ assertion that, ‘in women, the self, and personal history, blends together with the history of all women.’⁴⁹

Michèle Roberts

Michèle Roberts’ novels deal with the unconscious, spirituality, and feminist psychoanalytical ideas and as such, this thesis develops a close reading of *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) alongside my own novel, and additionally considers Roberts’ broader creative practice in the development of both *In the Red Kitchen* and *The Wild Girl* (1984).⁵⁰ Roberts acknowledges the debt she owes to the French Feminists for helping to shape her early feminist ideas, and her work has continued to engage with issues of women’s spirituality, sexuality, cultural dichotomies, maternity and the

⁴⁷ Cunningham, p.18.

⁴⁸ Cixous p.882.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 881.

⁵⁰ *The Wild Girl* was later published as *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. I will be referring to the title *The Wild Girl* throughout this thesis: Roberts, Michèle, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2007); Roberts, Michèle, *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Vintage, 1999).

body, from the 1980s through to her most recent novel, *Ignorance* (2013).⁵¹ Her work illuminates a continuous response to the feminist call of the mid-1970s and despite our generational gap, I have found great similarities in our impetus to write. Roberts refers to the unconscious as a ‘free space’ into which she delves for inspiration:

I think women have been so repressed into the unconscious of the culture if you like, that (a) it’s where we’ve belonged but (b) it’s where we can begin to invent ourselves. And I think I’ve been encouraged by those French philosophers like Kristeva and Cixous and Irigaray who I think suggested to me in the seventies and early eighties that because so many meanings of woman were repressed, it was very liberating for a writer to dive down, and see what she can find, and bring it back up to the surface.⁵²

The potential of Jungian feminism for the reimagining of mythical female symbols is particularly evident in *Wild Girl*, and in both texts it is clear that Roberts engages with *and* departs from Freud in her inclusion of post-Freudian feminist concerns with the maternal and the sexual body, the subversive potential of the mystical, mediumistic and hysterical fit, and the ability for the unconscious to create a meaningful space to challenge patriarchal constructs. Her characters descend into the unconscious to heal traumatic pasts, emerge into the Symbolic Order through writing, and to overcome fractured female subjectivity. Furthermore, similar to my own practice, Roberts discovered that these, ‘just happened’ in her work: ‘It wasn’t that I read the theory, and thought oh, yes, I must do that. It’s that I was very interested to find that the theory described what I was doing.’⁵³ Roberts’ characters, such as the medium, Flora Milk in *In the Red Kitchen*, and the fictional Mary Magdalene in *Wild Girl* challenge patriarchal feminine binaries and are forced to confront the consequences of such subversions. The fractured narrative structure of

⁵¹ *Ignorance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) follows two cousins growing up in France during WWII. It explores issues of maternity, faith and mysticism, and sexuality.

⁵² Roberts, Michele & Soraya M. García-Sánchez, *Traveling in History with Michele Roberts* (Peter Lang, 2011) p.142-143.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p.143.

In the Red Kitchen challenges linear concepts of time and allows notions of truth and history to be questioned. Her protagonists confront the maternal body, both as mothers and daughters, and come to terms with womanhood through the healing of the maternal split. They also engage with language variously through masculine and feminine forms, as each attempts to find an identity through writing. Roberts' women are complicated: they are not heroines or victims, passive or active, virgins or whores. They confront the limitations imposed on them by cultural binaries of the masculine and the feminine, and often both subvert and reinforce such notions. They are fluid, multiple, and subversive, able to unite light and dark, sexuality and spirituality, and through them, Roberts attempts to 'rescue women from history'.⁵⁴

The Masculine/Feminine Binary

Deconstructionists such as Derrida have alerted us to the extent that Western philosophy and culture have structured themselves according to binary oppositions.⁵⁵ Women's oppression, as I will discuss it in this thesis, is partly due to the collapse of gendered characteristics onto the biologically sexed subject.⁵⁶ As critics such as Sherry Ortner and Simone de Beauvoir note, historically, women have been associated with the body and nature due to their reproductive capacities that have relegated them to child-rearing and the home.⁵⁷ Men, meanwhile, are associated with the mind and culture and the creation of meaning through involvement with external industry and productivity.⁵⁸ The biological associations that separated men into the

⁵⁴ Roberts, Michele & Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, 'On Women, Christianity and History: An Interview with Michele Roberts' *Atlantis* vol.25, no.1, (2003) pp.93-107; 98.

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida traces this back to the Socrates/Plato dialogues in *Positions* trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p.41.

⁵⁶ Lloyd, Genevieve, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp.viii-ix.

⁵⁷ de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathon Cape, 1953); Ortner, Sherry 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' *Feminist Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 5-31.

⁵⁸ Gilbert, Sandra M. & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) pp.6-17; Lloyd,

public world of activity and culture and women into the domestic world of passivity and nature then became associated with the larger cultural concepts of the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’.⁵⁹ Cixous sums up the gender binary and associated traits succinctly in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Head/Emotions
Intelligible/Sensitivity
Logos/Pathos⁶⁰

These accord with masculinity/femininity respectively, and as Cixous demonstrates, they are prevalent in the social fabric of patriarchal culture. As Derrida states, binaries are always subject to hierarchy where one governs the other or ‘has the upper hand.’⁶¹ Thus, the masculine imaginary turned the feminine to its purpose, and arguably, Western culture is founded on the repression of the feminine.⁶² Cixous associates this with man’s need to ameliorate ‘two unrepresentable things: death and the female sex.’⁶³ As Ortner and Kristeva demonstrate, that which is natural is threatening: nature is associated with decay, pollution, primal desire, and natural death.⁶⁴ This accounts for the secondary binary that I will be discussing in this thesis: the Angel/Monster dichotomy.

Genevieve, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp.2-3; Kellerman, Aharon *Time, and Society: Geographical Societal Perspective* (Springer Science & Business Media, 1989) p.61.

⁵⁹ Rowland, Susan *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002) pp.133-139; Lloyd, pp.1-3.

⁶⁰ Cixous, Helene and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p.115.

⁶¹ Derrida, p.41.

⁶² *Ibid*, p.10, Gilbert & Gubar, pp.6-26.

⁶³ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ p.885; Beauvoir similarly notes that this image represents man’s inability to control his own physical existence, his birth or death, p.165.

⁶⁴ Ortner, pp.11-12; Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror* trans. by. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Kristeva & Catherine Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred* trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) pp.88-95.

Scholars such as Gilbert and Gubar note that, historically, Western society has split the feminine into a polarity of light and dark. This has become known as the Angel/Monster dichotomy, but it traces its roots to the virgin/whore dichotomy of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁶⁵ The Angelic woman is removed from the threat of her natural body and is instead passive, virginal, receptive and pure. The Monster, by contrast, represents the putrid, the body, animality, unbridled creativity, sexuality and death.⁶⁶ This polarity renders the subject split. The group privileged in the hierarchy projects the feared and repressed aspects of themselves onto the Other: men project the repressed feminine onto women. Women, being Other, have no group on which to project, and so suffer a split in their sense of identity.⁶⁷

The significance of the gender binary in relation to the central argument of this thesis begins with Sigmund Freud's idea that all infants are bisexual before they become gendered subjects. Bisexual libido, or sexual desire, is divided into the masculine or the feminine and its associated traits, particularly activity and passivity, by means of repressing the other.⁶⁸ This is the process of the Oedipal complex, wherein a child is said to identify with their same-sex parent and develop sexual desire for the opposite. In the development of psychosexual identity, boys are said to develop castration anxiety, the fear of emasculation by the father, and girls are said to develop penis envy, the realisation that without a penis she cannot sexually possess

⁶⁵ I will refer to this dichotomy as the virgin/whore as it pertains to more traditional Christian associations, but both represent the same feminine split. Gilbert & Gubar, p.20; Ruether, Rosemary *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005) p.150; Kristeva & Clément, p.79.

⁶⁶ Gilbert & Gubar, pp.6-29. See also: Caputi, Jane, *Goddesses and Monsters: Myth, Power and Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) p.13; Pinkola Estés, Clarissa, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp.1-4.

⁶⁷ Caputi, p.14.

⁶⁸ Freud, Sigmund, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* ed. by. Angela Richards, trans. by. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1977) pp.52-55, 141.

the mother and must redirect her desire to the father. This culminates for women in the bearing of a child who replaces the absent penis.⁶⁹

Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud's concept. However, he posits that sexual difference is not marked by genitalia, but by different relationships with language.⁷⁰ While men enter language by breaking the prelinguistic connection with the mother, women remain tied to the mother and thus remain outside of language.⁷¹ The phallus in a Lacanian context (and by extension in French Feminism) is not the penis as a sexual organ, but as a linguistic construct — the 'sign'. The signifier is the marker into the Symbolic Order: the realm of society and subjectivity where meaning is created, as governed by the Law of the Father.⁷² Within this system, women are 'castrated' due to their lack of the phallus and can only be understood as Other. Women are therefore unable to enter the Symbolic Order, as there is no discursive position for them to speak *as* women. The subject position, according to Lacan, is always masculine.⁷³ This is particularly problematic for the issue of female authorship since, as Gilbert and Gubar state, 'self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is.'⁷⁴ The

⁶⁹ Freud, 'On the Sexual Theories of Children' in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* 187-204; 'Femininity' in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* ed. and trans. by James Stachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990) 139-167, p.159.

⁷⁰ Lacan, Jacques, 'The Mirror stage as formative of the function of the I' in *Ecrits: A Selection* trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W Norton, 1977).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The Law of the Father dictates the way that a child enters language and accepts the rules of society. It takes place during the Oedipal phase when the child moves from their primary relation to the mother to the world of the father – the cultural world of the Symbolic Order. See: Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990) 67-74; Rose, Jacqueline, 'Introduction II' in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell, trans. by Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 1982) pp.27-58, 38-40.

⁷³ Lacan, Jacques, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX* trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1972-72) p.33; Rose, Jacqueline, pp.49-51. Scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz argue that Kristeva remains a 'dutiful daughter' to Freud and Lacan in relation to the Law of the Father. Her concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic rely on Freudian ideas of the pre-oedipal and oedipal sexual drives: Grosz, p.150. Irigaray rejects the Law, and writes most potently against it in 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis' pp.71-78 in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) and 'Cosi Fan Tutti' in *This Sex Which is Not One* trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985) pp.86-105.

⁷⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, p.17.

French Feminists generally agree that in order for women to overcome the hierarchical gender binary and achieve a subject position, they must work through sexual difference.⁷⁵

Sexual Difference and Bisexuality

In her introduction to *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir succinctly demonstrates Western culture's division of man/woman as the basis for the further divisions between self/other, mind/body that have excluded women from their own subjectivity.⁷⁶ Women are subordinated to and restricted by the body, while men remain free from it: 'He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it.'⁷⁷ The French Feminists extend de Beauvoir's concerns, but they criticise her essentialism of 'woman' and her notion of equality: 'Equal to what?' asks Irigaray.⁷⁸ It is not enough to advocate for equal rights and aspire to masculine models of power. Women must have a cultural value and identity of their own, and as such, the French Feminists are concerned with recognising the potential of the female body to turn difference into subjectivity.

According to Irigaray, within the Symbolic Order, 'equal' can only mean 'equal to men' and the neutralisation of difference would 'invite genocide'.⁷⁹ Irigaray's notion of difference acknowledges that men and women exist as two different 'genres' and in order to achieve a subject position, woman cannot simply become 'other of the same'; their position must be given symbolic and social

⁷⁵ Irigaray, Luce, 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 23-29, p32; Kristeva, 'Women's Time' p.25.

⁷⁶ de Beauvoir, pp.28.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p.15.

⁷⁸ Irigaray, Luce, 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader* p32.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.32.

representation.⁸⁰ Kristeva's deconstructionist approach to psychoanalysis locates difference at the heart of identity: there is no such thing as a unified subject, and one can only know oneself in relation to the Other — to alterity.⁸¹ She writes that we need a theory of difference that, 'accounts for oppression, marginalisation and exclusion in order to theorise how to reformulate difference so that it does not lead to oppression, marginalisation and exclusion.'⁸² Cixous also takes a deconstructionist approach to difference and maintains that within the patriarchal binary, the feminine has always represented the negative or the powerless, and that to continue such a paradigm is to render woman passive or non-existent.⁸³ Against this binary, she proposes openness, multiplicity and fluidity. Cixous' metaphorical Medusa represents active female desire that defies the constraints of Lacan's Symbolic.⁸⁴ She seeks to deconstruct difference through *écriture féminine*: feminine writing.⁸⁵ Feminine writing is where Cixous and Irigaray's ideas merge, as they both advocate for the development of a language which expresses the multiplicity of feminine desire, particularly by returning woman to the body. Central to the existence of active and passive desire within the speaking subject is bisexuality.

Kristeva, and Cixous suggest that the bisexual libido remains within each individual; the masculine and the feminine exist equally in the unconscious. As such, desire

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.33.

⁸¹ While a deconstructionist approach to the female subject and the unconscious are relevant here, a proper discussion of this branch of theory is beyond the scope of this thesis. Briefly, deconstruction suggests that language is not a transparent tool for understanding; it is unstable, fragile, and resists the possibility of a unitary, gendered self. For this reason, it is useful to subvert traditional ideologies, such as phallogocentric binaries, and destroy the myths that have historically repressed women.

⁸² Oliver, Kelly, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling The Double-Bind* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) p.12.

⁸³ Cixous & Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.118.

⁸⁴ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.885.

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the problematic essentialism of the term *écriture féminine*, see: Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.106-111; Jones, Ann Rosalind, *Feminist Studies* (1981) Vol.7, No.2, pp. 247-263.

itself is not sexed: it is both active and passive, and available nonexclusively to both genders.⁸⁶ Bisexuality does not mean to collapse the masculine and the feminine into an androgynous being as this would overlook sexual difference. Instead, it allows women to attempt a position in the Symbolic Order without adopting a masculine model of femininity.⁸⁷ This position allows women to acknowledge desire that exists within themselves: a desire not defined or attributed to her by men, but that which arises from her own unconscious.⁸⁸ This desire is also understood within a French Feminist context as an ontological desire to become a speaking subject and insert women into history.⁸⁹ Kristeva is clear that this is the way that the ‘third generation’ must challenge notions of identity and sexuality in order to overcome the problems of the previous generations and deconstruct phallogocentric binary exclusions.⁹⁰ Individuals and society need to learn how to deal with the return of the repressed alterity — the position of Otherness — that exists in everyone. In the context of phallogocentric culture, this is the repressed feminine.⁹¹ Cixous’ notion of bisexuality similarly locates both sexes within oneself, ‘variously manifest and insistent according to each person’.⁹² It does not deny difference, but dissolves the dichotomy of self/other, without which all other dichotomies fall apart. Bisexuality thus becomes a means to erase representations of female sexuality and the associated myths of womanhood.⁹³ The central ways that Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous claim

⁸⁶ Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference in bisexuality differs somewhat to Kristeva and Cixous. See: Irigaray, ‘The Poverty of Psychoanalysis’, pp.79-103; Whitford, Margaret, ‘Introduction to Section II’ in *The Irigaray Reader* p.72; Oliver, 175.

⁸⁷ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, pp.18-19; *Tales of Love*, p.224; Cixous, ‘Laugh of the Medusa’, p.884

⁸⁸ Cixous notes that when women discover their own desire they may feel ‘monstrous’ owing to the pervasive cultural notion of female desire as passive, ‘Laugh of the Medusa’, p.876. Irigaray’s ‘two lips’ imagines female desire as represented for itself, an inversion of Lacan’s lack as a hole, *This Sex Which is Not One* p.205-218.

⁸⁹ See: Cixous, p.880; Kristeva, pp.33-35; Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One*.

⁹⁰ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.33.

⁹¹ Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁹² Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ p.884.

⁹³ *Ibid*; See also, Oliver, p.175.

that women can enter history *as* women are to recognise the power of the body, and to locate images of the feminine divine to act as a mirror for the formation of female identity.⁹⁴

Jungian Feminism

While many may see Jungian psychology and French Feminism as uneasy bedfellows, this thesis draws on two important areas of Jungian thought that parallel the concerns of feminist revisionism and French Feminism: the bisexual unconscious, and the cultural significance of the feminine principle.⁹⁵ As I have stated, this thesis is a testing ground for many ideas, and the tension created in the overlapping of Jungian and feminist theories has provided valuable fodder for my practice. Jung is useful in a feminist revisionist context because his approach to the unconscious privileges images over words, and creates space for archetypes that contain powerful potential for both genders.⁹⁶ Jung's psychology broadens neurosis beyond infantile sexuality — the Oedipal complex — and his major break from Freud was a result of his insistence on the healing power of numinous and mythic symbols that arise from the unconscious.⁹⁷ Jung suggests that there is a bisexual complex at the heart of every individual and the aim of psychological development is to dissolve the anima and animus sub-personalities and integrate them into the conscious personality.⁹⁸ Unlike Lacan, Jung's symbolic is not reliant on the phallus: both the feminine and the masculine already exist in the unconscious as archetypes. Additionally, because the body contributes to, but does not govern meaning, this

⁹⁴ These will be discussed in detail on pages 19-25.

⁹⁵ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in Jungian theory beyond these two ideas. Furthermore, this thesis is not concerned with Jung's wider psychology.

⁹⁶ Rowland, Susan *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (Oxford: Polity, 2002), pp.5-10.

⁹⁷ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963) ed. by Aniela Jaffe, trans. by Richard & Clara Wilson (London: Fontana Press, 1995) pp.178-180.

⁹⁸ Jung, Carl, G, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self CW 9, part 2*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1958) pp.19-20.

allows the female body access to subjectivity.⁹⁹ The bisexual Jungian unconscious is complete with the same potential for overcoming binaries as Cixous and Kristeva's. For a bisexual libido to function in a healing manner, the individual must not be tempted to repress the Other, and so the feminine must be seen as equal to the masculine.¹⁰⁰

Jung's amplification of the feminine with the numinous as a rejection of patriarchal Judeo-Christian culture in favour of a 'return' to the feminine is therefore another important concept in the context of this thesis, and a second important link to the French Feminists.¹⁰¹ Jung develops links between Freud and the Church's repression of the feminine, which, if not resolved, prevents the individual and society from achieving wholeness.¹⁰² This is an important revelation for feminists as, like Kristeva and Irigaray, Jung sees potential in Christian figures such as the Virgin Mary to offer a powerful and positive image of divine femininity.¹⁰³ For Jung, reason is not the source of truth: subjectivity and reality are dependent on one another and on the unconscious. Archetypal images are influenced by the conscious mind's understanding of the world, and this means that if we change our perception of the world, so too can we change its archetypal images. Myths are fundamental expressions of human nature, and Jung did not regard spontaneous unconscious fantasies as pathological. As Susan Rowland states, Jung's unconscious was 'a healing, meaningful place.'¹⁰⁴ This reaction is in line with Cixous and Irigaray's

⁹⁹ Rowland, pp.112; 118.

¹⁰⁰ This is particularly relevant to Jung's work on alchemy which will be discussed in chapter three.

¹⁰¹ Rowland, p.47.

¹⁰² Jung, 'Answer to Job', in *Psychology and Religion: East and West CW 11* p.458; Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.228.

¹⁰³ Jung saw the 1950 Assumption of the Virgin Mary by the Catholic Church as an unconscious recognition of the feminine within the Church: *ibid*; Kristeva writes about the potential of Mary through the return of the maternal in 'Stabat Mater', and with Catherine Clèments in *The Feminine and the Sacred*; Irigaray discusses the need for women to have an image of the divine reflected back to them in 'Divine Women' in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* ed. by Ann Garry & Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996) 471-484, p.476.

¹⁰⁴ Rowland, p.16.

critique against what they deem to be the frustrating narrow mindedness of Freudian and Lacanian models that disallow any approach to the unconscious which does not fit a set of pre-established determinations.¹⁰⁵ Cixous writes that we need a new concept of the unconscious, and if the unconscious is a cultural product, then we can create this new unconscious through writing: ‘Things are starting to be written ... things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine’.¹⁰⁶ As Irigaray states, the unconscious is a ‘reservoir of yet-to-come’, a creative and generative source.¹⁰⁷

Towards a Practice of the Female Gothic

The Female Gothic, with its focus on repressed feminine sexuality and limited opportunity, voiced the concerns of the French Feminists — female subjectivity, sexuality and dichotomies — long before their theories emerged.¹⁰⁸ The Female Gothic provides a useful framework for writing a historical revisionist text, as my characters confront the implications of subversive desire within societies that strongly adhere to patriarchal binaries.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, according to Fred Botting, as the Gothic encourages the supernatural and subverts rational codes of understanding through darkness, horror, or the sublime, it becomes a powerful means to reassert the values of society and propriety.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ As well as my own observations, Jungian critics David Tracey, Susan Rowland and Frances Gray each make a case for this connection between Jung and the French Feminists against Enlightenment ideology. See: Tracey, David, *The Jung Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012) p.16; Rowland, pp.97-123; Gray, Frances. *Jung, Irigaray, Individuation: Philosophy, Analytical Psychology, and the Question of the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also: Irigaray, ‘The Poverty of Psychoanalysis’ pp.79-104; Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ pp.875-893

¹⁰⁶ Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation’ trans. by. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* Vol.7, No.1, pp. 41-55; 52.

¹⁰⁷ Irigaray, ‘The Poverty of Psychoanalysis’ p.82.

¹⁰⁸ Most scholars trace the Female Gothic back to Ann Radcliffe, who began publishing in 1790. See: Botting, Fred *Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1996) pp.63-71; Wallace, Diana, and Andrew Smith. *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) pp1-2, 26; Moers, Ellen, *Literary Women* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) p.91, 125.

¹⁰⁹ This will be discussed in chapter three.

¹¹⁰ Botting, p.7.

I have followed Ellen Moers' definition of the Female Gothic, which Diana Wallace summarises as a 'politically subversive genre articulating women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body.'¹¹¹ Donna Heiland states that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, writers have realised that the way through the 'impasse' of the 'black and white' structure of Gothic novels of the past is through complicating the Gothic's focus on oppression, dichotomies and divisions through embracing plural and fractured visions.¹¹² Gothic techniques such as the sublime and the uncanny allow writers to 'blur the seemingly rigid divisions' of the worlds they portray, and confuse our notions of villains and victims.¹¹³ This parallels French Feminist concerns. Drawing on Irigaray's idea that binaries can be subverted by working through difference, Diane Long Hoeveler states that 'If the female gothic heroine cannot finally destroy the patriarchy, she can attempt to outsmart it: she can mime it to death.'¹¹⁴

Within the supernatural world of the Gothic, the natural laws of time and space are no longer secure. This opens subversive territory in which to reimagine female agency through marginal, otherworldly revolts against the limitations of patriarchal institutions. The characters of Roberts and myself disrupt linear time in order to

¹¹¹ Smith & Wallace, p.2; See also: Moers, pp.90-91; Fleenor, Juliann E. *The Female Gothic* (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983), pp.4-27; Gilbert & Gubar; Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Heiland, Donna, *Gothic & Gender*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008) pp.180-186. I also wish to note that I acknowledge that this term is debated. In the 1980s, Fleenor's *The Female Gothic* began to debate whether the Female Gothic subverted or reinforced gender stereotypes. This was furthered Hoeveler, who placed the Female Gothic as the origin of 'victim feminism' – staged weakness by female characters in order to triumph over oppressive patriarchal society. In the 1990s, post-structuralist approaches to feminist literary criticism began to reveal the problematic essentialism in Moers' definition and in the categorisation of the genre more generally. The term Female Gothic was accused of universalising the female experience and of oversimplifying the genre.

¹¹² Heiland p.156.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Hoeveler, p.18; Irigaray, 'Equal or Different?' p.32.

renegotiate, reclaim, and escape from restrictive feminine spaces, as well as come to a sense of subjective identity. In 'Women's Time', Kristeva draws links between masculine and feminine understandings of time and space. She states that linear time, which is logical and inherent in the ontological values of civilisations, of history and structured and articulate language, is masculine. However, due to their separation from the Symbolic Order, and thus from history, women understand time differently.¹¹⁵ Women's time, according to Kristeva, is made up of two aspects, both of which are fundamental to this thesis: cyclical and monumental. Cyclical time is that of the body, related to gestational cycles, biological rhythms and nature. Monumental time is that of the sacred, related to eternal concepts of mythology and resurrection, and to women's eternal genealogies.¹¹⁶ Consequently, scholars such as Ortner and Aharon Khellerman draw on cultural associations which place women closer to nature and primitive mythologies, and men with culture, meaning and history.¹¹⁷ The Gothic gives scope for writers to extend Kristeva's time beyond the limits of the biological subject, particularly as her definitions revolve primarily around the maternal body. If this maternal body is reimagined as a symbolic link between women, as Irigaray's maternal genealogy suggests, then it can become a way for female characters to connect with one another through time.¹¹⁸ In *The Material and the Divine* and *In the Red Kitchen*, this connection takes place through apparitions, uncanny reminders of the return of the repressed, and through the trance, in which characters descend into their unconscious to communicate across time.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Kristeva, 'Women's Time' pp.16-17.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.16.

¹¹⁷ Ortner p.9.; Kellerman, Aharon *Time, and Society: Geographical Societal Perspective* (Springer Science & Business Media, 1989) p.61.

¹¹⁸ Irigaray, Luce, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *The Irigaray Reader*, 34-47, pp.44-45

¹¹⁹ For ghosts and the return of the repressed, see: Armitt, Lucy, 'The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic' in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp.510-522; 519; Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.17 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 217-256, p.241. For the trance and the unconscious, see: Clément, Catherine and Julia Kristeva *The Feminine and the*

Within the Female Gothic, spaces such as the domestic home, the dungeon or the asylum often reflect women's 'entrapment' within patriarchy and their lack of autonomy. *In the Red Kitchen's* representations of the home and the cemetery largely symbolise the characters' repressed desires, as do images of the asylum, the tower and the locked room in *The Material and the Divine*. Both novels also extend these metaphors to the characters' lack of control over their bodies, and their fear of, rejection of, and ambivalence towards pregnancy. As Diana Wallace suggests, 'metaphors of burial, imprisonment and spectrality proliferate in feminist theory ... in ways which suggest that they have a particular potency as theoretical "tools"'.¹²⁰ Wallace notes that there has recently been a 'shift' in the ways that these tools are used within the Gothic, and in a third generation context, I agree that we can move beyond theorising women's position within domesticity, to the repression of woman's subjectivity more widely.¹²¹ Though Kristeva privileges time in her essay, she also states that space has been socio-historically associated with the feminine through the maternal.¹²² Doreen Massey also associates space with the feminine, particularly as the 'lacking' opposite to superior time.¹²³ This association particularly relates to the restrictions of the physical maternal body which relegates women to nature and the domestic. Within contemporary revisionist Gothic fiction, these spaces can be reclaimed by subverting binaries and allowing women active desire: the home then can become one's own.

Sacred trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Gilbert, Sandra M. 'Introduction' in *Newly Born Woman*

¹²⁰ Diana Wallace in 'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory' in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, references Virginia Woolf, Hannah Gavron, Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Sarah Kofman, Diana Fuss and Judith Butler, among those that utilise these metaphors as tools, p.34.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kristeva, p.15.

¹²³ Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) p.258

The ‘all powerful, devouring mother’ is a powerful image in Female Gothic fiction.¹²⁴ Female characters generally face the mother on a two-fold basis: firstly, through conflict and rejection, and secondly, in her rescue. The conflict between the Gothic daughter and her mother arises because of what the mother represents: passivity, castration and the loss of subjectivity.¹²⁵ Flora and Hat in *In the Red Kitchen*, and Mathilde in *The Material and the Divine* most potently experience this conflict, not simply with their biological mothers, but with what Freud calls the ‘imago’ of the mother: the symbolic mother of the unconscious.¹²⁶ This is the mother who introduces the child to lack, and according to Irigaray, is repressed by women who internalise the masculine myth of female inferiority and instead align themselves with the father.¹²⁷ It is this idea that forms the most important understanding of ‘motherhood’ in this thesis, as I do not wish to suggest that motherhood is essential in the formation of female identity: far from it. Rather, this thesis engages with Freud and Irigaray’s ‘imago’ mother, and the restrictions, anxieties, and potential transcendence that can arise from reimagining our cultural understandings of the mother figure, and symbolic mother-daughter relationships.¹²⁸ Freud’s ‘Dark Continent’ suggests that within the masculine imaginary, the unknowable ‘territory’ of female sexuality is associated with contagion and death due to the horror of the castration complex.¹²⁹ Freud’s Medusa’s head demonstrates the monstrosity of the visible image of female genitalia, and the

¹²⁴ Fleener, p.16

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.15; Stein, Karen F., ‘Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic’ in *The Female Gothic* ed. by Juliann Fleener (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983) 123-137.

¹²⁶ Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p.24.

¹²⁷ Irigaray, ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’ in *The Irigaray Reader* pp.34-46; Hoeveler, p.24.

¹²⁸ I will discuss this further in chapter two.

¹²⁹ Freud, ‘The Question of Lay Analysis’ (1926); *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier, 1963) pp.212-213; Creed, Barbara, *Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 6. ; Raphael-Leff, J. ‘Freud's “Dark Continent”’ (2007). *Parallax* Vol.13 No.2 p.41; Jonte-Pace, Diane. *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

dread of its unnatural autonomy.¹³⁰ For the Gothic heroine, this putrid sexuality has two significant consequences. Firstly, it suggests cultural restrictions of the Angel/Monster dichotomy, where sexuality is condoned only through acceptable institutions such as marriage. The terror of the maternal can therefore represent the fear of female fertility both within and outside culturally sanctioned forms, either through the restriction of continuous births or social exclusion and punishment.¹³¹ The second horror of female sexuality is the return to the womb and to symbolic castration and loss of identity.¹³² Cixous reclaims the Medusa as the embodiment of powerful feminine desire.¹³³ She writes that women must see themselves not for what they lack, but for what they have. As Irigaray suggests, healing rejection allows women to overcome their anxieties of female inferiority and bring them back to the body, female identity, and healthy relationships with other women.

This brings us to the Gothic daughter's second task, to 'rescue her mother': the concern of *In the Red Kitchen's* Hattie and *The Material and the Divine's* Emma. Diane Long Hoeveler calls the 'originating fantasy that empowers the Female Gothic novel' a 'specifically female oedipal quest, a need to rewrite history from the vantage point of a beleaguered daughter intent on rescuing her mother — and by extension her future self — from the nightmare of the alienating and newly codifying and commodifying patriarchal family.'¹³⁴ Irigaray states that women must remove themselves from the 'phallic cult' as rival objects on the market of exchange by situating themselves within a female genealogy. Healing relationships with both the physical mother and the repressed 'imago' mother of the unconscious allows women

¹³⁰ Conboy, Katie & Nadia Medina, *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p.64.

¹³¹ Fleenor, p.16.

¹³² Ibid, p.4, 16; Hoeveler, p.24; Stein, p.124; Martin, Deborah, 'Feminine Adolescence as Uncanny: Masculinity, Haunting and Self-Estrangement,' *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol49, No.2 (2013), pp.135-44; 140.

¹³³ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' pp.875-893.

¹³⁴ Hoeveler, xvii; 24. See also: Wallace and Smith, p.2.

to then experience positive ‘horizontal’ relationships — with sisters and friends — and so work towards female-centred identities.¹³⁵

The internalisation of female inferiority can also emerge in how characters articulate themselves and form subjective identities through writing. Some women, such as Hat in *In the Red Kitchen*, align themselves with the ‘masculine pen’ because of its association with culture, and thus the creation of meaning, permanence and identity. However, Cixous and Irigaray claim that the female body can offer women ways of emerging into the Symbolic on their own terms. They claim that in writing women will reclaim the bodies that have been taken from them, and will realise their own sexuality.¹³⁶ *Écriture féminine* — feminine writing — is a transcendent, subversive and highly personal mode.¹³⁷ As a form, it reclaims the marginal Other space of woman outside the Symbolic Order as a space of creative freedom, and as such, privileges the non-linear and disruptive, so that it ‘cannot fail to be more than subversive.’¹³⁸ It disrupts hierarchical oppositional structures that deny difference, and instead, is open, plural, and seeks to appropriate the other.¹³⁹ Just as the Gothic heroine seeks to escape the restrictions of patriarchal institutions, so too the writer of *écriture féminine* seeks to escape the restrictions of masculine discourse.¹⁴⁰ Gothic subversion of the natural laws of time and space allow female characters to write not only through, but beyond the body. Consequently, Gothic ‘writing of excess’¹⁴¹ and the heroine’s ‘hysterical’ body language lends itself the subversive potential of

¹³⁵ ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’ in *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by David Macey, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991) 34-46, pp.44-45.

¹³⁶ Cixous, Hélène and Clément, Catherine, *Newly Born Woman* trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p.97.

¹³⁷ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ pp.875-893.

¹³⁸ Cixous p.888.

¹³⁹ Dobson, Julia, ‘Helene Cixous’ in *Contemporary Critical Theorists: From Lacan to Said* ed. by Jon Simons (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) p.125.

¹⁴⁰ Becker, Susanne, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p.34.

¹⁴¹ Botting, p.1

feminine writing.¹⁴² The unconscious becomes an important tool for the women from the two novels to overcome their repressed desire and inferiority, to write themselves, and thus attempt to enter the Symbolic Order.

Female Gothic texts since their origins have often highlighted the ‘devastating effects’ of the imposition of acceptable and unacceptable femininity: the Angel and the Monster.¹⁴³ Desire beyond what is culturally sanctioned, such as for sexual and spiritual autonomy, results in the heroine’s split self: conflict between that which arises instinctively from the unconscious, and that which is ‘monstrous’ according to a value system that excludes otherness.¹⁴⁴ Images of monstrous femininity abound in Gothic literature, and in my novel, they take the shape of the virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric, reflecting both Victorian and earlier Judeo-Christian versions of the same culturally pervasive myth. Both Irigaray and Kristeva criticise Judeo-Christian culture that upholds the patriarchal hierarchy of man/Other, and the relegation and split of the feminine into the polarity of light and dark. Women are both the virgin, pure and untouchable, and they are the whore, associated with nature and unbridled sexuality.¹⁴⁵ The virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric have been ways in which Western culture has demonised female attempts at the sacred, particularly through the body and the trance. However, as Jane Caputi states, myths can be transformative, and revisionist approaches to pagan and Christian images, such as Diana, or the Madonna/Magdalene, can allow us to overcome light/dark polarities.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Ibid, p.42

¹⁴³ Becker, p.44; Fleenor, pp.11-12.

¹⁴⁴ Becker, p.54; Fleenor, p.12; Stein, p.123.

¹⁴⁵ Hampson, Daphne, ‘The Sacred, The Feminine and French Feminist Theory’ in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, ed. by. Griselda Pollock & Victoria Turvey-Sauron (London: I. B. Taurus, 2007) 61-74, p.62.

¹⁴⁶ Caputi, p.4.

In 'Divine Women', Irigaray states that women lack a 'mirror' of idealised divine femininity, without which they cannot achieve subjectivity. Women are forced to adopt models that do not match them, that exile them, and that demonise them.¹⁴⁷ Jane Captui draws on Irigaray and states that to create a gynocentric imagination that can parallel the phallogentric, we must restore to the divine, and thus to the self, those aspects of the Other that have been demonised in both women *and* men. These include emotion, chaos, darkness, dirtiness, decay, illness and death.¹⁴⁸ Kristeva maintains that women, because of their marginal position between biology and meaning, are likely to participate in both sides of the sacred: the calm nurture of the Virgin, or chaotic revolt.¹⁴⁹ The body's abject natural secretions, particularly blood and milk, allow transformation through Otherness,¹⁵⁰ and the rebellious trance, the language of the hysteric, allows 'direct' and immediate connection with the divine.¹⁵¹ If Western history has been written by men, then we need texts which can create an image of feminine divinity for itself, through its associations with nature, the maternal, and the trance – through its difference.

The Question

This returns us to the objective of the third generation: how can women who identify with the third generation write revisionist fiction that attempts to deconstruct oppositions and insert women into history? To simply reverse the phallic Symbolic Order would be, as Derrida notes, to remain locked into 'either/or' binary

¹⁴⁷ Irigaray, 'Divine Women' in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp.55-72.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Clément & Kristeva, p.15.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* pp.89-94; Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater' trans by. Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today*, Vol.6, No. 1/2 (1985) pp.133-152, p.143.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* pp.9-10; 15.

opposites,¹⁵² and risk ‘inverted sexism’¹⁵³ or an ‘economy of the same’.¹⁵⁴ We must develop a strategy where difference is acknowledged, valorised, but not *separated*. Where it is used, as Irigaray and Kristeva suggest, to insert women into history *through* their own understanding of the feminine.¹⁵⁵ How this might be achieved is the purpose of the creative piece of this thesis. My novel attempts to recognise female desire not as a result of lack or castration, but as something that emerges fully, fluidly, and from the body. It is a desire that disrupts linear notions of time and subverts repressive space, a desire that finds itself through a struggle with the maternal and emerges as embodied writing, and a desire to engage with and resurrect the sacred. It seeks to recognise active desire within the unconscious of women of the past, and highlight the struggle of the unconscious to integrate internal desire with external social expectations, without merely leading my characters to death or madness.¹⁵⁶

The first chapter of this thesis examines feminine time and space as it appears structurally as a reflection of the feminine unconscious speaking as marginal Other. Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen* and *The Material and the Divine* use multiple interwoven narrative voices across three time periods that not only offer conflicting and complicated versions of historical ‘truth’, but also disrupt notions of linear time. In both texts, this is a particularly *féminine* disruption, primarily concerned with the return of repressed desire for sexual and spiritual autonomy. I relate the

¹⁵² Derrida, *Positions*, p.41.

¹⁵³ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.27

¹⁵⁴ Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’, trans. by. Carolyne Burke in *Signs*, (1980) Vol. 6, No. 1 pp.69-79; *This Sex which is Not One* p.106

¹⁵⁵ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.25; Irigaray, ‘Equal or Different?’ p.32

¹⁵⁶ The marriage/death ending has been a common binary for female authors trapped in the Angel/Monster dichotomy of the past, see: Gilbert & Gubar; Stein. Female Gothic authors attempted to free their protagonists from this binary through madness, however, while some scholars see it as subversive, others are critical of its potential. See: Caminero-Santangelo, Marta, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (New York: Cornell University, 1998); Hoeveler.

connectedness of each woman to the Gothic double; this reflects the split self that connects the women both cyclically, through their experiences of sexuality and maternity, and monumentally, as they appear to one another beyond the boundaries of linear time. These emerge as slippages in physical space, represented through Female Gothic metaphors of constricting domestic and romantic environments. These spaces not only reflect the conflicted identities of the female characters, they are also permeable, allowing characters to intrude on one another through cyclical and monumental time as ghosts, memories, or creative impulses.

Chapter two of this thesis examines women's relationships with the maternal and with writing. First, I analyse the rejection of both the maternal figure and maternity by the characters Hat and Flora in *In the Red Kitchen*, and Mathilde in *The Material and the Divine*. I consider the damage of the rejection of the feminine, how women can heal this split through the body, and in doing so, enter into positive and affirming relationships with other women.¹⁵⁷ This is attempted by Hattie in *In the Red Kitchen*, and Emma in *The Material and the Divine*. Once this separation is healed, women can emerge to 'attempt the pen' in their own language. This chapter then examines women's relationships with writing to demonstrate how the body can become a space of overcoming Otherness and entering the Symbolic Order. It analyses how Hat, Flora and Lucrezia understand language and history through a masculine lens and how, for a character such as Lucrezia, the bisexual libido and recognition of her own desire allows her to make the switch from the masculine to the feminine. I then discuss how characters such as Hattie and Emma write fluidly through the body, and use feminine writing to tap into their unconscious and to their own desires.

¹⁵⁷ This draws on Irigaray's vertical and horizontal female relationships. See: 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *The Irigaray Reader*, 34-47, pp.44-45.

Chapter three considers the subversive spirituality of my three protagonists and their attempts to establish a fulfilling and autonomous spirituality of their own. I consider Lucrezia as a mystic and through the conflicting icons of the Catholic and Protestant imaginary, the virgin/whore. I then discuss Mathilde as the archetypal witch and the subversive potential of the serpent/Medusa to reclaim the power of female sexuality. Finally, I discuss Emma as the spiritualist medium and the hysteric, and take the image of the serpent to a position between the Angel and the Monster, the mermaid. I argue that the Sacred Feminine becomes a powerful tool for overcoming archetypal binaries, and establishing femininity as different from but equal to masculinity.

Chapter One: Feminine Time and Space

Because she arrives, vibrant, over and over again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another. As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.¹

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

This chapter considers how a feminist revisionist text can demonstrate and utilise feminine time and space. It considers the characters of *In the Red Kitchen* and *The Material and the Divine* as ‘split’ female subjects due to their marginal positions within the masculine Symbolic Order. In the novels, multiple narrative voices overlap and sometimes contradict each other, revealing repeated concerns of the protagonists regarding sexual and spiritual desire, and pitting characters’ versions of truth against one another. In this vein, I consider the women as uncanny Gothic ‘doubles’ of one another who reflect the divided self.² The Female Gothic allows characters to move beyond the boundaries of linear time due to metaphors of the supernatural and the numinous. Such metaphors can be used to subvert rational codes of understanding and critique social structures.³ This is seen primarily through

¹ Cixous, Hélène, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976) 875-893, p. 878.

² Freud, Sigmund, ‘The ‘Uncanny’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.17 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 217-256; Fleenor, Juliann, ‘Introduction’ in *The Female Gothic* ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983) 4-30, p.11; Massé, Michelle. A., ‘Psychoanalysis and the Gothic’ in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012) 307-320, p.311; Spooner, Catherine, ‘Cosmo-Gothic: The Double and the Single Woman’ in *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol.12, No.3 (2001) 292-305, p.293.

³ Botting, Fred, *The Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1996) pp.3-6, 44-47; Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) pp.5-12.

mediumship, including the trance and automatic writing, and the shared visions of ghosts. The protagonists utilise cyclical and monumental time — time of the body and time of the sacred — to speak to one another or unconsciously share their experiences across centuries.⁴ This chapter then discusses how characters are able to use their marginality, and thus fluidity, through time to subvert restrictive feminine spaces.

Within the Female Gothic, metaphors of restrictive space reflect the repression of the feminine — and therefore women — within patriarchal culture.⁵ In *In the Red Kitchen* the domestic home is central to this concern as characters, particularly Flora Milk and Minny Preston, react against the restrictions of motherhood and chastity. In *The Material and the Divine*, restrictive spaces such as the asylum, the tower, and the locked room represent women's internalisation of the restrictions and expectations of Angel/Monster dichotomy, and the fear and experience of patriarchal punishment for sexual and spiritual deviance. Liminal spaces such as the forest represent the feminine as unrestricted, demonstrated by the longing Emma feels for Mathilde's experience of nature. As Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous suggest, the marginal is a powerful position from which to work *through* sexual difference and attempt a subject position within the Symbolic Order.⁶ To this end, this chapter finally reveals how a feminist revisionist text of the third generation uses the fluidity of the marginal to disrupt linear concepts of time, and in so doing, escape from, subvert, or reclaim restrictive spaces.

⁴ Kristeva, Julia, 'Women's Time' trans. Alice Jardine, Harry Blake, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981), 13-35, p.16.

⁵ Fleenor, p.16; Hoeveler, p.5; Wallace, Diane, "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory' in *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 26-40, p.26.

⁶ Irigaray, 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 23-29, p.32.

In Freudian psychoanalytical terms, female sexuality is partial and incomplete due to women's lack of the phallus, resulting in a conflicted identity. Freud was unable to see women as their own beings and reduced their bodies and experiences to those of defective men.⁷ Within this system, women cannot surmount the problem of the Oedipal complex and subsequent repression of their sexuality because they recognise their difference.⁸ For Lacan, this translates into women's inability to enter the Symbolic Order. The phallus is the signifier within the Symbolic Order, and despite his claim that the phallus is attained socially, not biologically, Irigaray accuses Lacan of maintaining Freud's single sex model of sexuality and subjectivity that excludes women from signifying.⁹ Women within the Symbolic Order are understood as Other, and exist in a marginal position.

As marginal subjects, women can only speak as objects of desire, not as subjects who desire. Women are taught to repress and loathe active desire within themselves. As Cixous writes, 'Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her.'¹⁰ The appearance of female sexuality becomes an uncanny 'crisis of the natural,'¹¹ as desire, sexual or otherwise, beyond women's biological function is 'forbidden by the law of the father.'¹² When the repressed returns it ruptures, splitting the self between acceptable docile

⁷ Freud, 'Femininity' in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* ed. and trans. by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990) 139-167.

⁸ Freud, Sigmund, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.19 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 248-260, p.255.

⁹ Irigaray, 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis' in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 71-78; 'Cosi Fan Tutti' *This Sex Which Is Not One* trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985) 86-105; Lacan, Jacques, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX* trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1972-72) p.33.

¹⁰ Cixous, Helene and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.68.

¹¹ Royle, Nicolas, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2003) p.1.

¹² Irigaray, Luce 'The bodily encounter with the mother,' in *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by David Macey, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991) pp.34-46; 36.

femininity and transgressive monstrousness.¹³ This is referred to as the ‘split’ or ‘fractured’ self by various scholars, and plays an important role in metaphors of the Female Gothic.¹⁴ The Gothic heroine is supposed to be a reflection of patriarchal values — innocent, pure, uncorrupted — but this mirror does not truly reflect her.¹⁵ Irigaray similarly suggests that women lack a mirror to adequately reflect their femininity.¹⁶ She claims that the dominant imaginary projected by a culture governs how subjects within that culture define themselves. The imaginary body within Western culture is male and so women are not understood by culture, and subsequently, women cannot understand themselves.¹⁷ As Cixous writes, ‘phallographic ideology tells woman to idolise that which she cannot have.’¹⁸ Juliann Fleenor aligns the split self of the Gothic heroine with women’s self-disgust and horror towards their bodies and their battles with an internal sense of themselves as good or evil.¹⁹ However, according to Cixous, this position of marginality is powerfully disruptive, and within a feminist revisionist text, it can destabilise and subvert patriarchal binaries and allow for the ‘eruption’ of the feminine into the Symbolic Order.²⁰

Feminine Time and Space in Theory

Kristeva and Irigaray suggest that because of its position outside of the Symbolic Order, feminine time is not subject to the same linear chronology as masculine

¹³ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ p.876.

¹⁴ Fleenor, p.12; Heiland, Donna, *Gothic & Gender*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008) p.156; Royle, p.6.

¹⁵ Fleenor, p.12.

¹⁶ Irigaray’s concept of the mirror in relation to Lacan’s mirror-stage of the pre-Oedipal formation of ego is beyond the scope of this thesis, but, for a broader analysis of how Irigaray critiques the formation of female identity in phallographic culture, see *Speculum of the Other Woman* trans. by Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*; ‘Cosi Fan Tutti’ in *This Sex Which is Not One* pp.86-88.

¹⁸ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ p.884.

¹⁹ Fleenor, p.12.

²⁰ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ p.878, 880.

time.²¹ Masculine and feminine experiences of time rely on the culture/nature divide of the masculine/feminine binary. According to scholars, notably Kristeva, Ortner, and Kellerman, men are associated with linear time due to their involvement in material production through industry, capital accumulation, and cultural production.²² Linear time is related to civilisation, history, and particularly, to language. It is therefore related to the speaking subject — the one who defines history.²³ Female subjectivity, by contrast, ‘provides a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilisations.’²⁴ Kristeva distinguishes between two female experiences of time, cyclical and monumental.

Cyclical time is that of the body. Kristeva relates it to natural biological rhythms and repetitions of female experiences such as menstruation, gestation and the biological clock.²⁵ Ortner and Kellerman similarly align women with nature in opposition to men’s alignment with culture, and provide links between the natural and reproductive cycles of women, and the natural and reproductive cycles of the earth, such as seasonal, lunar and agricultural rhythms.²⁶ As Kellerman states, ‘the temporal dimensions of life creation and maintenance, on the one hand, and those of economic production, on the other, adhered to the same frameworks of nature and cyclical time.’²⁷

²¹ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ ; Irigaray, Luce, ‘Sexual Difference’ in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp.161-177.

²² Kellerman, Aharon *Time, and Society: Geographical Societal* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) p.61; Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, p.14 ; Ortner, Sherry B., ‘Is Female To Male As Nature Is To Culture?’ *Feminist Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1972), 5-31 p.12.

²³ Kristeva, ‘Woman’s Time’, p.17.

²⁴ Kristeva, p.16.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Sherry B. Ortner, ‘Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?’ *Feminist Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1972), 5-31 p.12.

²⁷ Kellerman, Aharon *Time and Society: Geographical Societal Perspective* (Springer Science & Business Media, 1989) p.61.

Kristeva's monumental time is related to the sacred. She aligns it with cosmic time, resurrection, mythology and women's eternal genealogies. Monumental time is often linked with mystical experiences and is associated with civilisations outside of Judeo-Christian culture.²⁸ In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade relates cyclical time in primitive societies to an anti-historical attempt to abolish concrete time through the repetition of an archetypal act which begins regeneration.²⁹ The Supreme, or Divine, belongs to the mythic age, from which these archetypal acts arise; without Divine intervention, man exists solely in the present and historical time does not exist.³⁰ Time has historical meaning because Divine acts give events a religious significance, and as Eliade notes, the Hebrew concept of God and Christianity's subsequent Messianism give time a linear structure.³¹ In 'About Chinese Women', Kristeva similarly calls Judaism 'the victory of patriarchal monotheism over an earlier, maternal and fertility-oriented religion.'³² I argue that the spiritual position of the women in both novels, particularly the trance state that allows movement beyond linear time, is marginal to Judeo-Christian culture.³³ Eliade's subordination of the natural and cyclical repetitions of 'primitive' cultures to sophisticated Judeo-Christian time links the marginal and subversive natures of women, non-Judeo-Christian spirituality, and time through their relationship with 'subordinate' nature, and therefore with Other.³⁴

²⁸ Kristeva, p.17.

²⁹ Eliade, Mircea, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954) trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) p.85.

³⁰ Ibid, p.104.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kristeva, Julia, 'About Chinese Women' in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) p.138; Kristeva, Julia, 'About Chinese Women' in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 139-159, pp.140-145.

³³ I will discuss the subversive nature of female spirituality in relation to the Divine and Sacred Feminine through the medium, the witch and the mystic in chapter three.

³⁴ Ibid, p.107.

Drawing on similar notions of sexual difference and masculine and feminine dualities, Massey conceptualises space as the ‘lacking’ opposite to superior time.³⁵ Time, in a traditional linear context, is masculine, while space is feminine: ‘where space is chaos ... then time is Order.’³⁶ Irigaray also aligns the feminine with space and the masculine with time, as time becomes *interior* to the subject because of its relationship with God (as organiser of space), and is thus, as the ‘master of time’, the manager of *exterior* space.³⁷ ‘Chaotic’ women represent a threat that must be subjugated: space must be brought under the authority of patriarchal control in order to avoid the ‘horror of multiplicity.’³⁸ Both Kristeva and Massey are concerned with attempting to resolve such dualisms through revision, which echoes the attempts of contemporary Female Gothic authors to resolve the fractured female self.³⁹

Important feminised metaphors within the Gothic include romantic tropes of ruinous castles, dungeons and towers, sublime mountains and forests, as well as traditional female spaces such as the home.⁴⁰ Wallace notes that one of the most powerful metaphors in feminist theory is the idea of women as ‘dead’ or ‘buried (alive)’ within male power structures, rendering them ‘ghostly’.⁴¹ Traditional plots of the Female Gothic focus on imprisonment, burial, and confinement as metaphors for woman’s sense of dislocated self, particularly the loss of identity through the institution of marriage.⁴² However, whether traditional Gothic authors used these

³⁵ Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) p.258.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Irigaray, ‘Sexual Difference’ p.167.

³⁸ Massey quotes F. Jameson’s ‘terror’ of the complexity of the contemporary world conceived of as both social and spatial, p.259.

³⁹ In ‘(In)Between locations Space, time and the female subject in Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen*’ *Feminist Theory*, Vol.7, No.1 (2006), Sarah Gamble offers a comparison of Kristeva and Massey’s concepts of time and space, particularly in relation to Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen*, pp.7-26.

⁴⁰ See: Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Ferguson Ellis, Kate, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1989); Wallace, Diana, and Andrew Smith, *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴¹ Wallace, ‘‘The Haunting Idea’: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory’ p.26.

⁴² Fleenor, Juliann E. *The Female Gothic*, (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983) pp.12-13; Wallace, pp.26-29.

spaces to reinforce or resist restrictive social structures remains debatable.⁴³

Undoubtedly, however, the supernatural nature of the Gothic, where rationality is questioned and transgression invited, *can* resist social propriety and become a world in which female protagonists encounter ‘frightening violence’ but also ‘adventurous freedom’.⁴⁴ Hoeveler suggests that Female Gothic authors ‘ironically inverted the “separate spheres” ideology, valorising the private female world of the home while they fictively destroyed the public/juridical masculine world,” and by doing so, took control of a space that had once victimised them.⁴⁵ This is my goal as a contemporary revisionist writer. However, simply reversing the spheres can come to resemble the ‘counter society’ that Kristeva criticises in the second generation of feminists.⁴⁶ Therefore, my depiction of constricted spaces, particularly in a historical context, speaks to the repression that resulted in the female split self, but also offers a more complicated understandings of those spaces beyond a victim/villain binary. Within the novels, the confining walls of the asylum or the home are subject only to the laws of linear temporality as they represent the laws and restrictions of rationality, order, and patriarchal governance. Cyclical and monumental time liberate the characters from these spaces, and fluidity gives them access to that beyond the boundaries of the rational. Through accessing the unconscious, the domestic home becomes one’s own, a safe space for the expression of the self, and the asylum transforms despair into self-awareness and become a place of liberation.

Kristeva states that despite female subjectivity being closer to cyclical and monumental time, they are also to be found in ‘numerous civilisations and

⁴³ Juliann Fleenor’s *The Female Gothic* began to debate whether the Female Gothic subverted or reinforced gender stereotypes. This was furthered by Diane Long Hoeveler in *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) who describes the Female Gothic as the origin of ‘victim feminism’: staged weakness by female characters in order to triumph over oppressive patriarchal society.

⁴⁴ Botting, pp.6-7.

⁴⁵ Hoeveler, p.5.

⁴⁶ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.27.

experiences' and are therefore not rendered incompatible with 'masculine' values.⁴⁷

This is important in my revision, as it is in Roberts', as it allows women to be defined by their own experiences, but does not separate them through 'inverted sexism'. Also, because it acknowledges the availability of both femininity and masculinity within the self, it does not restrict characters from using this position to enter into history.⁴⁸ Both texts respond to Cixous' assertion that 'woman occurs simultaneously in several places.'⁴⁹ Their structures playfully disrupt linear concepts of time and subvert spatial tropes in order to assert an experience, that is 'different but equal' to its masculine counterparts.⁵⁰ In doing so, female characters return to their identity, subjectivity, and heal the split within themselves.

In the Red Kitchen

In the Red Kitchen is a fractured composition of five interwoven voices speaking from three historical periods: Ancient Egypt, Victorian London and contemporary London. The three central protagonists — Hat, an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, Flora, a Victorian spirit medium, and Hattie, a cookbook writer — share their narratives with two additional voices in the Victorian setting: Flora's benefactress, Minny Preston, and her younger sister, Rosina. A mixture of epistolary letters and diaries, its first and second person accounts emphasise both the personal, private nature of traditional women's writing while denying a singular voice. Instead, it offers a 'personal history' that 'blends together with the history of all women.'⁵¹ These voices give rise

⁴⁷ Kristeva, 'Women's Time' p.17.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.32.

⁴⁹ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.878.

⁵⁰ Irigaray, Luce 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 23-29.

⁵¹ Cixous, p.878; See also: Parker, Emma, 'Recovering Women: History, Trauma, and Gender in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*, *Contemporary Women's Writing* Vol.2 No.2 (2008); Golda-Derejczyk, Agnieszka, 'Repetition and Eternity: The Spectral and Textual Continuity in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*' in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* ed. by Arias, Rosaria and Patricia Pulham (Houndsmills: Pangrave Macillan, 2009).

to contention, often polarising and thus problematizing our understanding of events, and in turn, ‘stress the indeterminacy of historical truth.’⁵² As scholars such as Rosie White, Emma Parker and Susan Rowland suggest, these multiple unreliable voices reveal how truths can be hidden, erased, and varied, enabling each woman to resist and complicate the social expectations placed upon them and act with a greater sense of independent agency.⁵³

The voices converge through Flora Milk’s mediumship and spaces such as the home and the cemetery. Flora can therefore be seen as the central ‘split subject’ through whom the other women are able to overlap. In doing so, they become uncanny doubles of one another. The return of the repressed is central in this conflicted identity, and is invariably concerned with their repressed bodies: the spaces each woman occupies symbolise conflicting, thus split, relationships with sexuality and motherhood. Their appearances to one another through time demonstrate that these conflicts are shared.

Flora Milk, based on real life medium Florence Cook, communicates with her spirit guide, Hattie King, variously through automatic writing, planchette, and physical manifestation. The identity of Hattie King, however, is an accidental amalgamation of both Egyptian Hat and contemporary Hattie. Flora first sees Hat, a vision in white, at her father’s burial.⁵⁴ This is followed by her first communication on a make-shift ouija board where she mistakes Hat’s attempt at disclosing her royal identity: ‘FARE. O! FARE’ (pharaoh) as an exclamation of beauty, and instead assigns her the *name*, King: ‘Hattie King! You’re called Hattie King!’⁵⁵ Hattie

⁵² Parker, p.111.

⁵³ Ibid. ; Rowland, Susan, ‘Women, spiritualism and depth psychology in Michèle Roberts’s Victorian novel.’ *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (2000), pp. 201-14; White, Rosie, ‘Visions and re-visions: Women and time in Michèle Roberts’s *In the Red Kitchen*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol.15 No.2 (2004) pp.180-191; 182.

⁵⁴ Roberts, p.4.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.46.

encounters the apparition of Flora in her basement (Flora's former home) in contemporary London, and Hattie simultaneously appears to Flora: 'Hattie, she breathed: you've come to me again!'⁵⁶ Possibly confusing Hattie's 'baggy white overalls' and 'white rag, twisted turban-like about [her] hair'⁵⁷ for Hat's 'pleated white cloak' and 'tall jewelled crown'⁵⁸, the two Hat/ties form a singular persona.⁵⁹ Flora is not, however, the only 'medium' through which these two characters unite; as a child, Hattie dreams of 'exotic royal parentage' in a 'far off country blazing with heat',⁶⁰ and writes a cook book 'inspired by the Tutankhamen exhibition',⁶¹ hinting at a connection between the women beyond Flora. Sarah Falcus suggests that this monumental overlapping has 'intimate connections with the issue of personal time and space, identity and subjectivity,' which results not only in the shared or doubled identity of the three women, but a simultaneous loss of the individual, and thus subjectivity.⁶² This then suggests that Flora is a 'split subject' who projects the repressed within herself onto the spirit Hattie King, and the three women are symbolic 'doubles' of one another.⁶³

The double, according to Freud, can be physically identical persons, or those that possess knowledge, feelings and experiences in common with another. It is the constant recurrence of similar situations, faces, traits, or the same name, and is a powerfully uncanny representation of a division in the individual psyche.⁶⁴ Fleenor

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.57.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.4.

⁵⁹ White links these overlaps with 'a-topian' experiences — between opposites of masculine linear and feminine cyclical experiences, pp.185-166.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.27.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.13.

⁶² Falcus, Sarah, *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (Oxford: Peter Land, 2007) p.139

⁶³ Despite the fact that there are *three* women, I use the term 'double' for its inherited meaning from Freud and subsequent use by Gothic scholars such as Fleenor.

⁶⁴ Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.17 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 217-256, p.234; Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1996) p.92; Royle, pp. 2, 6, 182.

describes the female double as ‘the way that women have attempted to structure reality ... by focusing upon their own split personality (as good/evil women) as supported or threatened by good/evil women.’⁶⁵ Flora’s ability to be taken over by Hattie King makes her the epitome of ideal passive femininity: ‘Vacant possession I am; they move in on me.’⁶⁶ However, as I shall explore in chapter three, it is also a threat to Victorian propriety: the medium is able to transgress respectability and, while in trance, take on roles otherwise barred to her. The dualism of Flora and Hattie King — where Flora is ‘simple’, ‘modest’ and ‘innocent,’⁶⁷ and Hattie is outspoken and sexual — shows, through the conjoining of the protagonists, the internal duality of the Angel and the Monster.⁶⁸ These dichotomies also allow the novel’s two peripheral narrators, Minny and Rosina, both to praise and challenge the acceptability of Flora’s femininity. Minny defends Flora when she is accused of fraud, claiming she is ‘as pure as an angel’,⁶⁹ only to turn on her after Flora reveals in a trance that Minny may have smothered her child. Rosina, meanwhile, begins the novel with the claim that, ‘Flora Milk is a monster in silk skirts.’⁷⁰

There are also strong suggestions that all three women have suffered sexual abuse: Hat and Flora by their fathers, and Hattie by an uncle. Thus, the amalgamated figure of Hattie King may represent the return of repressed sexual trauma for all three women. This comes to a head when Flora describes intimate scenes between William and the materialised Hattie. The materialisation of spirits occurs when a medium sits inside a spirit cabinet and apparently produces a physical apparition. In this case, both the materialisation and the sexual encounter are ambiguous. Flora

⁶⁵ Fleenor, p.12.

⁶⁶ Roberts, p.93.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 22; 31.

⁶⁸ For an examination of the medium as split subject, see: Falcus, pp.137-151; Kontou, Tatiana, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the fin de siecle to the neo-Victorian* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p.102.

⁶⁹ Roberts, p.34.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.1.

slips from first to third person, and then to Hattie's point of view: 'William puts his fingers inside Hattie, while Flora lies unconscious on the sofa next door. Hattie is frightened at first, she wriggles and whimpers and says no. William says hush, it's all right, be a good girl now, don't cry.'⁷¹ However, there are also hints that Flora may conflate herself with Hattie in order to transgress sexual barriers because of either repressed sexual desire, or as an attempt to manipulate the man who can save her reputation.⁷² Flora admits that she finds William 'handsome',⁷³ 'trembles with excitement' as he holds her hand,⁷⁴ and declares that she will '*submit*' herself to his 'penetrating gaze'.⁷⁵

Such transgressions of time, identities and desires become linked with the ultimate form of female subversion, hysteria.⁷⁶ Susan Rowland argues that hysteria is embedded in the narrative form; history and fiction are contingent, and 'since no hierarchy of narratives is possible without defining one or more women as liar ... the novel encourages hysterical reading, the failure to find a secure subject position as a way to incorporate an acknowledged fiction like *In the Red Kitchen* into our traditional history.'⁷⁷ Monumental and cyclical time allow uncanny spillages: repressed and taboo desires, conflated and split personalities, and hysteria as a language that erupts into the Symbolic. This fluidity spills over into space, and the combination of the two can be used to overcome the split of the female subject.

The narrative voices converge in the shared space of the kitchen, the childhood home of Flora, now owned by Hattie. The text is concerned with typically female domestic

⁷¹ Roberts, p. 122-123.

⁷² See: Parker, Emma 'Recovering Women: History, Trauma, and Gender in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*', *Contemporary Women's Writing* Vol.2 No.2 (2008) pp.111 – 130; Rowland, pp.201-214.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.60.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.63.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.62.

⁷⁶ I will examine this link more closely in chapter two.

⁷⁷ Rowland, p.208.

spaces, including the kitchen and the bedroom, but also with the home as a place for the formation (or restriction) of female identity. There have been several examinations of Roberts' use of space in *In the Red Kitchen*, most notably by Sarah Gamble and Sarah Falcus, who link these spatial images to temporality and Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. I want to extend their observations to consider how Roberts' portrayal of the domestic is a subversion of the Gothic home as a 'prison and refuge'⁷⁸ that highlights and poses questions about how the split female identity can be resolved by reclaiming the home as 'one's own.'⁷⁹

Two houses make up the central locations of Roberts' text: the Hackney house shared by Flora and Hattie, and the Preston house, where Flora becomes Minny's companion and the subject of William's scientific inquiry. The Hackney house serves as the strongest link between the three women in both space and time, with the kitchen as the centre of the most slippages. Home, however, is not necessarily restricted to the physical house. It echoes into landscapes of the dead: the crypt, the grave, and the cemetery. Here we find the root of the psychic split, the home of trauma that connects the three protagonists, and inhibits the formation of female identity.

Home is so important that each of the narrators, save Rosina, begins by detailing their relationship with the spaces they occupy. Flora begins her narrative in her father's funeral carriage, imaging the dark space of her father's coffin as the confining space of the kitchen cupboard where she was locked as a 'naughty child' to 'calm [her] down.'⁸⁰ Darkness is an important image in most of Flora's spatial relationships, it is where she is most free: 'The darkness touches me, velvet on my

⁷⁸ Botting, p.128.

⁷⁹ I refer to Virginia Woolf's assertion that a woman must have a room of her own — access to spatial and economic freedom — if she is to write, and by extension, access independent means, become a creator of meaning and enter the Symbolic: Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001).

⁸⁰ Roberts, p.2.

face and wrists, and I dissolve in it. So that I can flow about the room, a dark cloud skimming a dark sky.’⁸¹ It represents the subversion at the heart of Flora’s relationship to domestic spaces. As a lower class Victorian woman, her identity exists in a precarious balance between upholding outward propriety, while attempting to stave off the assumptions of her class’s moral degeneracy. The kitchen in her Hackney home, a ‘dreadful neighbourhood’⁸² upper-class Minny associates with female ‘vice’,⁸³ marks the initial site of her sexual trauma through her relationship with her father. Darkness becomes a cloaking device where she can hide desire and subvert expectations.⁸⁴ Darkness is necessary in the séance, and through Hattie King, Flora can express her creative unconscious, share in articulating a history of abuse, or both, all while maintaining her ‘passivity’ and thus propriety.

Minny is constantly astounded to find that Flora is not the ‘monstrous’, morally corrupt working class girl she expects her to be, but these assumptions serve to highlight the domestic as a space of feminine restriction.⁸⁵ Resigning herself to the ‘sickroom’ to wait out the confinement of her eleventh pregnancy, Minny uses this space to conceal an affair. This could be seen as an exhausted ambiguity toward motherhood that she is not supposed to feel.⁸⁶ Minny’s repressed ‘horror’ of herself and refusal to acknowledge such monstrous drives are projected onto Flora, and Flora’s ambiguous affair with William, and revelation of Rosalie’s possible murder, then compound as a monstrosity that must be removed.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Ibid, p.32.

⁸² Ibid, p.22.

⁸³ Ibid, p.65.

⁸⁴ Gamble describes darkness as a ‘cloaking device’, both operating as a space of freedom and power, but also possible deception, p.14.

⁸⁵ Roberts, p.48.

⁸⁶ Wallace, Diana, and Andrew Smith. *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) pp.1-2; Fleenor, pp.8-13.

⁸⁷ Fleenor suggests one aspect of the split female subject within the Gothic is the reproduction of the values of patriarchal society which mirrors the female self as uncorrupted, innocent and pure, and thus in this context, the Victorian domestic Angel, who must sacrifice herself willingly to motherhood, pp.12-13.

Domestic space is rarely safe for Flora. After returning home, she is thrust into conflict with her mother. In the kitchen, she remembers her mother as a ‘cruel woman’ who was ‘jealous of Flora’ because ‘Daddy likes Flora best.’⁸⁸ Flora remains unable to resolve this tension; she ends her narrative believing herself ‘wicked’, retreating into the safety of darkness.⁸⁹ However, she also admits that while she is not yet able to speak (‘that way men will love me’), Hattie ‘keeps the secret, that Flora is angry’,⁹⁰ hinting at the possibility of her subjectivity emerging through Hattie: ‘I wall up my pain in the house, on the landing under the window with its bit of blue glass. I put all my pain and grief into the wall, sealing it up hard and smooth as ice, and I leave it there’.⁹¹ Here, in the shared house, Hattie can find it. In the contemporary world, freer from restrictive notions of femininity, she can attempt to overcome her trauma and reclaim subjectivity.

Hattie begins with a description of the home she has just purchased, then details her homeless past, from being left at her aunt’s in a wicker basket,⁹² then ‘despatched to the convent’ at age seven,⁹³ to her subsequent adult life ‘drifting between other people’s homes.’⁹⁴ The purchase of her tiny ‘tumbledown house’⁹⁵ signifies the beginning of her happiness, and, as Gamble suggests, the restoration of a sense of personal identity.⁹⁶ Hattie takes refuge inside her home where she begins to build a life, particularly after she meets the unnamed lover, ‘you’, that her first/second person narrative voice addresses. The outside world is ‘harsh’ and ‘grimy’, and though she still feels connected to its ‘dark windings’ it remains a place of threat:

⁸⁸ Roberts, p.127. I will return to a discussion of Flora’s relationship with her mother in chapter two.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.128.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, p.131.

⁹² Ibid, p.10.

⁹³ Ibid, p.11.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.12.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.15

⁹⁶ Gamble, p.21.

economic destitution and sexual exploitation abound.⁹⁷ However, by engaging with this threat, Hattie can purchase the home. Through prostitution she discovers herself as a ‘good actress’, and drifts between roles such as the ‘degraded angel’, and ‘the ever-welcoming mother’ without admitting to herself what she’s doing.⁹⁸ Her ambivalent relationship with her body began with sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle, and so she built walls to protect herself. Home becomes a refuge, but her relationship with this space, like her identity, remains split. As Gamble suggests, Roberts’ traversing of the boundaries between home and homelessness, inside and outside, aligns the text with Freud’s *unheimlich*, and the refuge of the home becomes the ironic and uncanny site of the threat from which she runs: the return of the repressed.⁹⁹ In the bowels of the house, the basement kitchen, trauma returns again and again as the apparition of Flora. Gamble states that these moments of connection are ‘tenuous and provisional, refusing to coalesce onto a logical sequence of exchanges,’ and as such, ‘female identity remains fractured and impartial, unable to settle into a unified, unproblematic whole.’¹⁰⁰ However, Hattie is a subject in progress, as she restores herself through the literal renovation of the house and through love which ‘breaks down [her] carefully built walls’ she can come to a new understanding of the domestic house, not as a site of trauma, or as a restrictive domestic space as experienced by Flora and Minny, but a space of her own.¹⁰¹ First, however, she must enter the crypt, the space haunted most prominently by Hat.

Hat begins her narrative by describing the apartments of her summer palace, where ‘everything here has been chosen by me, and nothing is to be moved without my permission.’¹⁰² It is exotic and extravagant, highlighting not only Hat’s control

⁹⁷ Roberts, p.14.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.16.

⁹⁹ Gamble, p.22.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.13.

¹⁰¹ Roberts, p.16.

¹⁰² Ibid, p.6.

and possession of the space, but how it forms her identity: ‘This little world is all mine. It encloses, expresses and reflects me. It is beautiful and perfect.’¹⁰³ Home, in both its abundant extravagance and as the object of her minute control, reflects the desire for power and immortality that she aligns with the masculine. The palace is not a typically domestic space, and Hat is careful to remove all taints of the feminine. Testament to this is her description of her mortal and her immortal births. The first erases the realities of childbirth and its relationship with the feminine. It takes place in the ‘courts of the palace’ at the behest of the ‘great god Amun’, where her mother, merely an earthly ‘vessel’, was attended by deities who ensured she ‘experienced no pain’, and instead it ‘was [her] father in his divine form who begot and birthed [her]’.¹⁰⁴ However, it is Hat’s second birth that aligns her more significantly with the novel’s two other protagonists and moves us from domesticity to the Gothic home of the crypt.

In Hat’s ‘initiation’ into immortality, her marriage bed becomes her crypt. She is ‘veiled in black linen’ and, on a bier in a funeral barge, travels to the mortuary temple, where ‘no one ever goes’, marking the reader’s entrance into the taboo.¹⁰⁵ Her father, now husband, comes to her as Thoth, and after travelling with him through the temple where ‘stone trees’ line the archways and orderly columns mark the way to a ‘sanctuary’, she must ‘yield [her]self utterly to the power of the god’.¹⁰⁶ While images of the Gothic crypt hint at Hat’s fear, she knows that it is through the union with her father that she can eventually take his place and ascend through the masculine to power. According to Hat’s mythology, she is not entering into a ‘taboo’ incestuous relationship with her father, but rather a powerful connection with the god Thoth. Therefore it is ‘not fear that courses through [her] and dissolves [her] limbs,

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.54.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.71.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.72.

but anticipation'.¹⁰⁷ What is important in the context of the shared repressed trauma of the three women, however, is that Flora and Hattie link their own sexual trauma with Ancient Egyptian imagery, suggesting that Hat has submitted herself to the Law of the Father, and the ramifications of the loss of her own feminine subjectivity are felt by Hattie and Flora.¹⁰⁸ The crypt is the 'psychic site that undercuts all material spaces and the relationships enacted within them', particularly in relation to the 'novel's Gothic heart', sexual trauma.¹⁰⁹

Landscapes of the dead permeate Flora and Hattie's narratives. The cemetery is the location of the beginning of Flora's text, and just as the other narrators do, she aligns this initial space with home: 'I press Mother's arm and steer her left into a narrow passageway lined with vaults, sealed stone doorways and blank stone windows, tightly packed like the houses in our street: why, the necropolis is just like home. Why haven't I noticed it before? I've been here often enough for family funerals. Home is just like the cemetery; full of Mother's dead babies.'¹¹⁰ The scene is awash with Gothic images: Flora's boots are 'clotted with the rich compost of corpses', the ground is filled with 'hairy suckers' clawing at the 'rotting bodies beneath', and the air is thick with the 'stench' of lilies.¹¹¹ However, it is the intrusion of ghostly Hat into the scene that brings us to the novel's 'Gothic heart'.¹¹²

Abraham and Torok's cryptonymy posits that hauntings can take the shape of a secret transmitted through generations.¹¹³ It is associated with repressed guilt, shame or repressed trauma, and because it is silent, it becomes a 'phantom', an unconscious

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.72.

¹⁰⁸ Emma Parker states that Hat is unable to conceive of her relationship with her father as abuse because there was no taboo against father-daughter incest amongst pharaohs in Ancient Egypt, pp.118-119.

¹⁰⁹ Gamble, p.18.

¹¹⁰ Roberts, pp.2-3.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.3.

¹¹² Emma Parker links Roberts' potent imagery in this scene with Flora's unconscious memories of incest and abuse p.116.

¹¹³ Berthin, Christine, *Gothic Hauntings*. (Palgrave Macmillan: 2010) pp.4-5.

formation transmitted to the ego of the next generation.¹¹⁴ The crypt then embodies the secret. Roberts' literal crypt shortcuts what is usually a more 'encrypted' search for meaning on the reader's behalf, but nonetheless, the crypt and its associated images of burial, tombs and cemeteries are present as the heart of the shared trauma of the three women. This secret transmits itself not through biological generations, but through Flora's mediumship, transcending the limits of linear time. Hat first appears at the *burial* of Flora's abuser, suggesting that it is time for the secret to come to light, but like Hat, Flora never explicitly discusses her abuse and continues to adore the man the reader recognises as her abuser.¹¹⁵

Hattie, however, as the third generation and inheritor of the crypt/secret, experiences the cemetery itself as split. It comes as part of her healing, immediately after she experiences love and sex not as taboo, but as affirming: 'that morning I trusted sex again', where her partner is not an abuser, but an equal: 'I sat and looked at you and thought: we are alike, we know each other's insides, we are at home inside each other.'¹¹⁶ Descriptions of the cemetery echo both Flora and Hat's with recurring images of rot, decay, stone arches and columns. However, Hattie's positive reclamation of sex makes 'the world look different, I realised I was seeing double.'¹¹⁷ She comes across the graves of Flora and her family and finds them beautiful. The name Flora becomes a hint at the resolution of trauma through family, as Hattie's partner remarks that he likes the name if she should become pregnant again and have a daughter.¹¹⁸ Hattie returns home with a sense of renewal, knowing what she must do in order to move on from the past: 'I looked at the graves, ashamed of my cowardice, and came to a decision'.¹¹⁹ Once back in the kitchen, she encounters the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pp.114-115.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.115.

¹¹⁸ I will discuss Hattie's pregnancies in chapter two.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

child ghost of Flora for the final time and comforts her, ‘pour[ing] our words of love to her’ and wanting ‘her to be mine’.¹²⁰ The crypt is healed by the renewed home, a place of safety and unity: ‘I stared at the fire, the coals you had coaxed and breathed on, built to a basket of clear molten red. Inside me was my childhood, alive and demanding, the little girl I’d been afraid of giving space to because of what she made me remember. Now it was time to remember, to admit her truth, to recognize and cohabit with it.’¹²¹ Flora then imagines feeding disembodied limbs of her uncle into the kitchen hearth in order to ‘purify’ him, and thus herself.¹²² As Parker suggests, while Hat and Flora locate change in the future, Hattie ‘enacts change in the present, breaking the disempowering patterns of the past.’¹²³ Roberts’ text does not necessarily offer us resolutions to these split identities; however, it does pose important questions about the history of the female voice: how it has been distorted by the silence of abuse, how it can be understood through revisionist history of women’s writing, but also how it can emerge in the future. The contemporary home becomes a place where the wounds of the past can be healed, where sexual desire, transgression and trauma can be overcome, and where identity can thus be resolved.

The Material and the Divine

My characters react not just to their remembered pasts, but to their unremembered pasts, in uncanny moments that unsettle deep seated neuroses, fears, and desires.

This allows me to link characters not just at an unconscious developmental level, but to draw parallels relating to the novel’s themes of the repression of female sexual and

¹²⁰ Ibid, pp.118-119.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.119.

¹²² Ibid, p.137. See also, Parker, p.123.

¹²³ Parker, p.123.

spiritual desire: the two foremost tensions in Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. While in terms of linearity, each woman is the reincarnation of her temporal predecessor, there are disruptions through the appearance of the same young girl, Sophie, and man, Erik, which complicate the narrative's structure. The novel is composed of three interwoven narratives: each woman tells her story in first person through what Diane Long Hoeveler calls the 'talking cure', and an additional limited third person narration.¹²⁴ Hoeveler states that in order for the female Gothic subject to attempt to control the 'stifling' networks of psychic and linguistic codes we now call psychoanalytic discourse, she resorts to the 'talking cure', where she talks herself out of the perception of her life as a prison, confessional, asylum or maze.¹²⁵ This draws on Cixous' 'embodied voice' as one that emerges from the Female Gothic as what Kristeva calls 'purposefully perverse hysteria.'¹²⁶ This can be seen in how the three women tell their experiences, respectively, to a psychiatrist, priest, and as a written confession to the Virgin Mary. The female subject performs what is otherwise commonly thought of as female weakness (emotional, irrational, hysterical) in order to gain agency. As spiritual and sexually driven women — sorceresses and hysterics, as they are labelled by men around them — this 'purposefully perverse hysteria' represents the floods of their desires restricted. In the introduction to *Newly Born Woman*, Sandra M. Gilbert summarises Cixous and Clément's exploration of the sorceress and hysteric in patriarchal culture: 'the misrule that governs witchcraft and the rebellious body/language that manifests hysteria are culturally stylised channels into which *excess* demonically flows — excess desire, excess rage, excess creative energy — only to be annihilated by the society that drove it in such directions.'¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Hoeveler, p.12

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid. See also, Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* pp.32, 76; 'Cixous' in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), p.96.

¹²⁷ Gilbert, Sandra M., 'Introduction' in *Newly Born Woman* p.xii. I will explore Clément's sorceress and hysteric further in chapter three.

The ‘annihilation’ of each woman’s ‘excess’ desire compounds from life to life, carried forward in the unconscious and emerging in uncanny moments that unsettle deep seated neuroses.

I use reincarnation as a narrative framework, not to advocate for any religious or spiritual belief, but as a cause and effect technique to allow for characters that carry unconscious characteristics of the persona before them. Not only does the eternal aspect of reincarnation link it with Kristeva’s monumental time, but it is revival, where, like the Gothic, ‘the past returns with sickening force.’¹²⁸ As a trope, reincarnation allows uncanny repetitions. The dead return not just as spectres, but as living people, returned to repeat, as in Freud’s ‘repetition compulsion’, their unfinished business.¹²⁹ The uncanny is a disturbance of the proper order, ‘undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and creeping horror.’¹³⁰ It is an experience of strangeness, of something familiar yet alien at the same time.¹³¹ Uncanny moments in the novel reveal the return of repressed active female desire. Despite Freud’s association with the term ‘uncanny’, I have located the ‘unfinished business’ of the three women through Jungian psychology, as it allows for an approach to the unconscious beyond the limitations of a purely sexual libido.¹³²

Jungian psychology draws from the deepest regions of the unconscious in terms of what is repressed by both the individual and culture.¹³³ The soul, for Jung, is not just a ‘theoretical abstraction but an empirical reality’.¹³⁴ The psyche does not reside

¹²⁸ Spooner, Catherine, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006) p.18.

¹²⁹ Freud, Sigmund, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-through’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.12 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 145-156.

¹³⁰ Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ p.219.

¹³¹ Royle, p.1; Freud p.9.

¹³² Rowland discusses the differences between the creative and healing potential of the Jungian vs the Freudian unconscious in *Jung: A Feminist Revision*, (Oxford: Polity, 2002) pp. 46-71.

¹³³ Tracey, David, *The Jung Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012) p.2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid* p.31.

purely ‘inside’ us, as Freud suggests. Rather, we are inside the psyche, which is split into three parts: the ‘ego’, the conscious part of the psyche, the ‘personal unconscious’ where we find repressed memories that result in complexes and neuroses, and the ‘collective unconscious’, made up of universal forces called archetypes.¹³⁵ The ego collects external sensory experiences and is internally comprised of memories, thoughts and feelings — in other words, all that we are aware of, and what makes up our identity.¹³⁶

Within Western Esoteric notions of reincarnation (which I have used agnostically as a fictional framework), we can similarly posit the distinction between the ‘soul’ (as psyche) and the ‘personality’ (as ego).¹³⁷ The ‘soul’ is the immortal life force that is reborn again and again with the accumulated experience that makes up the three parts of the psyche. The ‘personality’ is the separate and unique form of an individual existence, which usually has no knowledge or memories of its past lives, just as the ego has no awareness of the unconscious aspects of the psyche. These are, however, carried as a sense of morality, similar to repressed complexes and archetypes.¹³⁸ This ‘unconscious morality’ is the crux of the intersection of the monumental/cyclical, Gothic and psychoanalytic elements of the novel.

The appearance of Sophie, the child ghost, is initially frightening to Lucrezia and Mathilde, and she appears to Emma when she is most vulnerable. Sophie is an uncanny reminder of the ‘return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts’ in a

¹³⁵ Jung believed the unconscious mind showed itself through symbols, dreams, visions, and that mythology, religious symbolism and so-called occult phenomena were manifestations of the collective unconscious. I will return to the collective unconscious in chapter three to explore the connections between the mythologies and demonising of the three protagonists in the novel: Hall, Calvin S, Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1973) pp.33, 38, 42; Tracey pp.2-3.

¹³⁶ Jung, Carl, *Aeons: Researches Into the Phenomenology of the Self*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959) pp.3-7.

¹³⁷ For definition of Western Esoterism see: Faive, Antoine, *Western Esoterism: A Concise History* trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

¹³⁸ Prince, Ruth and David Riches, *The New Age in Glastonbury: The Construction of Religious Movements* p.189.

traditionally Gothic manner, but is also the physical reminder of repressed sexuality, and the residual guilt carried over from each woman's past 'failures' as mother, and therefore, failure as ideal 'feminine' woman.¹³⁹ However, Emma does not reject motherhood per se. She is fulfilled by the role, and it is Sophie's death that initiates her supposed madness. She inherits residual fear of punishment should she reject the role of domestic Angel due to the traumatic consequences of acting on desire experienced by Mathilde and Lucrezia. This also develops the strongest *persona*. Jung compares the 'persona' to a mask. It is the façade exhibited publicly so that the individual will be accepted socially.¹⁴⁰ Before the events of the narrative, Emma's life was structured around maintaining the persona of Angel, but, as Jung notes, it can be harmful if a person's ego becomes primarily identified or preoccupied with the persona.¹⁴¹ Emma's libido — the psychic energy that flows between the conscious and unconscious — reveals more of her unconscious than any other character, resulting in strange dreams, impulses, and, importantly, the most tension between her personality, persona, and her ego. Emma's natural psychic gifts and her sexual desires defy the impositions of her persona, causing neuroses.

The dichotomy of good/bad woman, or good/bad mother, haunts each woman, and the trauma of each child's death, or her own punishment as a result of the child's death, repeats itself. Though these latent neuroses are not brought to the surface for the women. However, as Jung explains, 'the unconscious helps by communicating things to us, or making figurative allusions. It has other ways, too, of informing us of things which by all logic we could not possibly know.'¹⁴² Emma, as the inheritress of accumulated latent impulses and neuroses, experiences the most intuitive impulses

¹³⁹ Freud p.241.

¹⁴⁰ Jung, Carl, G. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1953) p.190; Hall and Nordby, p.44.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* ed. & trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Collins and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) p.281.

from the unconscious that she could ‘not possibly know’. These occur frequently as a sense of *déjà vu*. Nicolas Royle states that *déjà vu* cannot be disassociated from the double, or the recollection of an unconscious fantasy.¹⁴³ But it is precisely this duplicity that drives Emma to question her own sanity. In the asylum, she finally confronts the return of the repressed and, by accessing the unconscious through the trance, and with the help of the ghost, Sophie, Emma is able to use her ‘hysterical’ voice to overcome the ‘annihilation’ of her ‘excess’ creativity.¹⁴⁴ As in *In the Red Kitchen*, the voice unrestricted by linear time can be used to escape from and subvert restrictive space. The trance allows monumental, or mythic, access to the unconscious. Here, the repressed can not only return, but be acknowledged and understood, and repressive space can be subverted to become a place of liberation of the unconscious, and thus female, desire.

The three protagonists of *The Material and the Divine* narrate their stories retrospectively from places of confinement. Lucrezia, from a locked chamber of her *palazzo*, Mathilde, from the prison walls of a Witches’ Tower, and Emma, from a private asylum. Images of the three confined spaces recur: the padded walls of the asylum room look ‘hard like stone’ and the shadows on the ceiling recall crossbeams;¹⁴⁵ Lucrezia describes the high walls of her room as a turret;¹⁴⁶ light pierces the tiny windows of all three rooms like a needle; and, in her bedroom, Emma sees the image of Saint Anne behind the wallpaper as though she’d been ‘chipped away’, = like the fresco of Saint Anne in Lucrezia’s room.¹⁴⁷ Fleenor states that within the Female Gothic, images of closed rooms, dungeons and secret

¹⁴³ Royle, pp.174-182; Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* trans. by James Strachey (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1965) p.95.

¹⁴⁴ I will discuss how this emerges in writing in chapter two.

¹⁴⁵ *The Material and the Divine*, p.157.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.19.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.190.

chambers stand as metaphors for both the repressive society and its socially enforced institutions, such as marriage, as well as the repression of the heroine herself.¹⁴⁸ But they are also dark, enclosed, and thus can represent the uncanny womb: the repressed ‘Dark Continent’ of female sexuality, and the body’s entrapment through pregnancy.

Lucrezia’s sense of a lingering threat in her new home is manifest in the crumbling Cassini *palazzo* — a family once wealthy, rising with the advent of Savonarola, but now, like his puritanical ideology, decayed and out-dated. Fleenor associates ruins with the triumph of chaos over order, symbolic of women’s triumph over the chaotic and disordered desires of the body.¹⁴⁹ Fleenor suggests this limitation perpetuates self-fear and disgust, and ultimately Female Gothic authors accept rather than challenge dichotomous view of female sexuality.¹⁵⁰ However, Donna Heiland suggests that the contemporary author’s way through the ‘impasse of the gothic’ is to complicate the Gothic’s focus on oppression, dichotomies and divisions by embracing plural and fractured visions.¹⁵¹ In my revision of this Gothic space, I attempt to dissolve such binaries. Following the contours of dark and labyrinthine passages, Lucrezia begins the descent into her unconscious. She is led by Sophie’s ghost, not to the repressive chambers or dungeons where the patriarchal husband’s secrets lie in waiting as an unbearable threat, but to the door of Jacopo’s study. The alchemist’s lab, where the union of opposites, particularly masculine and feminine, is paramount to transcendence, is the place where Lucrezia first experiences *jouissance*: the expression of her desires as fluid, sublime, and, importantly, both sexual and spiritual.¹⁵² This is the foundation of the desire for

¹⁴⁸ Fleenor, p.12.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid p.12.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid pp.11-15.

¹⁵¹ Heiland, Donna, *Gothic & Gender* (Maldon: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) p.156

¹⁵² Heitsch, Dorothea, ‘Cats on a Windowsill: An Alchemical Study of Marie de Gournay’ in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture* ed. by. Kathleen P. Long (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) pp.217-220, p.218; Gibbons, Brian J. *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and Its Development in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.77.

subjectivity and expression that will be passed unconsciously to Mathilde and Emma. Thus, though recalling the twisted passages of ruinous castles as repressive spaces of female entrapment, the image of labyrinthine space represents the unconscious, where, by excavating and working through, hope emerges in the possibility of wholeness.¹⁵³ However, I am also aware that Lucrezia operates within the limitations of her historical social and cultural milieu. It would be disingenuous to suggest that an escape through pure and uncontrolled expression is possible: a balance is necessary to such a revision. It is then up to Mathilde and Emma, as the inheritors of Lucrezia's repressed desires, to attempt to overcome the gender binaries that restrict them.

Desire for self-assertion and subjectivity emerges in Mathilde as a need to separate herself physically from society, and thus her home of the cottage, like her own identity, exists on the boundary between the civilised village and the wild forest: between nature and culture, order and chaos. Descriptions of the forest recall Gothic tropes: jutting limbs, rolling mist, circling ravens and, of course, the very real threat of what is hidden in the shadows.¹⁵⁴ Typically, the terror of the natural world is subjugated by cultured man in his quest to dominate and control chaos, darkness and animality, and Gothic spaces highlight the tension between the human domain of the rational and the terrifying and irrational world of the numinous.¹⁵⁵ The forest is a place of secrets. It is where Mathilde and Anna cultivate and harvest the resources for their arcane practices, where they keep their secret pagan idols (on another boundary — the crossroad marking the place between the Catholic and Protestant

¹⁵³ von Franz, M. L., 'The Process of Individuation' in *Man and his Symbols* (n.p: Dell, 1968) 157-255, p.176

¹⁵⁴ *The Material and the Divine*, pp.16-17, 149-151, 164-168.

¹⁵⁵ Caputi, Jane *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture*, (University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2004) p.7, 13; Ortner, p.12; Aguirre, Manuel 'Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction' in *Gothic studies* Vol.10. No2 (2008) pp. 1-17.

villages), where they witness Ursule's attack and bury the body of the soldier. The villagers transfer the threat of the forest's power onto its resident, Mathilde. She and Anna are frightening and strange Others, objects of suspicious gossip, and are ultimately ostracised.¹⁵⁶

However, things are not all as they seem; space and identity are unstable and the forest is also a numinous place.¹⁵⁷ Mathilde describes the forest as sacred; it is where she is childlike and uninhibited. Thus, her personal identity as aligned with this space reflects an attempt at a return to nature, the primal woman before 'humankind forgot the sanctity of the earth and began to worship its gods in church and cathedrals.'¹⁵⁸ She admits that she cannot find God in church and uses religious imagery to describe the natural world. The forest is sublime; not only vast, magnificent and obscure, as suggested by Fred Botting, but also excessive.¹⁵⁹ It is where Mathilde loses reason, and experiences herself literally as split, embodied and disembodied, as she watches herself from above.¹⁶⁰ Mathilde's most numinous experience here comes during what is later labelled by others as her 'Sabbat'. Having just discovered her pregnancy, she rebels against the 'entrapment' and 'betrayal'¹⁶¹ of her body by descending into the 'Divine Insanity' of the sorceress.¹⁶² If the sublime is a state of majestic and natural awe where God is 'embraced through feeling and emotion' and becomes an 'absolute Other, a wholly Other, who exists beyond concepts', a 'terrible power' experienced as ineffable and rapturous positivity, then it is also entwined with a sense of space as

¹⁵⁶ *The Material and the Divine*, pp.35, 131-32, 215.

¹⁵⁷ Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1996) p.171.

¹⁵⁸ Murdock, Maureen, *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (New York: Shambhala, 1990) p.111.

¹⁵⁹ Botting, p.39.

¹⁶⁰ *The Material and the Divine*, pp. 149-151.

¹⁶¹ Fleenor, p.16.

¹⁶² Sandra M. Gilbert, in the Introduction to *Newly Born Woman*, refers to Emily Dickinson's description of madness inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Tomes of solid Witchcraft', as 'Divine Insanity', which Gilbert claims preceded Cixous and Clément's argument about the sorceress and the hysteric. I will return to this idea in chapter three, p.xii.

inextricably spiritual.¹⁶³ However, as Vihar Mishra states, in the Gothic, the sublime becomes negative: the Gothic locates itself in the ‘space of the momentary letting-go which Reason awards Imagination.’¹⁶⁴ The sublime becomes uncanny, where the subject experiences a split — as Mathilde experiences during her rapture — and emerges as the double:

Without an identity of the self with reference to a wholly Other, there is a strong sense of self-extinction even when Reason (had the subject entered the “symbolic” world of difference) demands detachment and understanding. The source of terror, the *mysterium tremendum*, now regresses into a trace, a memory, a recollection, that is firmly located in the unconscious, where it must compulsively repeat self-annihilation in the sublime.¹⁶⁵

Mathilde’s explosive loss of reason in the numinous space of the forest cannot last. While it is a momentary experience of sexual and spiritual desire which echoes the residual desires of Lucrezia, it is a threat, a force that cannot be contained. As Catherine Clément states, the excess desire, rage and creative energy of the ‘rebellious body/language’ of the sorceress are inevitably destroyed by the society that forced its explosive expression, and ‘nothing is registered of her but mythical traces’.¹⁶⁶ Mathilde must be brought back under subjugation, and so she finds herself punished by the authority of the village: the priest, the bailiff, and the novel’s ghostly patriarch, Erik. The forest thus represents the terror of the sublime, the twofold nature of the divine as transcendent and perilous. However, the ‘mythical traces’ of the positivity of the sublime, the awesome beauty and potential power of the forest, are imprinted in Emma’s psyche.

Emma’s spatial relationship with the world is largely constructed through two conflicting topoi: the private female world and the public masculine world. Emma’s

¹⁶³ Mishra, Vihar, ‘The Gothic Sublime’ in *A New Companion to the Gothic* ed. by David Punter (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp.288-306; 290.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid* p.292.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid* p.294.

¹⁶⁶ Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* p.5.

identity is largely aligned with the domestic, where her mobility is constrained not only by her role as wife and (former) mother, but from the need for bed-rest. Massey argues that female identity, particularly in the nineteenth century, was limited through such attempts at consignment to the domestic as a way of controlling the threat of a woman's life being defined by something other than family and husband.¹⁶⁷ While this is certainly true for Emma, domestic confinement is not simply an obligation under Victorian separate spheres ideology. She associates the city, its smoke stacks, the cogs of its machines and factories, with the masculine, subordination and repression.¹⁶⁸ The public world is not one that will bring freedom. The city itself is a threat: London, her native city, her *home*, is dreadfully *unheimlich*. She longs instead for the countryside, and her happiest memories are of her walks with Sophie in Hampstead Heath, a place of natural solace within the repressive city. She has never known a home other than the city, and yet she feels an uncanny longing — a sensation like homesickness — for somewhere she has never been.¹⁶⁹

The self-splitting aspect of the female double occurs on a twofold basis for the three women: they confront the return of the repressed of the woman before her, and the tension between the two selves of each personality through the Angel/Monster dichotomy. Madness occurs when, as Stein argues, women are 'confronted with [their] own terrifying split between 'monstrous' inner drives and 'nice' outward appearances.'¹⁷⁰ Emma struggles most in overcoming her fears of patriarchal punishment. She creates her own walls, confining herself not just within the home, but within her bed, doped up on laudanum, for fear of leaving the safe, domestic and

¹⁶⁷ Massey, pp.179-180.

¹⁶⁸ *The Material and the Divine*, p.80.

¹⁶⁹ Royle state that the feeling of the uncanny is bound up with the most extreme nostalgia or 'homesickness', a compulsion to return, p.2.

¹⁷⁰ Stein, Karen. F. 'Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic' in *The Female Gothic* ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983) p.125.

female world.¹⁷¹ The persona she is attempting to maintain represses the natural integration of her unconscious desires and, as Jung states, a lack of symbolic or spiritual life can make a person mentally and physically ill.¹⁷² When she becomes involved in spiritualism, the latent desires of self-expressed spirituality inherited from Lucrezia and Mathilde compel her to enter the public and masculine world. In doing so, she begins to integrate rather than repress her desires. She finds a sense of purpose in her work and encounters strange new liberal ideas, but she is continually torn between the two worlds. The public world is still a repressive one: while at a party where she is first exposed to the libertine ideas of her new friends, she remarks on the oppressiveness of the city.¹⁷³ Her place within this world is not secure, and the nature of its threat means that she begins to doubt the validity of her experiences.

While confinement leads all three women to the type of madness typically associated with female imprisonment within the domestic — a result of the ‘devalued female role’¹⁷⁴ — only Emma experiences madness as a condition diagnosed by others. Emma is forced to question the validity of her psychic gifts. She connects with the inherent spirituality that compelled Lucrezia and Mathilde, and is encouraged by supportive friends such as Susannah. However, the combination of her deviance from the Angelic persona, her confrontation with her past doubles, and the residual complexes regarding the validity of such psychic gifts, mean that she believes the men that accuse her of being a hysteric who must be incarcerated.

When she finally leaves the city for the open air of the country she is ironically contained within asylum walls. She can only peer at the forest beyond the boundaries, but still she envisions herself running free within it, returning to the state

¹⁷¹ *The Material and the Divine*, p.51.

¹⁷² Tracey, p.40.

¹⁷³ *The Material and the Divine*, pp.80-81.

¹⁷⁴ Stein, p.125.

of transcendence within nature as experienced by Mathilde.¹⁷⁵ But this sensation oscillates, and she only truly feels when in the company of Dr Barrett, who listens and validates her experiences. The asylum is far more constricting when Emma finds herself alone, or in the company of Dr Gissing, reflecting the asylum as a place where women are ‘buried alive’.¹⁷⁶ However, I could not allow Emma to languish there as her literary foremothers had. In the cell resembling Mathilde’s tower, her descent into madness brings her repressed desires to the surface. Her irrational and embodied voice becomes ‘purposefully perverse hysteria’ through which she is able to navigate her escape.¹⁷⁷

Emma often recalls childhood memories of the ocean, the time in her life when she was also able to see spirits, particularly her mother, before her girlish desires for expression were subjugated. Her father tells her the ocean will take her and she will be lost.¹⁷⁸ But this image of the ocean similarly becomes one of *déjà vu*. It returns most potently while she is on the bow of the ship, having escaped the asylum, crossing the Mediterranean on her *return* to Italy, and thus to the roots of her neuroses. The sensations of exhilaration and possibility rise again not only as they relate to her childhood memories, but as ‘the recollection of an unconscious phantasy’.¹⁷⁹ The sublime nature of the ocean, both awe-inspiring and frightening in its potential, is familiar. This time, however, it is a fear that can be overcome. The power of the creative unconscious, where the repressed can be worked through by recognising its emergence through uncanny doubling or *déjà vu* can be used to overcome typically restrictive feminine spaces. By liberating herself, Emma also suggests the mythic or monumental liberation of the women who have come before

¹⁷⁵ *The Material and the Divine*, p.85.

¹⁷⁶ Wallace, ‘‘The Haunting Idea’’: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory’, p.27.

¹⁷⁷ Hoeveler, p.12.

¹⁷⁸ *The Material and the Divine* p.79.

¹⁷⁹ Royle, 173.

her; *Emma* is all three women, as they exist together within her unconscious. This, I hope, becomes a metaphor for the third generation revisionist text.

The characters of *In the Red Kitchen* and *The Material and the Divine* are able to subvert the Gothic's metaphors of repressive space by circumventing linear time. Their marginal positions allow them access to cyclical and monumental time, through which they can liberate themselves. However, only the most historically recent woman of each text is able to do so. This suggests, I argue, that it is an important concern of contemporary writers both to locate and pay respect to the damage of the repressed feminine, and offer a revision where active female desire does not ultimately succumb to either the masculine/feminine binary, or the Angel/Monster binary. The complication of dichotomies through the multiplicity of fractured voices, overlapping to haunt one another through time, suggests, as Adele Jones claims, that an 'acceptance and understanding of the theoretical ghosts of the past may be the best means of moving towards a future free of the paradigms of "Woman."' ¹⁸⁰ However, speaking as a marginal subject still restricted within the Symbolic Order alone is not enough to overcome patriarchal binaries. As Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva write, women must be able to enter into the Symbolic Order, to explode *through* the marginal and *into* history. To do this, they argue that women must be returned to their bodies, both as a site of the maternal, and as a site of feminine writing.

¹⁸⁰ Jones, p.90

Chapter Two: The Body: Maternity and Writing

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display — the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.¹

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

This chapter discusses how characters heal their split or doubled female identities through the body. Irigaray and Cixous claim that sexual difference should be celebrated rather than repressed, and part of that celebration is the positive reclamation of women's subject positions and their relationship with their bodies through the maternal and the practice of writing. Once the separation of the self is brought to light and the maternal relationship is healed, woman can attempt the pen and find a language that represents her own subjectivity within the Symbolic Order.²

Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous agree that the figure of the mother must be brought into representation if women are to create their own subjectivity and accept, rather than reject, the masculine myth of female inferiority.³ In both *In the Red Kitchen* and *The Material and the Divine*, the women struggle not only with relationships with their biological mothers, but with the institution of motherhood, and the mother figure of the unconscious. Flora and Mathilde reject their biological mothers, symbolic of the 'imago' mother of the unconscious, for fear of becoming like them, resulting in a rejection of their own maternity and its entrapments. Hattie and Emma meanwhile,

¹ Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976), 875-893, p.880

² Kristeva, Julia, 'Women's Time' trans. Alice Jardine, Harry Blake, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981) 13-35 p.24; Irigaray, Luce, 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp.30-34 p.32; 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *The Irigaray Reader* pp.34-46; *This Sex which is Not One* trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985) p.29; Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.875

³ Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *The Irigaray Reader* pp.34-46

demonstrate the potential for healing. They come to terms with their 'failures' as mothers, and move into an identity that accepts, but is not solely defined, by their maternity.

The second concern of this chapter is with the body as a site of writing. Cixous argues that writing has maintained a masculine economy that has excluded women. However, this Other space allows women freedom to create.⁴ Cixous subverts Freud's 'Dark Continent': the male dread of female sexuality.⁵ It is not dark, she claims, it is not unexplorable; women have only been made to believe it is too dark to be explored.⁶ While male sexuality is localised, the 'dark continent' of the female body is without boundary: 'Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.'⁷ Other space allows women freedom to write, subvert and invent a language of their own. As such, 'a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way.'⁸ In this vein, this chapter considers how the female protagonists of the two novels 'attempt the pen'. Hat and Lucrezia associate writing with masculinity, power and, therefore, with subjectivity. However, Hat lacks the phallus that can make her identity permanent, resulting in her symbolic death. Meanwhile, the bisexual libido allows Lucrezia to make the transition from masculine to feminine. She discovers an embodied voice through 'excess creativity' and blood, and so she can confess her subversive desires in narrative *as* a woman.⁹ Hattie and Emma are able to locate their own unconscious more so than the women before them, and so they allow

⁴ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.879.

⁵ Freud, 'The Question of Lay Analysis' trans. by. James Strachey (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1959); *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* trans. by. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963) pp.212-213.

⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.885.

⁷ Ibid p.889.

⁸ Ibid p.888.

⁹ Gilbert, Sandra M. 'Introduction' in *Newly Born Woman* trans. by. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) discusses both the 'excess creativity' of the hysteric, as well as the feminine voice as one of 'milk and blood' p.ix, xii; Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa' p.891.

their 'immense resources' to 'spring forth'.¹⁰ Their engagement with writing brings them into confrontation with the repressed through which they discover an identity for themselves created by themselves. This then allows them access to the Symbolic, and because it arises from their female identities, it cannot be destroyed in the same manner as Hat's.

The Maternal Body

The cultural myth of the 'Mother' is prominent in the works of the French Feminists, as well as Anglo-American second wave feminists, who sought to deconstruct the idea of women constrained by motherhood, and examine how they can be liberated by reimagining and revolutionising the *institutionalisation* of motherhood.¹¹ I am not a mother, and do not agree that physical motherhood is necessary in the formation of female identity, as this restricts the feminine to biological determinism. What I am interested in, however, is the cultural concept of the mother. For this reason, none of the women in my novel are physically mothers (with the exception of Emma, who must redefine her identity as the mother of a deceased child), however, each of them engage with the cultural significance of the mother, and motherhood, and what these mean in the restriction of, and formation of their own female identities. The mother in a Freudian context is not simply the biological mother, but the mother of the unconscious, an 'imago' constructed from a set of psychological and emotional needs. This mother introduces the child to lack, castration, and representation,¹² and her openness,

¹⁰ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.880.

¹¹ Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother'; Kristeva, Julia, 'About Chinese Women' in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)139-159. The most prominent authors from this movement include: Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); Chodorow, Nancy, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Hirsch, Marianne, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton & Company Inc., 1986).

¹² Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) p.24.

according to Irigaray, threatens contagion, illness and death.¹³ In ‘Freud’s ‘Dark Continent’ Joan Raphael-Leff considers Freud’s problem with female sexuality: ‘Sphinx-like, Woman thus remains for him a “dark region” associated with enigmatic and dangerous powers — an uncharted feminine terrain, theoretically ‘unsatisfying, shadowy and incomplete.’¹⁴ The horror of female sexuality lies in the return to the womb, the most *Heimlich* of all places: ‘there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings.’¹⁵ According to Irigaray and Kristeva, in the masculine imaginary, the mother has become a ‘devouring’ monster.¹⁶ This type of representation has appeared in Gothic novels for two centuries, particularly through the devouring mother: the woman who represents castration, entrapment within patriarchy and loss of identity, but also the absent woman with whom the daughter longs to reconnect.¹⁷ In order to overcome such ‘atrocious and primitive’ phantasies of male projection, Irigaray contends that the relationship with the mother needs to be brought out of silence and into representation.¹⁸ But it is not a simple task. For women, the castration complex is a double anxiety; they find that they are already castrated, and who is to blame but the mother? Women may internalise the masculine myth of female inferiority — weakness, dependence, and powerlessness — and align themselves with the masculine.¹⁹ The

¹³ Irigaray, ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’ in *The Irigaray Reader* p.40.

¹⁴ Raphael-Leff, J., ‘Freud’s “Dark Continent”’ *Parallax* Vol.13 No.2 (2007) pp.41-55; 41.

¹⁵ Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.17 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 217-256; ; see also, Fleenor, Juliann E., *Female Gothic* (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983), p.15. Feminist readings generally accuse Freud’s uncanny Oedipal complex as androcentric, where woman is situated in a secondary, inferior role, excluded from the work of culture. See: Jonte-Pace, Diane. *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud’s Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Irigaray, ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’ *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by David Macey, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991) p.40; Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.54.

¹⁷ Fleenor, p.16; Anolik, Ruth Bienstock, ‘The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode,’ in *Modern Language Studies* Vol.33, No. 1, (2003) pp.24-43; 25.

¹⁸ Irigaray, ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’ *The Irigaray Reader* pp.43-46.

¹⁹ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, p.155; Murdock, Maureen, *The Heroine’s Journey* (New York: Shambhala, 1990) p.17-18.

mother and daughter then come into conflict, both in desire for the father, and in the attempt to separate themselves from one another. But Irigaray warns against perpetuating the 'matricide' on which she claims Western culture is built; woman must 'give new life to her', give her the right to pleasure, to speech, and to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter with her (as paternal language attempts to do), in which words 'do not bar the corporal.'²⁰

However, before the mother can be reclaimed and revisioned, the trauma of her matricide and subsequent burial must be acknowledged and worked through. Michèle Roberts writes that the modern novel makes women's quest for the 'Holy Grail' — the mother — possible. Her essay 'Write, She Said' is framed as an imagined interview between herself and Christine de Pisan, a fourteenth century author who wrote treatises on women's education as well as poetry about love.²¹ Their 'conversation' considers the contention between the cultural status of literary fiction and romance. Roberts reveals that as a feminist, she eventually overcame her anxieties about reading 'low class' romance as she realised that 'one thing that medieval and the modern romance have in common is that they are often quest narratives'.²² The modern heroine's search for a man is symbolic of a search for the lost mother, and the ending of a heterosexual kiss is a metaphor for the infant at the breast.²³ She goes on to write that 'reading a novel compensates for two losses, two griefs: the loss of the actual breast every baby has regularly to experience; and the loss of the nurturing mother that little girls in particular experience. The loss of any symbol of the power of the female.'²⁴ The female author then turns the grief and rage of her loss into writing, in both traditional romance, and in

²⁰ She states this in direct opposition to Freud's assertion that Western culture is based on patricide Irigaray, p.36; p.43.

²¹ Roberts, Michèle 'Write, she said' in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* ed. by Jean Radford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) p.221

²² Ibid, p.227

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid p.228.

those texts that attempt to subvert it. This is a conflict at the heart of the Female Gothic, where the popularity of the genre for women is not in its escapism, but in its representation of the confrontation between the mother and daughter.²⁵

Cath Stowers suggests that journeys (both internal as well as physical) can ‘decolonise and activate difference’ through a pilgrimage back to the mother, to maternal redemption and reparation.²⁶ This is similar to Maureen Murdock’s ‘Heroine’s Journey’, which emerged from the need to heal the mother daughter split, a ‘deep feminine wound’, and redefine and validate the feminine values once denigrated.²⁷ The journey becomes a descent where woman must meet the dark feminine and come to terms with her grief and rage; only then can she emerge to heal this relationship (which can be archetypal as well as biological) and ‘reclaim feelings, intuition, sexuality, creativity’:²⁸ Cixous and Irigaray’s *jouissance*. The healing journeys of the women in both novels are not physical, but metaphysical, as that which is repressed travels through time. While they each face different individual conflicts with ‘the mother’, they also become symbolic daughters of the temporal women before them, and as such, continue the journey of healing on behalf of one another.

Rejection of the Maternal

The relationship between Flora and her mother is one of *In the Red Kitchen*’s most destructive. It is clear early in the narrative that Flora adores her father, whom she describes warmly and intimately, detailing their physical closeness: ‘I rest in the dark cave of his arms, lit by firelight ... Him wrapped around me. He and I are the world.’²⁹

²⁵ Fleenor, p.16.

²⁶ Cath Stowers, ‘Journeying Back to Mother: Pilgrimages of Maternal Redemption in the Fiction of Michele Roberts’ in *Mothers and Daughters* ed. by Andrea O’Reilly and Sharon Abbey (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) p.61.

²⁷ Murdock, Maureen, *The Heroine’s Journey* (New York: Shambhala, 1990) p.4.

²⁸ *Ibid* p.9.

²⁹ Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Vintage, 1999) p.30.

By contrast, she is ambivalent towards her mother, who is described in practical terms, always distant and obtuse: ‘How far away Mother is. Hunched over her work, thin shoulders tense as she steers thread towards the needle’s eye, in her own little circle of light that the men don’t need.’³⁰ This scene also inverts typical images of masculinity and femininity. Her father is associated with the warm, nurturing ‘cave’, while her mother penetrates with a phallic needle. This suggests Flora’s need to reject not only the mother, but those ‘weak’ and undervalued aspects of the feminine that are associated with her. She has, as Kristeva writes, repressed the *body* of the mother in her identification with the father. Through such imagery, she defines herself as a ‘father’s daughter’ in the symbolic murder of the mother and repression of the nurturing maternal drive.³¹ This is compounded when Flora reveals that she knows she was unwanted; her mother attempted to abort her with ‘gin and water, a boiling bath’³², and her parents’ marriage ‘was only because [they] had to.’³³

The closest Flora comes to sympathy for her mother is when she describes ‘that terrible tearing pain, over and over and over again’ when remembering her mother’s eight births.³⁴ But the unrelenting repression of birth and the constant burial of those infants only serves to confirm her rejection of motherhood: ‘I shouldn’t be able to bear it’.³⁵ Kristeva and Murdock agree that alienation and rejection from the mother may cause the daughter to search for recognition from the father and patriarchal culture.³⁶ Flora’s search for validation is transferred to her father so that she fails to recognise the true nature of his taboo affections. After his death, this extends to William and Charcot whom she refers to as ‘delighted daddies’ when mimicking the hysterical dance for

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, pp.151-152.

³² Roberts, p.76

³³ Ibid. 126.

³⁴ Ibid, p.76.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, p.155; Murdock p.27.

them at La Salpêtrière.³⁷ Unlike Hat, Flora's attempt to align herself with masculinity does not mean taking on masculine attributes, but submitting her femininity to the ideal 'archaic projections' of the masculine imaginary.³⁸ She becomes flirtatious, submissive, passive, and describes herself as a 'good girl.'³⁹

The heart of this conflict is desire: learning how to desire, and what she is allowed to desire. But there is no mirror for female desire reflected in the mother, and so it is a 'relationship with need, with no possible identity'.⁴⁰ This is described literally in Flora's inability to see herself in the mirror while playing with Rosina, imagining their 'skimpy dresses' as 'ball-gowns with real bustles', as grown and beautiful women, feminine objects of desire: 'the game is unsatisfactory, hindered by the lack of proper reflection.'⁴¹ Irigaray states that desire on behalf of the daughter can only be experienced as a function of the father's law, and thus only begins when she enters into a relationship with him.⁴² This causes her to experience the virgin/whore dichotomy: her father sees her 'budding sexuality' as taboo, while her mother sees her as a rival.⁴³ As 'rival objects' of male exchange, the mother and daughter then come into jealous conflict:⁴⁴ 'I did love my mother, but I was always jealous, she loved father too much, far more than she loved me.'⁴⁵ As Irigaray suggests, the lack of a mirrored subjective feminine desire results in 'somatic pain, in screams and demands',⁴⁶ and Flora's hysterical performance for her 'daddy' William at La Salpêtrière, where her narrative voice moves between her dance and memories of a violent confrontation with her mother, is demonstrative of the damage of Flora's belief that she exists only in the

³⁷ Ibid, p.128.

³⁸ Whitford, 'Introduction to section I' p.25.

³⁹ Roberts, p.123.

⁴⁰ Irigaray 'The bodily encounter with the mother', p.52.

⁴¹ Roberts, p.28.

⁴² Irigaray, 'The bodily encounter with the mother', p.52.

⁴³ Murdock p.24; Gilbert, 'Introduction' in *The Newly Born Woman* p.xii.

⁴⁴ Murdock p. 45.

⁴⁵ Roberts, p.142.

⁴⁶ Irigaray, p.52.

mirror of male attention.⁴⁷ However, her need to keep her mother at a distance also reveals the desire most deeply felt: a need to align herself with the masculine not simply for recognition, but for the longed for phallus with which she can return to the womb. As a child, Flora jealously ‘protects daddy from the stupid cruel woman’, imagining herself as ‘the sword that keeps them apart and keeps them chaste. She is her father’s sword. She belongs to him. One night she dreams that thus she can go where he goes: into the warm sweet mother.’⁴⁸

Flora’s relationship with her mother remains unhealed. Hers is a time when the mother is desirable only as an object, a distanced figure onto whom she projects ambivalence. Flora also appropriates the father’s attitude of the mother as an object of sexual desire. This indicates that her desire to return to the womb is one of longing for home, for love and acceptance, as Freud suggests in ‘The Uncanny’.⁴⁹ Thus, the dread of the truth, that the father, and not the mother, could be at fault for her pain, is traumatic.⁵⁰

She spits the words out, bits of dead flesh and bone.
– Your father. It was your father who wanted me to get rid of you. He went on and on at me about it. It was he who didn’t want you, not me. Funny how you don’t remember me telling you that.
Terror wants to be wax plugging my ears. Too late. I’ve heard her bitter truth. Her sour milk truth.⁵¹

Flora’s ambivalence about the mother transfers into the veneration of her own son in favour of her daughter: ‘I never hid from her how much I wanted a son ... how much I grieved having only a daughter left to me once Jo was killed.’⁵² Flora admits she finds ‘it hard to love women. They want far too much.’⁵³ Her relationship with her own

⁴⁷ Murdock, p.37.

⁴⁸ Roberts, p.128.

⁴⁹ Freud, p.254.

⁵⁰ Falcus and Parker similarly discuss Flora’s trauma as a result of both parents’ rejection. Falcus, p.145; Parker, p.116.

⁵¹ Roberts, p.125.

⁵² Ibid, p.142.

⁵³ Ibid.

daughter is also fractured, and the distance that she describes suggests that her daughter has continued the generational matricide. However, there is hope in cyclical and monumental time. When the youngest version of Flora's ghost appears to Hattie in the kitchen, she is taken in and told that she is loved, indicating the healing that can arise from Hattie's own pregnancy.

While Flora claims to have no intention of getting married or mothering children, anxiety regarding a woman's role *as* mother is more deeply reflected in Minny Preston. Ellen Moers was among the earliest scholars to claim that the Female Gothic brings light to women's anxieties regarding birth and motherhood. She identifies Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a 'birth myth', because 'its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.'⁵⁴ Minny's narrative highlights the internalised double of femininity; while outwardly subscribing to Victorian ideals by appearing loving towards her husband and children, she hides the monstrous drives which lead her to possible infanticide. It is clear from her letters to her mother (in which she all but begs her mother to visit and help, but is refused) that despite pronouncing her love for her family, she is exhausted, isolated and desperately unhappy.⁵⁵ This comes to the fore when in the séance Flora reveals that Minny may have smothered her daughter: '*Mother. Smother. Mother, you smothered me.*'⁵⁶ Minny's subsequent terror comes not only from the consequences of being found a murderer, but from the dread of confronting herself as Other: a woman deemed socially and culturally monstrous, beyond the boundaries of acceptable femininity.⁵⁷

After her tenth birth, she returns to the 'melancholy [she] suffered *before* her confinement,'⁵⁸ suffering 'not only from a physical disability and from a depression

⁵⁴ Moers, Ellen *Literary Women* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) p.93.

⁵⁵ Falcus draws attention to the overbearing nature of Minny's letters, which highlight her own sense of abandonment by her mother, p.146.

⁵⁶ Roberts, p.94.

⁵⁷ Jones more closely links this dread with the abject, p.99.

⁵⁸ Roberts, p.109.

which ... [she is] *unable* to recover from' but also from 'terrifying nightmares.'⁵⁹ In these dreams, Flora appears 'in white', much like Hat, and 'carries a bloodstained kitchen knife' in one hand, and in the other, the 'torso of a human child': 'As I halt in terror, she raises the ghastly piece of flesh to her mouth and begins to gnaw at it ... then I see that the victim of this hideous cannibalism is none other than my very own newborn babe.'⁶⁰ The image of Flora then resembles 'the Sphinx.'⁶¹ This abject scene reveals a monstrosity that is too much to bear, and, as discussed in chapter one, Minny projects the 'horror' of herself onto Flora, who, appearing in an Egyptian setting, is further aligned with the matricidal Hat. While Minny's is another maternal wound that remains unhealed, what is important, as Cath Stowers notes, is that Roberts tackles areas of mothering usually glossed over: mothers who cannot cope, who do not want to mother, or who've lost their children.⁶² The recognition of maternal anger, particularly in a narrative which emphasises the literal confinement of women in pregnancy, a 'double bind by the institutions of Medicine and Family'⁶³, is an important aspect of 'historicising the maternal' and bringing her out of silence.⁶⁴

While Mathilde does not come into such violent conflict with her mother figure as Flora, she too experiences rejection of and by the mother, as well as rejection of motherhood itself. Abandoned after her mother was banished from the village for adultery, Mathilde and her sister Anna were raised by their grandmother.⁶⁵ Hers is a threefold betrayal: her own pregnancy recalls the dread of her mother's punishment for

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.111.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp.111-112.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.112.

⁶² Ibid, p.66.

⁶³ Jones, p.99.

⁶⁴ Stowers, p.67.

⁶⁵ In the town of Alsace in the Württemberg state, women could be punished for premarital or adulterous sex with prison sentences of 12 days, public shaming, and banishment. Fornication 'with no intention' (for marriage) was more harshly punished: Rublack, Ulinka *Crime and Gender: The Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

sexual deviance; the truth of Mamé's maleficent connection to Agnes Stark's death reveals the dark potential of the divine feminine. So too does she carry the residual burden of the failure of her past self, her 'past mother', Lucrezia, to overcome the restrictions of the gender binary. Initially, Mathilde valorises the arcane women's knowledge Mamé shares with her of herbal medicines and abortifacients. But when that knowledge fails to save Catherine and Anna, and rumours of Mamé's past amplify the town's suspicions of Mathilde's practices, she feels cruelly betrayed by the feminine. What she once thought of as an instinct to heal becomes instead the dark and ancient power associated with the witch.⁶⁶

Mathilde's pregnancy further complicates this ambivalence. Mathilde desires a life of independence and action, much like her grandmother's. Her affair with Michel is a drive purely for physical gratification, but, as Stein suggests, this quest of self-hood is 'monstrous' as it defies the continuance of patriarchal values of virginity and marital chastity.⁶⁷ Mathilde's narrative is most closely concerned with the relationship between identity and the body, and she is acutely aware of how her body operates beyond her control. This is a common theme in the Female Gothic, where the mother represents 'what woman will become if she gives in to her sexual self'.⁶⁸ In the mind of the village, this means sin, seductiveness and corruption, but to Mathilde, motherhood means becoming a passive victim of her own body.⁶⁹ She is fascinated and horrified by her body's automatic processes, and reflects on the differences in the level of control granted to women versus men: 'That body could do anything it wanted, and I could hardly make a mark.'⁷⁰ She ends her pregnancy not only because of the limitations that

⁶⁶ Russell, Jeffrey B., *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980) p.116; Gilbert, Sandra M. & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) p.79.

⁶⁷ Stein, Karen. F., 'Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic' in *The Female Gothic* ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montréal: Eden Press, 1983), p.123.

⁶⁸ Fleenor, p.16.

⁶⁹ Fleenor, p.16.

⁷⁰ *The Material and the Divine* p.197.

motherhood would place upon her in her social context — a fate like her own mother’s — but as an attempt to regain the lost control of her body, to become an active participant in her identity and her destiny. However, this physical rejection of the maternal cannot heal the wound at its heart.

When Magret comes to her pregnant with Erik’s child, but dismissed from her position in his house because of her ‘lewd’ behaviour, Mathilde becomes enraged: ‘I saw my mother again. She and Mamé both ... She was all of us. Our anger was not our own. We saw Erik in the ether and we stripped him bare.’⁷¹ Mathilde is terrified to discover that she has *become* her ‘mothers’ — passionate, angry, and capable of terrible revenge — and that she carries the legacy of their destructive rage.⁷² Murdock states that *matriphobia*, the fear of becoming the mother, runs deep in Western culture, particularly in a daughter’s need to distance herself from the archetypal Dark Mother.⁷³ The Dark Mother represents those aspects of the feminine which have been suppressed and driven underground.⁷⁴ Mathilde’s rage resulting (she believes) in the death of the village patriarch Erik is an ancient expression of her repressed creativity and instinctive nature. Mathilde destroys Mamé’s almanac, the secret book of recipes and incantations, but also the encrypted evidence of Mamé’s terrible secret, expressing her sense of betrayal. Murdock warns of the consequences of the repudiation of the feminine when, ‘the daughter who rejects the aspects of the negative feminine embodied by her mother also denies positive aspects of her own feminine nature, which are playful, sensuous, passionate, nurturing, intuitive, and creative.’⁷⁵ This is a danger carried forward to Emma, where the split may begin to be healed.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.228.

⁷² Her mother, grandmother and spiritual ‘mother’, Lucrezia.

⁷³ Murdock, p.20. See also: Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* p.237.

⁷⁴ Ibid. See also: Gimbutas, Marija, *Goddesses and Gods of Ancient Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Stone, Merlin, *When God was a Woman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976).

⁷⁵ Murdock, p.23.

Healing the Split

Hattie is the figure in *In the Red Kitchen* with the most potential for healing the mother/daughter split. She writes to her unnamed lover, the father of the child she carries, detailing her recovery from the trauma of a miscarriage. However, she also carries the trauma of rejection; she was not only abandoned by her own mother, but again by her aunt who ‘found [her] too much to cope with.’⁷⁶ Such rejection is a confirmation of her ‘wickedness’, coming after her abusive uncle threatens to have her sent away if she reveals to her pregnant aunt their ‘secret.’⁷⁷ At the convent, this past sin, ‘too wicked to mention’, results in ‘loathing’ for her body, an ‘alien guest’ invading her ‘pure spirit’ and what is ‘imprinted on it.’⁷⁸ She learns from the nuns lessons in ‘self-denial, mortification of the senses,’⁷⁹ but rather than teaching her to separate herself from her body, as she desires, her anxiety regarding the ‘problem’ of her body remains.⁸⁰ These reflections build the template for the betrayal she feels at her body’s ability to end her pregnancy without her knowledge: ‘My body detonated a time bomb and I killed her.’⁸¹ She blames her ‘absent mother’ for not teaching her how to ‘look after things and make sure they do not get broken’, and as a result, she ‘can’t trust [her]self to know anything for sure.’⁸² As Falcus notes, this ‘alterity’ aligns Hattie with Kristeva’s ‘process without subject’. Pregnancy is the ultimate borderline state where ‘life explodes into death, heat into cold, past into future’.⁸³ Such a suggestion of cyclical

⁷⁶ Roberts, p.136.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.136.

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp.86-87.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.86.

⁸⁰ Roberts, p.73; Adrienne Rich states that she knows ‘no woman’ for whom the body is not a problem: ‘its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so called frigidity, its blood speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings’, p.284.

⁸¹ This is also discussed by Falcus, p.146.

⁸² Roberts, p.73.

⁸³ Kristeva, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’ in *Desire in Language* ed. by Leon S. Rodriguez, trans. by Thomas Gora et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) p.238; Falcus, p.146.

overlapping is demonstrated by Hattie's belief that visions of Flora in the basement are just her 'desires for a daughter getting the better of [her].'⁸⁴

Hattie must come to terms with her own abandonment, her lack of control over her body, as well as the trauma of sexual abuse, as an entwined entity. The ghost of Flora becomes not just a reminder of maternal abandonment, longing and trauma, but a way to work through it. Recognising herself in Flora, she also recognises her body's ability to heal itself through maternal love: 'My body was made of love and it was all hers if she wanted it. I poured out words of love to her, I told her she was safe now, she was all right.'⁸⁵ Her relationship with the unnamed lover is similarly healing, and his 'warm body' helps to 'drive away' the recurring nightmare of her uncle.⁸⁶ She dreams of her uncle again only because her 'task is to purify him',⁸⁷ and after she 'burn[s] off the monstrous bits he doesn't need, the growths that disfigure him', she is able to acknowledge her new pregnancy.⁸⁸ While Flora experiences herself only in the mirror of masculine desire, Hattie is able to shatter it. The important combination of these elements is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's assertion that the female *experience* of motherhood can be liberating if removed from patriarchal restrictions.⁸⁹ Hattie becomes Irigaray's woman-mother, as opposed to the mother of the masculine imaginary.⁹⁰ As Falcus states, Hattie's re-negotiation of the past and re-connection with her lover show that she is 'learning to love and desire', and the 'promise of a new generation ... represents the cyclical and eternal nature of women's time.'⁹¹ She can become a woman who is capable of active desire, and therefore subjectivity, within the Symbolic Order.⁹²

⁸⁴ Roberts, p.57.

⁸⁵ Roberts, p.118.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.72.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.137.

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp.136-137.

⁸⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p.285.

⁹⁰ Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', p.35.

⁹¹ Falcus, p.151.

⁹² Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', p.43. Kristeva similarly suggests that reconnection with the power of the maternal on her own terms can give woman access to desire and *jouissance*: 'About Chinese Women', p154.

Irigaray writes that in order to prevent continued matricide, we must acknowledge that there is a genealogy of women, and that by rediscovering the initial ‘homosexual’ love for the mother, daughters can similarly discover their ‘singularity’ of love for other women.⁹³ In my novel, Emma’s narrative is predominantly concerned with revealing the potential for love between women. As discussed in chapter one, Emma suffers the most in terms of her repressed desires for autonomy, and is haunted most often by her daughter, the uncanny reminder of her failure. Emma’s identity is defined by the institution of motherhood, but when this is taken away she suffers from a loss of purpose.⁹⁴ Her reconnection with the sacred feminine in the séance recalls the numinous bodily experiences of Mathilde. Here, she recognises Susannah as a ‘contemporary creative woman with whom she can identify’ and who will ‘teach her about female power and beauty’.⁹⁵ This reconnection allows her residual fear regarding the Dark Mother, the dangerous potential in the irrational and creative, to be overcome, and teaches her to use the feminine to communicate with her daughter, bridging the gap between generations.

Like Irigaray, Rich advocates for reinstating and valuing love between women. Rich suggests that by extending our definition of lesbian beyond the ‘clinical’ limitations of the term to include ‘many more forms of primary intensity between women and among women’, we can ‘begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach.’⁹⁶ As a third generation writer concerned with highlighting the plurality of female existence and the bisexual libido, it was important to me to include constructive and loving female relationships that did not simply reinscribe

⁹³ Irigaray, p.44.

⁹⁴ I return to my previous idea of Emma’s persona being aligned with the ideal patriarchal woman, the Angelic mother.

⁹⁵ Murdock, p.27.

⁹⁶ Rich, Adrienne, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality And Lesbian Experience’ in *Culture, Society and Sexuality a Reader* ed. by Richard G. Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: UCL Press, 1999) p.210.

the normality of heterosexual love, whether they were defined by sexual desire, friendship, or both.

The relationship between Emma and Susannah extends the chaste, sororal love between Mathilde and Anna — severed because of its potentially maleficent threat — into love based not only on friendship, but romantic and sexual love.⁹⁷ As a woman who came into her feminist identity during the third wave, I am conscious that while my own experiences are limited to white, middle-class Western woman, I would like to avoid an ‘ahistorical’ universalising of womanhood.⁹⁸ Monique Wittig acknowledges that the ‘ensemble’ of discourses of Western culture takes for granted that society is founded on heterosexuality.⁹⁹ Any voice other than this is silenced unless it speaks on ‘their’ terms.¹⁰⁰ As a woman of Victorian society, Emma cannot engage ‘with the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity’ that I, her author/daughter of the third wave, can.¹⁰¹ She is tied to a rigid masculine imaginary in which there is no concept of women’s sexual development not ‘governed by [their] lack of, and thus [their] longing for, jealousy of, and demand for, the male organ’.¹⁰² She is ‘resubmitted’ to the ‘dominant discourse of the father’, and the doctor ‘intervene[s] to censor, to repress,’ her deviant desire, deeming her hysterical.¹⁰³ As Irigaray writes, the desire for the woman-mother (imagined outside her role as reproducer) results in the ‘burial of women in madness.’¹⁰⁴ After experiencing the brief *jouissance* of autonomous desire,

⁹⁷ I feel it’s worth pointing out that a relationship exclusively between women is so undermined that Microsoft Word does not recognise ‘sororal’ as the feminine equivalent to ‘fraternal’.

⁹⁸ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ pp.18-19; Wittig, Monique ‘The Straight Mind’ in *Feminist Theory: A Reader* ed. by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartowski, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005) 343-347 p.344; Snyder, Claire, ‘What is Third Wave Feminism?’ *Signs* Vol.34, No. 1(2008) pp.175-196.

⁹⁹ The ‘ensemble of discourses include the relationships between semiology, Structural Linguistics and the Structural Unconscious which produce a confusing state for the oppressed, plunging them into an ahistorical vacuum,’ Wittig, p.344.

¹⁰⁰ Wittig, p.343-344.

¹⁰¹ Snyder, p.187.

¹⁰² Irigaray, ‘Powers of Discourse’ in *The Irigaray Reader* p.119-120.

¹⁰³ Ibid; ‘The bodily encounter with the mother’ p.36.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.37.

Emma slides back into her Angelic persona and is torn between moments of lucidity and hysterical visions. However, the reappearance of Sophie during a fit reaffirms the mythical power of the divine feminine. She reconnects not only with Susannah and thus Irigaray's 'horizontal genealogy', but vertically, to heal the damage of her archaic, Dark Mother, Mathilde, through her descent into her unconscious in her return to Italy. Emma is able to come into a position where she can both acknowledge the power of maternal love, but is no longer solely defined by her ability *to* mother. She becomes Irigaray's woman-mother.¹⁰⁵

Writing Masculine and Feminine Bodies

Although Freudian and Lacanian concepts of lack are now widely criticised, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the primacy of the phallus has historically kept women from the pen. In opposition to this, Cixous proposes *écriture féminine*, writing that utilises woman's marginal subject position to erupt into the Symbolic through multiplicity, fluidity, and the body.¹⁰⁶ In both novels, writing is an act of transcribing as a construction of identity that is also entwined with Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. Hat and Lucrezia share masculine associations with writing as a source of power, permanence and knowledge. This aligns Hat in particular with Kristeva's first generation, those who sought equality by erasing difference.¹⁰⁷ Flora and Emma, meanwhile, use automatic writing and the trance to attempt to enter the Symbolic Order, aligning with Kristeva's second generation, who sought to disrupt linear temporality and advocated for feminine modes of discourse.¹⁰⁸ However, as Kristeva notes, this method is too far removed from

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.35.

¹⁰⁶ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' 875-893.

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p.19.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Irigaray also states that one of the two ways that women have attempted to enter the Symbolic Order as 'man's equal' by becoming a 'potential man'. However, this becomes a 'masquerade of femininity' and she loses herself: Irigaray, 'The power of discourse' in *The Irigaray Reader* pp.130-131.

practice, and is not a realistic way of entering women into history.¹⁰⁹ As a writer of the third generation, my own role can be aligned with Hattie: a voice that gestures to a future free from the problem of difference. Kristeva's cyclical and monumental time demonstrates how writing both as passive mediumship, and as active self-inscription, 'function to promote the history of women as a collection of shared experiences, dialectic across time and space.'¹¹⁰

As writing has maintained a masculine economy that has excluded women, women who wish to enter the symbolic may do so by aligning themselves with this privileged position.¹¹¹ Roberts' Hat, and to a lesser extent my own Lucrezia, exhibit the desire to inscribe themselves into history by taking up the phallic pen. Hat, sole daughter of the Pharaoh, believes herself 'born of the God',¹¹² and her desire for power, identity and immortality looms over her narrative. She marries her father, has his favourite concubine assassinated, and after his death names herself Pharaoh: 'Power over all this land ... sole power; I, only I ... I am man, I am Pharaoh, and I shall rule.'¹¹³ She understands the immortal potential and significance of writing: 'To write is ... to partake of word's power ... To write is to deny the power of death'¹¹⁴. Additionally, she has her name inscribed on stone edifices and her crypt.¹¹⁵ Falcus states that through this inscription, Hat stresses that death, and not the mother, is now the place of birth: 'language covers an absence and creates the world; words are life. And in order to subscribe to this phallic order, Hat must deny her mother and make her father and his

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p.19.

¹¹⁰ Golda-Derejczyk, Agnieszka 'Repetition and Eternity: The Spectral and Textual Continuity in Michèle Roberts's In the Red Kitchen' in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* ed. by Arias, Rosaria and Patricia Pulham (Houndsmills: Pangrave Macillan, 2009) p.47.

¹¹¹ Cixous, p.879.

¹¹² Roberts, p.53.

¹¹³ Ibid, p.100.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.24.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

law (and name) her goal.’¹¹⁶ However, as a masculine impostor, she ‘lacks’ the necessary phallus to truly enter the symbolic: ‘I am lacking. I am lack. I am nothing but a poor dead body that lacks the sign of life: I am female.’¹¹⁷ Her inscribed temples are pulled down, erasing her from history. This act is worse than death: ‘I have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I.’¹¹⁸ Her obsession with inscribing herself reappears through Flora’s mediumship. Flora then becomes the vessel through which she can continue her transcriptions and once again attempt to enter the Symbolic Order.

In *The Material and the Divine*, Lucrezia’s relationship with language comes from her father. As a scholar of the Platonic Academy, he is not only the owner of a large library, but because of his humanist valuing of knowledge, he encourages her curiosity and allows Lucrezia relatively free rein of the library. Her education, however, remains informal. While her brother, Luca, and brother-in-law, Jacopo, are given tutelage under his instruction, Lucrezia is left to assemble knowledge herself. Nonetheless, it is broad: she is exposed to Greek and Roman classics, Gnostic and Hermetic texts, poetry and contemporary scholarship. But it is a world full of male writers. Though Jacopo similarly encourages her curiosity and is happy to share his alchemical studies with her, it is he, at first, who transcribes her visions. Anna Antonopolous encounters a similar difficulty in her *écriture féminine* examination of the texts of Saint Catherine of Genoa, whose mystical visions were ‘committed to writing by others’: ‘While the individualised religious experience gains political significance in the context of a historical setting, here the roles of community, confessor and reporter are so entwined that the female body becomes a site of struggle for competing discourse.’¹¹⁹ Lucrezia, at

¹¹⁶ Falcus, p.143.

¹¹⁷ Roberts, 133

¹¹⁸ Roberts, p.133.

¹¹⁹ Antonopoulos, Anna, ‘Writing the Mystic Body: Sexuality and Textuality in the *écriture-féminine* of Saint Catherine of Genoa’ *Hypatia* Vol. 6, No.3, (1991) p.188.

first, accepts such exclusionary authorship as women were typically excluded from authoring theological and philosophical texts.¹²⁰ However, like the trance utterances of the Victorian medium, the spiritual knowledge of women was accepted if communicated while ‘filled with the spirit of God.’¹²¹ Authorship for the mystic, like the medium, relied on liminality; as Kristeva and Clément suggest, in a trance woman is on the borderline of both biology and meaning.¹²² Lucrezia’s body becomes Cixous’ signifier: ‘it conveys meaning, it “writes”, and is thus its own text, beyond the patriarchal pen.’¹²³ As such, she can experience the brief *jouissance* of outwardly expressed sexual and spiritual desire, as her body’s language is understood and validated by Jacopo, and so she can make the transition from writing as masculine, to writing as a form of female subjectification.

The ‘threat’ of female signification arises. Marco destroys not only her beloved books, but Jacopo’s transcriptions of her visions, echoing the reformist attitude of his idol, Luther, regarding the propriety and ability of women to share knowledge: ‘There is no dress that suits a women or maiden so badly as wanting to be clever.’¹²⁴ But this silencing gives over only to the desire to, like Hat, inscribe herself into history and make permanent her identity and her story. In the locked room, Lucrezia begins her written confession and after running her ink well dry, she transcribes the remainder of her narrative in blood. Cixous states that women’s bodies signify what cannot otherwise be said through fluids: tears, milk and, in Lucrezia’s case, blood. They *write* what partially escapes, and so threaten the paternal Symbolic.¹²⁵ Lucrezia’s ink is not simply

¹²⁰ Atherton, Mark (ed and trans) *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 2001), xxiii. See also: Ruether, Rosemary, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005)

¹²¹ Atherton, xxiii.

¹²² Clément, Catherine and Julia Kristeva *The Feminine and the Sacred* trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p.15.

¹²³ Holmes, Emily A. *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Women Mystics, Writing, and The Incarnation* (Baylor University Press, 2013) p.108.

¹²⁴ Luther, Martin, as cited in Karant-Nunn, Susan C, & Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.29.

¹²⁵ Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*.

blood, it is abject: the haemorrhaged blood of her miscarriage becomes a reappropriated eruption into the Symbolic — the unborn child (and potentially symbolic son), instead becomes the feminine fluid of her confession.¹²⁶

As Hattie is required to attempt to heal the split of Flora and Hat, and carry their narratives monumentally through time, so too is Emma's automatic transcription, mythically inscribed in her unconscious through maternal blood, necessary for Lucrezia's subjective voice to carry forward.

The passivity of the Victorian séance lends itself to dualistic transgressions. The trance, or 'mind passivity', as Alex Owen calls it, 'operated as a mechanism of release, undermining the normative connotations of feminine passivity in its potential for expressive revelation.'¹²⁷ Automatic writing occurs when a medium enters a meditative state to allow for transcriptions from the spirit world. Flora corresponds not only with Hattie King, and thus the novel's two other central protagonists, but also Rosalie Preston, the dead daughter of Minny Preston, and impetus for Flora's invitation into their home as a subject of William's experiments. Emma similarly communicates with the spirit of a young girl, her daughter Sophie, allowing her access to knowledge beyond the boundaries of the asylum. For both Flora and Emma, automatic writing is a subversive attempt at signifying by forming identity through unconscious drives. However, for these same reasons, it causes them to be labelled hysterics.

The process of transcribing the words of 'others' conceals the dualism at the heart of Victorian women: the passive Angel and the active Monster. Freud observed that hysterical patients were often adept at writing in place of speech, and in some cases, wrote 'more fluently, quicker, and better' than they had before.¹²⁸ The important

¹²⁶ See Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹²⁷ Owen, Alex, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p.215.

¹²⁸ Owen, p.214.

difference is that under the guise of possession, spiritualists could maintain the tension between ‘control and abandonment’: ‘hysteria gave rise to ‘fits’ of problematic behaviour, but when all went well, passive writing manifested only ‘suitable’ expressions of the unconscious.’¹²⁹ Mediumship undermines the passivity it appears to uphold. The necessary trance state in which the medium is ‘taken over’ is not only socially acceptable, it can conceal a medium’s true intentions.¹³⁰ Agency on behalf of the medium is removed, and subversive messages can be blamed on mischievous spirits.

The ability to channel and transcribe messages from Sophie signals the beginning of Emma’s recovery. It is not only a confirmation that her longed for daughter is still present, but is also a confirmation of the legitimacy of her ‘irrational’ drives. It occurs at the same time that she enters a liberal new social circle, and her resulting sense of freedom and self-determination is both foreign and familiar. Owen notes that automatic writing could be a ‘libertine experience’ and spirit messages often ‘seemed dedicated to the destruction of home life.’¹³¹ The threat of such destruction, as already observed through Emma’s continued physical absence from the home and the threat of her new friendships, leads both Edward and Gissing to tear up the transcribed pages, evidence of Emma’s writing as part of her journey into her unconscious, and thus the return of her repressed desires and true sense of identity.

In *In the Red Kitchen*, William exhibits Flora to real-life Charcot, a neurologist famous for his work in hypnosis and hysteria, at the Salpêtrière in Paris where she must ‘play charades’ for the doctors.¹³² Her instructions to ‘mime’, combined with the barrier of foreign French (she ironically mistakes ‘*isterry*’ and ‘*famm*’ for ‘history of women’),

¹²⁹ Ibid, p.215.

¹³⁰ This is a well-established idea. See Owen, p.11; pp.214-216; Basham, Diana. *The Trial of Women: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p.124; Tromp, Marlene ‘Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage and Victorian Spiritualism’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 31, No.1 (2003) pp.67–81; 67-68.

¹³¹ Owen, p.11.

¹³² Roberts, p.126.

silence Flora and so she must ‘let [her] body shape words for [her]’,¹³³ signifying Cixous’ notion that part of the ‘rupture’ of women into the symbolic is to write *through* their bodies.¹³⁴ She mimics the hysterical performances of the Salpêtrière’s patients; however, she does not realise that her body’s language is seen by the authoritative men only as, ‘*isstery. Delloosyon,*’ a self-confirming bias to the illegitimacy of her voice.¹³⁵ However, men are not the only ones to exhibit such silencing. Minny, who aligns herself with conservative notions of Victorian propriety and patriarchal authority (despite her own struggles to maintain them), similarly denounces Flora as possessing the ‘moral degeneracy always found amongst hysterics’¹³⁶ after an automatic writing session reveals Rosalie’s murder.¹³⁷

Sussane Gruss claims that there is a ‘revolutionary potential in hysteria’; denying structured speech is a way of subverting or denying the Symbolic.¹³⁸ But as Showalter states, the transgressive potential of hysteria is limited. It is tolerated, but it cannot give women economic or legal rights.¹³⁹ This is where my own text and Roberts’ differ. After escaping the Salpêtrière, Flora is abandoned by her subversive unconscious voice, Hattie: ‘I did love Hattie, but she was a spirit, that made her different. And anyway, she had to leave me.’¹⁴⁰ As Falcus states, Flora ‘cannot escape into the semiosis of the hysteric, nor the rationality of science.’¹⁴¹ Though she no longer writes through the

¹³³ Ibid, p.127.

¹³⁴ Cixous, p.886.

¹³⁵ Roberts, p.129.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.143.

¹³⁷ Flora’s treatment at La Salpêtrière’ and its implications in regards to hysteria have been analysed by a range of scholars. See: Falcus, pp.141-143; Parker, p.118.

¹³⁸ Gruss, Susanne, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2009) p.82.

¹³⁹ Showalter, Elaine, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) p.161. It is worth noting that while writing, particularly revisionist writing, may not be able to give women immediate access to ‘legal and economic rights’, it offers more potential for women as a form of expression. While hysteria remains marginalised, revisionist and feminine writing attempt to legitimise women’s voices in the Symbolic Order, and by normalising feminine expression as equal to masculine expression, contribute to the cultural changes necessary for economic equality.

¹⁴⁰ Roberts, p.142.

¹⁴¹ Falcus, p.142.

spirits, Flora *does* decide to write for herself, particularly in response to her experiences at La Salpêtrière: ‘I will force myself to write down what happened. I will go back in there, and remember.’¹⁴² She does not begin writing her story until she is an old woman and, while referring occasionally to Rosina and her lover in second person, she admits that she writes, ‘for no reason except to please myself.’¹⁴³ Her writing is therefore aligned with the traditionally female form of journal writing, a personal narrative with no intended audience. But so too is it a confession and a way of healing the wounds of the past; a story written not for the public, but for herself, her dead sister, and for the potential future reader, Hattie.

However, while Hattie is aware of boxes of the former occupants’ possessions that remain in her attic, including Flora’s writing, she never reads them.¹⁴⁴ Flora’s silence is bound up in her own perception of her transgressions. The spirits left her ‘because [she] lied’, betraying her ‘calling’ but also her creative and feminine unconscious, and she thus ‘was punished for it.’¹⁴⁵ So too she betrays women such as her sister and her mother by privileging and worshipping the men who abused her: ‘I always loved men more than women. They are so prickly, so demanding ... The men used me up, I hadn’t anything left for women.’¹⁴⁶ The importance of Hattie’s voice is then revealed in Hoevler’s assertion that the Female Gothic novel involves ‘a specifically female oedipal quest, a need to rewrite history from the vantage point of a beleaguered daughter intent on rescuing her mother — and by extension future self — from the nightmare of the alienating and newly codifying and commodifying patriarchal family.’¹⁴⁷

By contrast, while Flora is compelled to return to the site of her trauma — the asylum — Emma’s ‘hysterical’ transcriptions allow her the chance of escape. It is

¹⁴² Roberts, p.120.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.18.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.138.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.141.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.142.

¹⁴⁷ Hoevler, xvii.

through the channelled messages of Sophie, and thus communication from Susannah, that Emma is able to begin to separate the inflated aspects of her ‘Angel’ persona and heal the ‘split self’ of her unconscious. This is signalled in both monumental and cyclical time by a return to Lucrezia, the root of Emma’s neuroses, her hidden desires, but also the beginning of the novel. Moving forward necessitates moving backwards. For both Emma and myself, as real and imagined authors, this represents a ‘re-vision’, an act of looking back in order to move forward, as, as Rich states, ‘until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.’¹⁴⁸

The Third Generation

As Kristeva states, the third generation is a ‘mixture of the two attitudes—*insertion* into history and the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed by this history’s time on an experiment carried out in the name of irreducible difference.’¹⁴⁹ Rosie White locates Hattie within Kristeva’s third generation.¹⁵⁰ Like her predecessors, Hattie is a writer, and shares an awareness of the significance of the symbolic with Hat, but also the potential for subversion with Flora. Her self-identity is conflicted: she ‘went on the game’, to purchase her house,¹⁵¹ she ‘reluctantly accepted that she had a body’,¹⁵² and she is accused by her partner of being a ‘feminine monster’ and ‘an Amazon who doesn’t need a man.’¹⁵³ Her childhood sexual trauma, shared with her historical doubles, compounds her ambivalence about her body and thus identity. However, she is a woman

¹⁴⁸ Rich, Adrienne, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ *College English* Vol. 34, No. 1 (1972), pp.18-30.

¹⁴⁹ Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ p.20.

¹⁵⁰ Rosie White, ‘Visions and re-visions: Women and time in Michèle Roberts’s *In the Red Kitchen*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol.15, No.2 (2004), 180-191, p.185.

¹⁵¹ Roberts, p.14.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p.87.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p.103.

who can speak and who writes her own history, including its intrusions from Flora through mediumship and the appearance of the young apparition. Adele Jones calls Hattie a 'subject in process': she is able to reconcile her traumatic past and moves 'out of the position of non-speaking subject attributed to her by patriarchal discourse ... subverting the understanding of women as cipher within the Symbolic Order.'¹⁵⁴ In line with Kristeva's 'parallel' generations, the 'parallel' narratives of the two novel's three protagonists function to not only bring together the first two generations of women, but as physical products, simultaneously represent the third voice, where the potential for subversion, for the individual and for a collective history come together.¹⁵⁵ As both White and Jones suggest, Roberts remains ambiguous about Hattie's future and thus the potential of her as representative of the third generation.¹⁵⁶ However, the overlapping of each woman's voice through time generates a 'potential for subversion that remains unfulfilled but still available.'¹⁵⁷ As Roberts herself writes, 'I catch myself writing, or wanting to write, about a woman achieving wholeness, being reunited with her mother, having nothing but wonderful sex with men, healing all the splits inside herself, and so on. These impulses are constantly subverted and challenged by their opposite.'¹⁵⁸ Hattie's written narrative, as a combination of her attempt at the masculine pen and permanent inscription in time, is done through a vision of history which is necessarily personal, cyclical and monumental. Only by sharing the shared trauma of Hat and Flora can Hattie attempt an understanding of her own identity: an identity as yet unresolved, but certainly in progress.

As a writer of the third generation, I am both the product of my history, and capable of a Symbolic and subjective experience of identity. I write for the formation of my own

¹⁵⁴ Jones, Adele, 'A Feminist Act of Adaptation: Identities and Discourses in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*' *Neo-Victorian Studies* Vol.2, No.2 (2009/2010) 86-108, p.101.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.33.

¹⁵⁶ Jones, p. 104; White, p.190.

¹⁵⁷ White, p.190.

¹⁵⁸ Roberts, , 'Write, she said' p.229-230.

female identity. I am Lucrezia, I am Mathilde, I am Emma, and I am Lauren. As Roberts states: ‘just as autobiography requires great art to do it well, so writing imaginatively means opening up to the deep self of the personal unconscious, drawing upon the hidden processes of the psyche, discovering that they can turn into treasures of writing.’¹⁵⁹ Nadine Muller states that third wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction — and I would extend this more broadly to women’s historical fiction — are connected by their shared concern with the relationship between the past and the present.¹⁶⁰ They engage in dialogue with their pasts as multifaceted: a place where multiple and disparate truths exist, where the author’s subjective experiences influences their ‘historical, ideological and social background.’¹⁶¹ We engage with the themes of the past — sexuality, hysteria, prostitution — because they are problems as ‘fundamental to Western societies today as they were in the nineteenth century.’¹⁶² Such returns allow for reconsideration, and through narrative, female authors can ‘substantiate their presents in order to envision desirable, possible futures without escaping into utopia.’¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Roberts, Michèle, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, (London: Virago, 1998) p.14.

¹⁶⁰ Muller, Nadine, ‘Not My Mother's Daughter: Matrilinealism, Third-wave Feminism & Neo-Victorian Fiction’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol.2 No.2 (2009/2010) pp. 109-136; 125.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.128.

¹⁶² Linda Hutcheon (1988) as cited in Muller p.125.

¹⁶³ Muller p.130.

Chapter Three: The Feminine and the Sacred

‘The word and works of God is quite clear, that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes.’¹

Martin Luther

‘All Witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.’²

Malleus Malificarum

‘Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure’³

Coventry Patmore

In the previous chapter, I discussed the importance for the characters of both novels to return to their bodies as sites for maternal healing and for writing in order to overcome the split self and enter the Symbolic Order. However, it is also important to overcome the denigration and repression of the feminine through its relegation into binary archetypes if women are to enter history on their own terms. As a writer aspiring to Kristeva’s third generation, I believe it important to challenge ideas of identity and sexuality and understand the ‘dichotomy of man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities’ not as biologically determined, but ‘as belonging to metaphysics.’⁴ This position accepts that active and passive desire exist fluidly within the unconscious, and that both the feminine and masculine should be recognised and valued within the self and culture. In my novel, this recognition engages with historical sites of the Sacred Feminine in an attempt to deconstruct archetypal binaries. However, it may seem contradictory to assert the dissolution of biologically determined sexual identity while advocating a difference model of feminine experience. What is important to consider,

¹ Luther, Martin, *Works 12.94*.

² Kramer, Heinrich & James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum* trans. by. Montague Summers (London: John Rodker, 1928) p.47.

³ Patmore, Coventry, *The Angel in the House* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1866) p.48

⁴ Kristeva, Julia, ‘Women’s Time’ trans. Alice Jardine, Harry Blake, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981), 13-35, p.33.

though, is that this project contributes to a *process* of cultural change; as Toril Moi states, defending a third generational position by rejecting ‘stage two’ — the ‘second generation’s rejection of the male symbolic order through difference feminism — would be a ‘grievous political error’, as ‘it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women.’⁵ It is precisely this patriarchal oppression that my novel seeks to explore, by examining how active desire beyond the limits of acceptable femininity resulted in the demonising of women of the past. The conflict between what is acceptable and unacceptable for women in patriarchal culture is an important theme in the Female Gothic. However, many traditional Gothic novels continued to perpetuate these social limitations, leading monstrous women to endings of death or madness.⁶ This is an ending that, through the framework of reincarnation culminating in Emma’s liberation, my revision attempts to subvert.

This chapter uses Kristeva and Cixous’ concepts of bisexuality to attempt to dissolve the dichotomous representations of female sexuality and its ‘associated myths of womanhood.’⁷ As Irigaray states, women lack a ‘mirror’ or ideal through which to see themselves reflected as divine.⁸ The repressed feminine must be returned, revalorised and transformed to balance the psyche of both women and men.⁹ Jung’s approach to the bisexuality of the unconscious and to the cultural formation of archetypes offers fertile

⁵ Moi, Toril, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1985) p.13

⁶ Caminero-Santangelo, Marta, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (New York: Cornell University, 1998); Hoevler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

⁷ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976) 875-893, p.884.

⁸ Irigaray, ‘Divine Women’ in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp.55-72. See also: Irigaray, Luce, ‘Volume without contours’, in *The Irigaray Reader* ed. by Margaret Whitford, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp.57-58; ‘The power of discourse’, in *The Irigaray Reader* p.125.

⁹ Jung states that Western culture lacks wholeness due to the repression of the feminine in Judeo-Christianity. See, ‘A Psychological Approach to the Trinity’, *Psychology and Religion: West and East CW XI*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1958) p.171.

ground from which to write a revisionist text. Therefore, I also use a Jungian approach to resurrecting the feminine within the unconscious, as well as Jungian cultural and psychoanalytical theorists' approaches to revisionist mythmaking.¹⁰ To support this, my discussion of Michèle Roberts will focus on her practice as an author of revisionist mythology, rather than a literary analysis of her texts. This chapter discusses the ways in which my characters, Emma, Mathilde and Lucrezia, attempt to overcome the myths of the virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric. As a revisionist text, my novel does not attempt to offer a utopian ending for my characters, but to reveal the subversive power of female desire through the Sacred, and acknowledge the historical restrictions that silenced such attempts. Therefore, this chapter will integrate theoretical approaches to the Sacred Feminine and cultural mythology through the characters' respective historical contexts, Victorian London, Early Modern Alsace, and Renaissance Florence.

Revisionist Mythologies

Feminist revisionist mythologies emerged in response to Adrienne Rich's assertion that the act of looking back, or understanding old texts from new angles, is necessary if culture is to change its concepts of sexual identity. We need to know that past differently, 'not to pass on tradition, but to break its hold over us.'¹¹ In the last few decades, revision has become an important strategy for feminist writers to deconstruct cultural images and discourses and reconstruct our notion of femininity.¹² In 'Thieves of Language', Alicia Ostriker states:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for

¹⁰ These include Jungian feminist analysts Maureen Murdock, Clarissa Pinkola Estés and Susan Rowland, as well as literary revisionist critics Jane Caputi and Barbara Creed.

¹¹ Rich, Adrienne, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' in *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1972) 18-30, p.19.

¹² Ostriker, Alicia, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,' *Signs*, Vol.8 No.1 (1982), 68-90.

altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.¹³

To the status of mythic, Ostriker attributes historic and quasi-historic figures, the gods and goddesses of classical mythology, folktales, legends and Scripture.¹⁴ Myth, she writes, has a ‘double power’: it exists objectively within the public sphere and so ‘confers on the writer some sort of authority’ handed down through the ages, but, ‘at the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation — everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed or abominable.’¹⁵ Myth is transformative. As Jane Caputi states, reclaiming the past and ‘the reworking of its symbols comprise a political, emotional, spiritual and psychical vision that not only describes but also generates a resistant, non-patriarchal consciousness and an alternative path of *becoming* for both women and men.’¹⁶

Michèle Roberts, the daughter of a French Catholic and an English Protestant, is aware of the transformative power of revisionist mythology.¹⁷ Resurrected myths of female divinity, particularly from a Catholic perspective, are prevalent in her work and her process: ‘The new wine of hot or cool modern/postmodern consciousness sometimes, paradoxically, enjoys maturing in the old bottles of folk tale or fairytale, for example.’¹⁸ Her novels follow saints, heretics, mediums and mystics in order to highlight the problem of the female body within the Church and its potential to

¹³ Ibid, p.72.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Caputi, Jane, *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) p.10.

¹⁷ While acknowledging the common reduction of female authors to their biographies, I comment on Michèle Roberts’ spiritual upbringing because she makes frequent reference to it as important to the development of her personal feminism, as well as to her fiction. See: Roberts, Michèle, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, (London: Virago, 1998); Rodríguez, Patricia Bastida, and Michèle Roberts “On Women, Christianity, and History: An Interview with Michèle Roberts”. *Atlantis* Vol.25, No.1 (2003) pp. 93–107. Her revisionist novels include: *The Wild Girl* (London: Methuen, 1984); *The Book of Mrs Noah* (London: Vintage, 1984); *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Vintage, 1990); *Impossible Saints* (London: Virago, 1998); *Daughters of the House* (London: Virago, 1992).

¹⁸ Roberts, Michèle, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, (London: Virago, 1998), p.191

overcome the divisions between men/women, good/bad, and virgin/whore.¹⁹ Her characters, like mine, journey into the unconscious in order to confront their inner darkness and combine opposites, and her awareness of psychoanalytical approaches to healing such splits is evident.²⁰

The Wild Girl, more than any of her novels, is influenced by both Jungian and Gnostic concepts in its depiction of Mary Magdalene as the ideal feminine principle of the divine. The text draws on the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Gospels, in particular the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Mary. Gnostic gospels broaden the patriarchal myths of the biblical Gospels, and, as Roberts states, they helped her to ‘imagine what an alternative version of Christianity might have been like.’²¹ However, despite this influence, Roberts does not pretend to follow them as ‘gospel’ and her interpretation is ‘poetic, not scholarly.’²² The novel’s protagonist is a composite woman made up of both Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, a woman who also intersects depictions of the Biblical Mary with the Mary of art and legend.²³ In her foreword to the novel, Roberts writes: ‘puzzling over them, I began to imagine another long-lost gospel retrieved from its burial place ... I wanted to dissect a myth; I found myself at the same time recreating one.’²⁴

Roberts’ version is one that offers not only a feminist revision of one of Western culture’s most pervasive myths, but, as Susanne Gruss notes, invoking Gnostic imagery of a bisexual or androgynous God(dess) gives new access to a repressed tradition of

¹⁹ For further discussion of Roberts’ use and subversion of female binaries, particularly related to Christianity, see: Falcus, Sarah, *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (Oxford: Peter Land, 2007); Susanne, Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2009); García-Sánchez, Soraya, *Traveling in Women’s History with Michele Roberts* (Peter Lang, 2011) p.142.

²⁰ However, like me, she admits that she does not write to fit a particular theory, but rather, she found the theory that fits her work: Roberts, Michèle, interviewed by Soraya García-Sánchez in *Traveling in Women’s History with Michele Roberts*, p.142.

²¹ Roberts, Michèle, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2007), p.x. Originally published as *The Wild Girl*.

²² *Ibid.* pp.ix-x.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.x .

Christianity,²⁵ and her text is therefore ‘a powerful indictment of the disavowal of the feminine in Western religious thought.’²⁶ Roberts states that Jungian ideas were integral to the development of *The Wild Girl*, and while she also admits to growing beyond using Jungian terminology in the years since (‘I’ve simply incorporated them into my language. I think we share a DNA.’²⁷), she states that at the time of writing, she found Jung, and particularly Jungian feminism, very exciting in the way that it allowed for an exploration of female archetypes and female completeness.²⁸ The presence of either the anima or animus within an individual links Roberts’ Jungian and Gnostic approaches to the concepts of bisexuality, in particular, to Cixous. Writing, for Roberts, is a bisexual practice. She draws on Woolf’s concept of the bisexual writer, but, like Cixous, rejects Woolf’s conclusion of androgyny: ‘you have to be both active and passive; “masculine” and “feminine” need to be in relation ... I don’t use the word “androgynous” for this — to me it implies fixedness, transcendence. I prefer “bisexual”’.²⁹

For Roberts, Woolf, Cixous and myself, this bisexuality is psychological, imaginary, and located within the unconscious.³⁰ Jung’s approach to archetypes, not as ‘inherited images stamped on the female psyche’³¹ but as spaces for creative potential, allowed me to understand how images can be transformed through reclamation and fused with new meaning. Roberts, at least at the time of writing *The Wild Girl*, understood the potential of the Jungian unconscious in a similar manner: ‘This system of imagery helped me to see that sexuality and spirituality can be connected, need not be at war. Also, that a

²⁵ Gruss, p.64.

²⁶ Hanson (2000) p.235, as cited in Gruss, p.64.

²⁷ Roberts, Michèle, interviewed by Soraya García-Sánchez in *Traveling in Women’s History with Michele Roberts* p.145.

²⁸ Roberts also states that she is no longer as concerned with the idea of wholeness: ‘I’m not a complete woman and that’s alright.’ Rodríguez, Patricia Bastida & Michèle Roberts, pp.94-95.

²⁹ Roberts, Michèle, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, (London: Virago, 1998) p.199. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf discusses the influence of Coleridge’s vision of the androgynous mind and uses it to suggest that creativity relies on a marriage of opposites, p.136.

³⁰ I do not mean to dismiss physical bisexuality as an expression of sexual desire. I simply wish to locate this particular definition for the purposes of the deconstruction of archetypal binaries.

³¹ Rowland, Susan, ‘Michele Roberts’ Virgins: contesting gender in fictions, re-writing Jungian theory and Christian myth’ in *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol.8 No.1, (1999) pp.35-42; 37.

woman can be complete in herself, not just a companion or a shadow to a man, but a distinct being in her own right.’³² As Susan Rowland suggests, the Jungian unconscious can provide creative space in which to challenge and counteract psychic and cultural damage. Rowland suggests that despite the limitations of patriarchal discourse which influenced Jung’s now out-dated system of binaries, his theory, which allows archetypal images to be *filled* with meaning, does allow feminists to use the unconscious to provide a spirituality which ‘could heal patriarchal splitting’.³³

Return of the Feminine

Both Kristeva and Irigaray contend that within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the feminine, and therefore women, have been left out of the Symbolic and split into a polarity of light and dark in order to maintain patrilineal control.³⁴ The feminine tends to be diametrically split: woman is either the pure virgin, or the wicked whore. Jungian and cultural scholars of mythology use different terms to describe the repressed aspects of the feminine. Maureen Murdock’s ‘Dark Feminine’, Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ ‘Wild Woman’, and Jane Caputi’s ‘Goddess/Monster’ each stand for repressed creativity, intuition, anger, sexuality, and the body within the feminine.³⁵ As Pinkola Estés states, the ‘Wild Woman’ has been ‘relegated to the poorest lands of the psyche’, and women have become ‘ghostly’ from her neglect.³⁶ They argue that the aspects of the feminine deemed threatening and split into oppositional spheres must be returned to both the

³² Roberts, ‘The Woman who Wanted to be a Hero,’ in *Walking on the Water: Women Talk about Spirituality* ed. by Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland (London: Virago Press, 1983) pp.50-65; p.62.

³³ Rowland, p.36.

³⁴ Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’ in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 139-159, p.141; Irigaray, ‘Divine Women’.

³⁵ Murdock also calls this the Dark Mother, and the Dark Goddess: Murdock, p.18-19; Pinkola Estés states that the ‘Wild Woman’ is the female soul, ‘she is all that is of instinct, of the worlds both seen and hidden. She is the basis,’ p.9.

³⁶ Pinkola Estés, p.1.

feminine and the masculine imaginary. Otherwise, despite newfound subjectivity, women will remain imbalanced and incomplete.³⁷

For Roberts, this dichotomy is particularly evident in the Catholic Church's oppositional Marys: the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene. They are representative of the splitting of women in the larger masculine imaginary, two halves of a whole woman: 'Mary Magdalene is the missing half — the sexual half — of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of god [sic]. Take the two women, put them back to back, join them up again, and you've got a whole saint: passionate, maternal, sexy, visionary, The Church can't allow that. To control women it slices us down the middle.'³⁸ According to Jung, the darkening and repression of female sexuality causes an inflation of the Christ figure — the archetype for the self — which becomes over-identified with light and therefore casts a Shadow.³⁹ Jung contends that the Christian trinity is incomplete as it does not have a figure representative of evil, without which individuation cannot occur.⁴⁰ Jung found the female symbols of the Gnostics to offer a more fulfilling version of the Godhead.

Depictions of Christ within the early Gnostic traditions demonstrated the anima and the Shadow; however, these were removed in mainstream Christianity, and the figure of Christ became a reflection of a perfect father, while his Shadow was externalised as the anti-Christ. This means that, according to Jung, Christ as a redeemer lacks wholeness, and wholeness can only occur when the individual unites the light with the dark: paternal lightness must be compensated by maternal darkness.⁴¹ Within the gnostic gospels, Sophia is the embodiment of Wisdom, a celestial figure who stands in the

³⁷ Murdock, Maureen *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (New York: Shambhala, 1990) p.3; Pinkola Estés, Clarissa *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Random House, 1992) p.8.

³⁸ Roberts, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.40.

³⁹ Jung, Carl, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self CW IX, part II*, trans. by. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1958) pp.8-11; Tracey pp.146-147.

⁴⁰ Jung 'A Psychological Approach to the Trinity', p.171.

⁴¹ Ibid.

margins between the higher and lower worlds.⁴² Sophia is seen as an equal, not an inferior, to God. She represents a necessary evil: she mistakenly brings forth a creature (the Demiurge) that results in the creation of the material world. This error is repented and she is redeemed. Her liminal position then makes her an agent in the rescue of the fallen. In the Gnostic treatise, Christ is sent to aid Sophia in her redemption. It is through their union, as bride and bridegroom — the union of masculine and feminine — that Christ in his physical form, and as a representative of the redemption of man, is able to gain the Gnosis (knowledge) to ascend from the physical world to the spiritual. In these gospels, Mary Magdalene is also revealed as an equal and leading disciple of Christ.⁴³ What we have inherited as mainstream Christianity developed parallel to Christian Gnosticism; however, the central Gnostic element of salvation through personal knowledge and revelation directly from God threatened the power of the clergy as mediators of spiritual grace and as Christ's representatives on Earth.⁴⁴ As the early Christian fathers forcefully purged Gnostic elements from the church, they also removed the feminine from the divine. For figures such as Augustine, God has no 'taint' of the feminine.⁴⁵

Jung believes the Pope's recognition of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was an unconscious recognition of the fourth figure — the return of the feminine to consciousness. He claimed it was the 'most important religious event since the

⁴² Ruether, Rosemary, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005) pp. 107-122; Van Den Broek, Roelof, Wouter J. Hanegraaf (eds) *Gnosis and Hermeticism: from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) pp.8-11.

⁴³ In the Pistis Sophia, Mary is one of the most prominent among Jesus' disciples. The Gospel of Mary also reveals her significance and leadership, and her conflict with the disciple Peter. In the Gospel of Thomas, Mary is within Jesus' inner circle, but her influence is debated. In the Gospel of Phillip, the female is seen as a representation of the spiritual side of the soul-spirit hierarchy in humanity. The division of the once androgynous Adam into male left him with only soul power, and the spiritual power was drawn out as female. See: Ruether pp.122-125.

⁴⁴ Van Den Broek, Roelof, Wouter J. Hanegraaf (eds) *Gnosis and Hermeticism: from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) pp.1-5.

⁴⁵ Ruether, p.137.

Reformation.⁴⁶ But this event did not occur until 1950. Unlike Jung, Roberts does not believe that simply adding female images to the Godhead is enough to overcome female subjugation in the Church; however, she does see the potential for the return of the feminine through the unconscious and through the body. Roberts' Mary Magdalene is the embodiment of 'a lost tradition of the indwelling aspect of God, Wisdom or Sophia',⁴⁷ and represents the 'very image of the return of the repressed: the numinous body, sexiness and holiness intertwined, God as immanent and transcendent, the desires of the body as sources of religious joy.'⁴⁸

Like Roberts, I have found that elements of Gnosticism and its influences on Hermeticism and alchemy offer more fulfilling versions of sacred femininity.⁴⁹ However, the three sites through which the sacred emerges in my protagonists are through mysticism, witchcraft and mediumship. As sacred sites, they offer potential to help my characters find power in the cultural images that are supposed to limit them: the whore, the witch and the hysteric. Mysticism, witchcraft and spiritualism are also commonly, though not exclusively, associated with female practitioners, and attributes associated with femininity — passivity, intuition, and receptivity. They were deemed threatening specifically because these could become instruments of female *agency*. Witchcraft and spiritualism, in particular, are also individualistic and not reliant on salvation from Church authorities.⁵⁰ Catherine Clément aligns the sacred with an

⁴⁶ Jung, 'Answer to Job' in *Psychology and Religion: West and East CW XI*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1958) p.464.

⁴⁷ Haskins, Susan, 'Mary Magdalene' in *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, p.29.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing*, p.28.

⁴⁹ In order to locate these within a continuum, I have looked to Antoine Faive's fundamentals of Western Esotericism. Faive, Antoine, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) p.12.

⁵⁰ Finke, Laurie A. 'Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision' *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. by Wiethaus, Ulrike (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993) pp.28-29; Owen, Alex *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) pp.4-14; Russell, Jeffrey B., *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980) pp.46-49; Clément, Catherine and Julia Kristeva *The Feminine and the Sacred* trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001)

immediate and direct connection with the divine, which, through trance, mediumship, incantations, or ritual, allows women access to the sacred beyond the limits of doctrinal religion.⁵¹ It is, as Kristeva suggests, a connection more obvious to women, as she already exists on the borderline of biology and meaning.⁵² The supernatural power of the witch, who revels in nature under the darkness of moonlight, the ‘secret encounter’ of the witches Sabbat,⁵³ and the medium’s ability to conjure ghosts, the very epitome of the return of the repressed,⁵⁴ not only defy the ‘aggressively rationalist approaches’⁵⁵ of Enlightenment ideology, but are an uncanny force beyond Christian man’s control. A third generation revisionist text should remember that ‘our brains have been emptied out of all memory of our own cultural history and the colonizing power systematically denies such a history ever existed.’⁵⁶ In *Newly Born Woman*, Clément writes that women’s stories are ‘not inscribed in a void or in an ahistorical time when their repetitions would be identical. Each time there is a repetition of memories, a return to the repressed, it will be in a specific cultural and historical context.’⁵⁷ The myth continues to transform itself through history and culture, arriving at a new incarnation over and over again. In order to undo it, we must, as women, speak it.

⁵¹ Clément & Kristeva p.30.

⁵² Ibid p.15.

⁵³ Links between witchcraft and the night, darkness and the moon are well established. The darkness is also closely associated, of course, with both the uncanny and confronting the Shadow. On witches and darkness see: Ginzburg, Carlo, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the witches' Sabbath*. trans.by Raymond Rosenthal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Russell, Jeffrey B. *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980) pp.46-48; On darkness and the uncanny see: Royle, p.108-11.

⁵⁴ The ghost represents not only the return of the repressed, but it also a return of death, the ‘signifier without signified’, the ultimate secret in life. See: Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, Hélène Cixous, and Robert Dennomé, ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (the "uncanny")’. *New Literary History* Vol.7 No.3, (1976) pp. 543.

⁵⁵ Terry Castle, (1995) *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* cited in Royle, p.22.

⁵⁶ Caputi, p.8.

⁵⁷ Cixous & Clément, p.6.

The Virgin and the Whore

The most striking duality in the feminine psyche is that between the virgin and the whore, central to the work of both myself and Roberts. This begins with the Christian alignment of men with soul and women with the body. The soul is considered superior to the body; the pure spirit is trapped within the prison of corrupt flesh.⁵⁸ The body is a limit which impedes the progress of the soul towards God. According to Roberts, Christian tradition therefore finds it impossible to think of bodies that ‘retch, leak, piss and shit, vomit, come ecstatically.’⁵⁹ The bodies of women, being so much closer to nature and visible abject effusions, are therefore also more in need of restriction, and thus, woman is cut down the middle.⁶⁰ To separate her reduces her, and this makes her ripe for control.

The Virgin Mary is separated entirely from her body: immaculate, divine, and free from sin and death.⁶¹ For feminist scholars such as Kristeva and Roberts, this does not necessarily make her an impossible archetype for women. While she only represents one half of the whole, her visibility within the Church is important. The Virgin Mary represents the feminine within the divine, particularly in her most important representation as a mother. In traditional Christianity, Mary took the place of the Gnostic Sophia and so became representative of the human, which, as Rosemary Ruether suggests, identified the feminine with the human and the masculine with the divine.⁶² But this allows her a role as the intermediary between father and son, humans

⁵⁸ Finke, Laurie A., p.28; Mcnamara, Jo Ann ‘The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy’ *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. by Wiethaus, Ulrike (Syracuse University Press, 1993) p.14; Roberts, (1998), ‘The Flesh Made Word’ in *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.36.

⁵⁹ Roberts, ‘The Flesh Made Word’ p.37; Kristeva links women and the abject to their sacred potential. She states that the sacred has to do with odours, natural secretions, nail clippings and hair, and that women, because they are more familiar with their bodies, are therefore more inclined towards the sacred. However, these are regulated into hierarchical groups: Clément & Kristeva p.88.

⁶⁰ Roberts, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.37.

⁶¹ Kristeva, Julia, ‘Stabat Mater’ trans. by. Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today* Vol.6, No. 1/2 (1985) p.134

⁶² Ruether, p.164.

and God, and she is therefore seen as being uniquely influential with Christ.⁶³ For Roberts, despite the problems of the feminine split, there is power in representation: ‘The great thing about the Catholic tradition is that, though it oppresses women horribly by naming them as semi-devils, it simultaneously gives them a visible place, unlike Protestantism which simply ignores them.’⁶⁴ As Kristeva states, Mary is in possession of power, both recognised and denied, that holds up a reassuring mirror to women.⁶⁵

In the novel’s current form, Lucrezia is a devotee of the Virgin, though this was not always so. In the first draft, Jacopo was an Anabaptist disseminating heretical texts such as the translated Brucioli bible and the *Benefit of the Christ Crucified* via Venice, and Lucrezia secretly converted to Protestantism.⁶⁶ However, when I arrived in Florence in 2013 as part of my field research trip, I encountered potent images of the Virgin. I found her significance from small, hidden niches, to tabernacles, private altars, churches named in her honour, and as subject of the art of Renaissance masters.⁶⁷ Mary, I realised, was the key to understanding Lucrezia. But I was also surrounded by the products of humanism and the knowledge that the renewed focus on the classics and mythology brought to Florence: side by side with statues of saints and bishops, were figures of Roman mythology. As I wandered through the galleries of the Uffizi and Pitti Palace I saw this intersection prominently in the works of the Italian renaissance artists, but more importantly, I also saw renaissance *magic* appearing in their work. The

⁶³ Clément, Catherine and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p.73; Reuther, p.164.

⁶⁴ Roberts *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.39.

⁶⁵ Clément & Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* p.79.

⁶⁶ The *Benefit* and the translated Brucioli bible survive within the novel as part of Marco’s subplot. His conversion to Protestantism now reflects the attitudes that were originally attributed to Jacopo. The historical figures alluded to in the novel, such as Bernardino Occino, did disseminate such texts within Tuscany, primarily through Venice, during this period. The flight that Marco plans to take with Lucrezia north is the same one taken by Occino and Peter Martyr Vermigli in 1542. See: Caponetto, Salvatore *The Protestant Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* trans Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999).

⁶⁷ The middle ages saw a flowering of devotion to Mary. Feast days proliferated, hundreds of churches were built in her name, the Mary alter became standard in church. Relics, private devotions, such as the rosary, were created. Hymns, paintings, sculptures celebrated all aspects of her life: Reuther, p. 159; Kristeva comments on Mary’s proliferation and representation in art in *the Feminine and the Sacred*, pp.62, 78; Clément & Kristeva *The Feminine and the Sacred* pp.43-79.

intersection between Catholicism and classical mythology was everywhere. But this was a mythology renounced by the new dissenters. Protestantism could not offer Lucrezia access to the Sacred Feminine. Reformers discarded saints as mediators and advocates between individuals and Christ. This was a virtual elimination of female images in Protestant spirituality, which consequently became more exclusively male.⁶⁸ For Lucrezia, this would be devastating.

The Catholic and pagan intersection was how the Sacred Feminine would emerge in Lucrezia. Jeffrey Russell believes the Cult of Mary represented an unconscious effort to return the feminine to the concept of the deity.⁶⁹ However, her idealisation, specifically how she came to represent courtly love, resulted in her shadow image of the hag, or the whore.⁷⁰ Catholicism began to be regarded by many Protestants as pagan, and they likened the worship of saints to the worshipping of multiple idols. Priests too, were linked with magic, and their rituals and incantations became the works of magicians.⁷¹ Magicians in the more traditional sense — those learned men interested in alchemy, astrology and divination — also emerged during this period.⁷² This was largely influenced by the surge of interest in the occult as a result of the translation of texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, along with other Greco-Roman, Jewish and Islamic texts.⁷³ This was how I came to discover Lucrezia's father, who shifted between

⁶⁸ Reuther, p.223.

⁶⁹ Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* p.117. This 'unconscious' effort is similar to the way that Jung describes Mary's Assumption as doctrine in 1950, 'Answer to Job', p.464.

⁷⁰ Kristeva notes that the qualities of a desired woman were clustered around Mary, who became the symbol of courtly love. However, this combination of the virginal mother as the epitome of purity, but also as desired made her an impossible figure, inaccessible to women other than martyrs and nuns, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, p.79; 'Stabat Mater' pp.140-141.

⁷¹ Duni, Matteo, *Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007) pp.49-57; Cameron, Euan *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason and Religion, 1250 – 1750* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010) p.208.

⁷² Faivre, Antoine, 'Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esoterism' in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: from Antiquity to Modern Times* ed. by Van Den Broek, Roelof, Wouter J. Hanegraaf (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) pp.110-117; Rhone, Christine, 'Esotericism in the Heart of the Renaissance and the Flames of the Baroque' in *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* ed. by Antoine Faivre, Christine Rhone (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010) pp.35-51; Roob, Alexander *The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism* (Köln : Taschen, 1997).

⁷³ Van Den Broek, pp.vii; Faivre 'Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esoterism' pp.110-117.

drafts from a traditionally tyrannical Gothic father, to one from whom Lucrezia could learn.⁷⁴

While her father is a practitioner of high ritual magic, the doors to this as a formal education remain closed to Lucrezia because of her sex. Lucrezia draws on second-hand knowledge from Luca and Jacopo, and together with the folk Catholic rituals of her nurse, she generates her own spirituality. Lucrezia intuitively understands the strong connection between magic and Catholic ritual. Charms and incantations resembled Catholic prayers or ceremonies, and incorporated workings and signs that seemed to contain the key to access wondrous powers.⁷⁵

When undertaking the most recent edits of the novel, I realised how closely Lucrezia's visions resembled the female mystic's experiences of bodily transcendence, particularly through erotic metaphors. I must clarify that I do not mean to equate Lucrezia with historical female mystics; rather, she experiences a visionary trance in alignment with the witch's dance, the medium's trance, and the hysteric's fit. Her communion with God relies on a passive subjugation which conceals its subversive potential as a vehicle for female subjectivity. Roberts aligns the mystic's visionary orgasmic 'rapture' with the hysteric's fit, both traditionally showing feminine 'weakness', an inability to communicate properly, and functioning as a substitute for culturally sanctioned heterosexual sex.⁷⁶ But it is in its subversive potential that the mystic's trance becomes a vehicle for the Sacred Feminine. Such communion exists outside of the control of Church authorities, and is thus often an individualised experience which attempts to 'transform conditions of social, sexual, and religious

⁷⁴ It became more and more important to me during the writing of the project to represent both male and female characters with varying aspects of light and dark. The early drafts had positioned characters such as her father as quite two-dimensional Gothic tropes that did nothing to transcend the images I am now attempting to subvert. So while her father is not perfect, and is largely peripheral in the text, he does offer her opportunities for learning that other more stereotypical constructs of the 'Renaissance father of the young virginal daughter' may lack.

⁷⁵ Duni, pp.49.

⁷⁶ Roberts, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.39. See also: Gruss, p.92.

constraint.⁷⁷ Anna Anapolous locates Catherine of Genoa's mystical experiences within *écriture féminine* and argues that for such mystics, the body becomes a site of transcendence *through* flesh, rather than *from* flesh.⁷⁸ Roberts similarly aligns the mystic's experiences not just with the body, but with pleasure: 'We are our bodies and what is sacred is our capacity to make symbols of our bodily life. The numinous is not in looking upwards, denying our bodily existence, but looking outwards and inwards, rejoicing in it, celebrating it.'⁷⁹

For Lucrezia, there is little division between the spiritual and the sexual, particularly through her body. Her spiritual growth increases as she discovers her sexuality — a discovery she makes alone — and in this union she also combines the archetypes of the virgin and the whore. Her first vision comes after a prayer to the Virgin Mary where she loses herself 'in the trance of the rosary.'⁸⁰ In the vision, the Virgin is aligned with another archetypal virgin, the huntress, Diana. Matteo Duni states that it was common in Renaissance Italy for the pagan goddess Diana to be invoked alongside Mary and other saints in spells.⁸¹ In these spells, Diana is more closely aligned with nature, and the casters often evoked her with imagery of the moon and stars. These were not seen as incompatible systems: 'such prayers had their remote origin in pre-Christian rituals of propitiation of natural elements and forces, but they borrowed both format and vocabulary from Christian tradition, therefore mixing invocations to God and to the stars and plants, which the performers did not perceive as being incompatible, but rather components of the same system of the sacred.'⁸²

⁷⁷ Antonopolous, Anna, (1991) 'Writing the Mystic Body: Sexuality and Textuality in the *écriture féminine* of Saint Catherine of Genoa' *Hypatia*, Vol.6, No.3, p.189; See also Laurie A. Finke, who aligns female mystics with 'radical' religious experiences, an 'extreme practice' often linked with political and religious dissent; Finke, p.29.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p.186.

⁷⁹ Roberts *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.39.

⁸⁰ *The Material and the Divine*, p.66.

⁸¹ Duni also outlines the incantation and spell performed by Lucrezia in p.53.

⁸² Duni, p.53.

Though this image is only hinted at in Lucrezia's narrative (she becomes a more potent symbol for Mathilde), her image as the pagan virgin, who could offer a more fulfilling version of divine femininity, became apparent to me at the same time that I discovered images of the Virgin in Florence alongside other symbols of pagan mythology. At the Uffizi Gallery, I became enraptured by Botticelli's visions of Venus, both in the *Birth of Venus*, and *Primavera*, and the abundant sexual potency of the goddess.⁸³ These two paintings became instrumental influences in the pagan imagery of Lucrezia's mystical visions as part of her sexual awakening. Venus represents life and fertility, but also sexuality as sacred.⁸⁴ Marjorie M. Malvern states that the connection between the goddess of love, Venus, or Aphrodite, and Mary Magdalene is 'unbroken and unmistakable.'⁸⁵ However, in her Christian incarnation, despite retaining the 'attributes of a seductive goddess of love, a goddess of wisdom and of generation', she became emblematic of Christianity's ambivalence towards women.⁸⁶ In Roberts' words, she became the repentant whore, a 'highly coloured version of the eternal feminine.'⁸⁷ In aligning Christian imagery with pagan mythology, I aimed to symbolise the beginning of Lucrezia's quest to unite the opposites within herself. This represents the importance of revisiting such myths through a historical lens, as, as Roberts states, 'in the world of the unconscious, virgin and whore dance together, friends. Christianity tried to separate them. Recently, they're getting back together.'⁸⁸ Lucrezia's sexual awakening through such mythology and, importantly, through the female body, opens her to the possibility of the Sacred Feminine as a tool through which to also unite with the Divine Masculine, and so attempt wholeness.

⁸³ Botticelli, Sandro, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486) Tempera on canvas, 127.5cm x 278.9cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence; Botticelli, Sandro, *Primavera* (c.1482) Temara on panel, 202cm x 314cm. Uffizzi Gallery, Florence.

⁸⁴ Eliade, Mircea, (1958) as quoted in Malvern, Marjorie M. *Venus in Sackcloth: The Magdalen's Origins and Metamorphoses* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1975) p.66.

⁸⁵ Malvern, p.67.

⁸⁶ Ibid pp.67-74.

⁸⁷ Roberts, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* p.53.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.29.

Lucrezia's vision invites the appearance of Sophie, the ghostly daughter, and the figure who leads each woman into her unconscious.⁸⁹ Lucrezia follows Sophie through the labyrinthine passages of the *palazzo* to Jacopo's alchemical laboratory. This is where I wished for the pagan archetypes of Lucrezia's vision to connect with pagan influences of a more masculine pursuit, alchemy, and so begin to investigate the potential of the bisexual union. Jung interpreted the Great Work of the alchemists as an external projection of the psychological developments of the unconscious. The real 'gold' of true alchemists was inner transformation: individuation.⁹⁰ This includes most notably the reconciliation of opposites after a period of working through the *prima materia* (base materials), the un-individuated self, complete with neuroses and complexes, and confrontation with the Shadow.⁹¹

As Gruss notes in response to Roberts' *The Wild Girl*, a Gnostic approach is useful for feminists because Gnostic sources use sexual symbolism to describe God as a dyad made up of both masculine and feminine elements.⁹² Similarly, while there are arguments from scholars regarding how accurate Jung's hypothesis regarding the true intentions of historical alchemists may have been,⁹³ I do argue that Jung's approach to alchemy is appropriate as in philosophical alchemy 'the feminine principle plays a role equal to that of the masculine.'⁹⁴ The Gnostic and Hermetic basis of alchemy charges its practitioners with the pursuit of self-knowledge as the pursuit for knowledge of God. The divine exists within the self, and the self is divine.

I wrote the sexual union of Jacopo and Lucrezia to embody alchemical, and by extension Gnostic, imagery. The two lovers move through the four elements of the

⁸⁹ Named after the Gnostic Sophia, embodied Wisdom.

⁹⁰ Jung, Carl, G., (1953) *Psychology and Alchemy*, *CW 12*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (East Sussex: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2014); Lachman, Gary, *Jung the Mystic: The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung's Life and Teachings* (New York: Penguin, 2013) p.155; Roob, p.11.

⁹¹ Lachman, pp.256-258.

⁹² Gruss, p.59.

⁹³ Lachman, p.259.

⁹⁴ Jung, Carl, G., (1963) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* ed. by Aniela Jaffé, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Fontana Press, 1995) p.228.

alchemical process: earth, water, fire and air — the *prima materia* — and in doing so unlock the potential of their union.⁹⁵ Jacopo is not threatened by the feminine as he, and his subsequent incarnations (Anna and Susannah), are the characters closest to the idea of Kristeva and Cixous' bisexual individual, where both the masculine and feminine are not only in alignment, but the subject is not frightened by the presence of both.⁹⁶ However, central to the parallel plot of Lucrezia's narrative is the damage of patriarchal culture not only to women, but to men. Historically, I wanted to address the oppression of patriarchal institutions and, while hinting at the possibilities inherent in the union of the virgin/whore split and subsequent union of the masculine and feminine, I first needed to demonstrate why the split is so destructive.

The shadow of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, who had gripped Florence in a frenzy of puritanical revolution in the last years of the fifteenth century, still lingered amongst certain sects of Florentine society.⁹⁷ Savonarola took control of the city, deposing Piero de' Medici, in 1494. His sermons called for renewed purity, repentance and reform among the clergy and the laypeople. He famously destroyed sumptuous objects such as art works, jewellery, fine clothing, mirrors and playing cards in the Bonfire of the Vanities. His followers, known as *Piagnoni*, rose in 1527 to overthrow the Medici once again, but only lasted until 1530.⁹⁸ Savonarola set the tone for the arrival of Protestant texts, but while these were not influential among most Italians, they did lead to underground reform movements, such as that to which Marco belongs.

⁹⁵ Earth, water, air and fire make up the *prima materia*, or prime material: Roob, Alexander. *Alchemy & mysticism: the Hermetic Museum* (Cologne: Taschen, 1997) p.28; *The Material and the Divine*, p.97.

⁹⁶ Cixous, p.884.

⁹⁷ In the novel, Marco's family are known to have been *Piagnoni*. MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490 - 1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) pp.94-96; Caponetto p.12, 84, 271.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Sexuality within ordinary Florentine society was not as strictly managed as one might suspect — prostitution was common and understood to serve a role in society,⁹⁹ virginity was prized but not expected before marriage,¹⁰⁰ and young boys were assumed to engage in homosexual relations before they ‘matured’ and married.¹⁰¹ Marco has not, as expected, grown out of his ‘adolescent tastes’ and ‘turned his attention to women’.¹⁰² He has also been raised by *Piagnoni* who do not share the ordinary Florentine tolerance for sex, particularly homosexual sex. His repressed shame manifests as an increasingly frenzied need to become a perfect Godly husband and citizen, culminating in his conversion to Protestantism. Female leadership, including the valorisation of female saints and the Virgin, were strictly eliminated within Protestantism, and women who assumed leadership positions were considered evil.¹⁰³ Mary’s Assumption was deemed to lack scriptural basis and the Immaculate Conception violated the universality of sin and the dependence of all humans on Christ’s forgiveness.¹⁰⁴ Women were expected to submit to their husbands and had no role outside of that as wife and mother.¹⁰⁵ Alexander Roob claims that Protestant thought, particularly Lutheranism, also ‘managed to erase from its own ranks almost all memories of natural mystical reform movements deriving from alchemy.’¹⁰⁶ This is an elimination of all that Lucrezia holds dear, and her forced conversion is devastating.

⁹⁹ Terpestra, Nicholas, *Lost Girls: Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010) p.14.

¹⁰⁰ Often sex took place after the promise of marriage, rather than the wedding. Cohen, Thomas V., *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) p.138, 215.

¹⁰¹ Florence was so famous for this that *Florencing* became a German term for sodomy. The behaviour in young men was tolerated as it was understood that it was simply an outlet for a sexual appetite that could not be appeased until marriage – usually not until the late twenties or thirties. It was seen as preferable to ‘risking the honour’ of young women, and ‘there was no need to worry unless they carried on their adolescent taste for sodomy into adulthood.’ Terpestra, pp. 16-18.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Reuther, p.221.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Luther wrote in *Works* 20.84: ‘Even though they grow weary and wear themselves out with child-bearing, it does not matter; let them go on bearing children till they die, that is what they are there for.’

¹⁰⁶ Roob, p.22.

Marco projects his sexual ambivalence onto Lucrezia, and because she cannot be the ‘impossible virgin’, his shame manifests as disgust, and her lustful nature is to blame for his sexual failures.¹⁰⁷ But removing the Virgin from his ideology — the feminine too pure to corrupt — does not provide a solution. Instead, Lucrezia is further separated from personal transformation, despite the influence of men like her father and Jacopo who offer her alternatives to this binary. After discovering her affair with Jacopo, Marco beats her and she suffers a miscarriage. Lucrezia’s attempts to record her story as a confession to the Virgin, remembering the description of Wisdom by the mystic Hildegard of Bingen, under the light of the moon and transcribed in her own blood, is her attempt to revive the repressed feminine. Though her own quest has failed, it will be carried on through the unconscious and Sophie, to Mathilde and Emma.

The Witch

Mathilde did not exist in the first draft of the novel and materialised as a result of my 2013 field research trip. As Lucrezia developed from a passive victim of her father and husbands’ tyranny, to a woman who sought, — arguably selfishly — spiritual independence and sexual pleasure, I realised the novel needed a female incarnation of the logical next step. Mathilde would become the woman most closely associated with Pinkola Estés’ ‘Wild Woman’, who rejects the roles of wife and mother unless they are on her own terms, and who is most instinctively connected with nature, sexuality, and intuition.¹⁰⁸ It seemed to me that there was one very obvious role for the reincarnation of Lucrezia to take. As Reuther reminds us, ‘although female symbols for the holy were virtually eliminated in magisterial Protestant spirituality, there remained a vivid female symbolism for evil’ — the witch.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ *The Material and the Divine* pp.64, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Pinkola Estés, p.9.

¹⁰⁹ Reuther, p.233.

Mathilde's narrative became the most extreme in its representations of the destructive potential of patriarchal control and the subsequent damage of feminine rage. The union of Lucrezia and Jacopo as two halves of a whole is carried forward to Mathilde and Anna, emerging literally as twins. However, within such a repressive, superstitious society as rural, mountainous Alsace, where the feminine is not simply denigrated, but poses a significant threat through maleficent agency, the feminine cannot simply be brought into equal alignment with the masculine. Between 1582 and 1683, forty women were executed for witchcraft in the villages of Bergheim, Rodern and Rorschwihr (the novel's setting), and three died during interrogation. All victims were women.¹¹⁰ Within the wider Alsace area, Robin Briggs estimates there to have been between 1000 and 2000 trials, 75% of which led to execution. Men made up only 11% of executions, compared to approximately 25% of male executions in all of Western Europe.¹¹¹ Within such conditions, the two aspects of the feminine are further split. Mathilde aligns with the dark feminine: angry, sexual, and embodied. Anna, meanwhile, is smothered by her shadow and is that which Mathilde represses: passive, pure and disembodied. Anna restricts her intake of food, despite the village's famine, in an effort to control and surmount her body, an abject and restrictive vessel she cannot understand. Her body itself rebels against her through epileptic fits which ultimately destroy her.

Mathilde carries Lucrezia's affinity with the virgin archetype, but identifies more strongly with Diana, the virgin huntress. The aspects of the feminine repressed in Lucrezia by Marco emerge in Mathilde through Diana as a protectress and potent

¹¹⁰ I visited the *Maison des Sorcières* – the Witches' House – a museum dedicated to the witch burnings of the villages of Bergheim, Rodern and Rorschwihr, during a second research trip in 2014, to investigate the local impact of witchcraft accusations. *Maison des Sorcières*, Place de l'Église, Bergheim. 6 October 2014.

¹¹¹ Briggs, Robin, 'Witchcraft and the Local Communities: The Rhine-Moselle Region' in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* ed. by Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 199-217; 201-202.

symbol of independent femininity. She is the spirit who roams the countryside revelling and destroying, the origin of Hecate, the patroness of evil sorcery, and the mother of child eating lamias.¹¹² Though similar to the Virgin Mary, her chastity does not necessarily symbolise purity, but instead separates her from a reliance on men, and makes her autonomous. She is also then the Sacred returned to the body. This became an important image of female power and authority for Michèle Roberts, as it has been for me. She writes: ‘When I started reading books by Jungian feminists, I discovered the archetype of the virgin, the woman who exists for herself, Diana the huntress, who is both chaste and sexual, mother of many children but belonging to no man.’¹¹³

Ultimately, Mathilde presents the threat of unbridled female sexuality and the unknown. While in a Christian context the feminine is split into the Madonna/Magdalen, for Mathilde, this becomes the Goddess/Monster, a mysterious and ancient archetype, more frightening because she exists both within and beyond Judeo-Christian culture. Russell addresses this connection:

Folk tales, like dreams, express the concerns of the unconscious in symbols; the meaning of the figure of the witch, like the meaning of any symbol, varies with the story. Usually, however, she represents an elemental natural force possessing enormous and unexpected powers against which a natural person is unable to prepare or defend himself, a force not necessarily evil, but so alien and remote from the world of mankind as to constitute a threat to the social, ethical, and even physical order of the cosmos. This manner of portraying the witch is very ancient and probably archetypal. This witch is neither a sorceress, nor a demonolater, nor a pagan. She is a hostile presence from another world.¹¹⁴

Initially, like Lucrezia, Mathilde is empowered by her sexuality. Diana allows her to connect with her concealed erotic power. Audre Lorde calls this a ‘resource within each

¹¹² Russel, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972) p.48. See also: Campbell, Joseph, *Goddesses: Mysteries of the Divine Feminine* ed. by. Safron Rossi (Novato: New World Library, 2013) p.117.

¹¹³ Roberts ‘The Woman Who Wanted to be a Hero’, p.55.

¹¹⁴ Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* p.46.

of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling.’¹¹⁵ If women do not fear or repress this, as they are taught to do, then it can become a ‘replenishing and provocative force.’¹¹⁶

Mathilde rekindles an affair with the landowner Michel both to fulfil sexual desires, and because it will allow her to remain in the cottage she shares with Anna. But this kind of manipulative agency is scorned. The perceived weakness of women, particularly those who are socially isolated, financially destitute and legally powerless, made them safer to accuse than men.¹¹⁷ In order to gain agency, Mathilde is forced into means typically associated with powerlessness, by being clandestine, passive and manipulative. Cunning women, who appropriate the typically masculine attribute of assertiveness by disguising it through passivity are often portrayed as monstrous serpents linked to Biblical ideas of seduction and temptation, and to the mythical Medusa.¹¹⁸ This is also one of psychoanalysis’ most pervasive female images; the original serpent woman, Medusa, became the embodiment of Freud’s ‘dark continent’, female sexuality, and the dread of the womb, castration and death.¹¹⁹ Medusa’s disembodied, serpent-haired head threatens through petrification, an erotic ‘stiffening’, and recognition that the penis is not to be taken for granted. Medusa’s head is separated from her body and thus from her sexuality as controlled by her fertility, but this also leaves a gaping hole: a reminder of her inversion.¹²⁰ The Medusa is a femme fatale,

¹¹⁵ Lorde, Audre, ‘Uses Of The Erotic: The Erotic As Power’ in *Writing On The Body: Female Embodiment And Feminist Theory* ed. by. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997) p.277.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.278.

¹¹⁷ Russell, A *History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*, p.115.

¹¹⁸ Gilbert, Sandra M. & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* p.29.; Auerbach, Nina *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) p.93.

¹¹⁹ Freud, Sigmund, ‘Medusa’s head’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*. ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.18 (London: Hogarth, 1955) 273-274.

¹²⁰ Myerwitz Levine, Molly, ‘The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediteranian Hair’ in *Off with Her Head: The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. by. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz & Wendy Doniger (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995) pp.92-93.

dangerous because of the erotic allure that leads to destruction, castration (powerlessness) and death. Barbara Creed argues in response to Freud's horror, that men fear women not because they are castrated, but because they are *not* castrated. Drawing on Susan Lurie, she suggests instead that women have nothing to fear from castration because they are already physically whole and therefore in possession of all their sexual power: 'The castrated woman is a phantasy intended to ameliorate man's real fear of what woman might do to him ... Specifically, he fears that woman could castrate him psychically and in a sense physically.'¹²¹ To the same myth, Cixous states, 'Isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.'¹²² Laughter is shattering, it 'breaks up, breaks out, splashes over,'¹²³ it is feminine desire expressed through *jouissance*, and it can be used as a source for subjectivity.

For Mathilde, these images — Diana, the Serpent, the Medusa — come together most significantly in the forest during the 'Sabbat'. She lures the increasingly ambivalent Michel into the ceremony with Anna and Matti and the growing desires for freedom and autonomy, conflicting with her increasing sense of confinement and repression, emerge as a barely lucid, ecstatic celebration. Cixous and Clément identify the witches' Sabbat as a 'festival of madness'. It is the combination of the sacred, where woman is 'priest and altar', but also a 'communion of revolt', where unbridled, even violent, desire is expressed.¹²⁴ The Sabbat that Mathilde experiences is a return to the Wild Woman, or Goddess/Monster. Her laughter is her 'flight', an ecstatic ascendance where she feels herself both removed from her body and intrinsically part of it,

¹²¹ Creed, p.6.

¹²² Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' p.885; see also, Cixous and Clément, p.69.

¹²³ Ibid. p.33.

¹²⁴ Cixous and Clément, p. 31.

particularly as she contemplates the relationship of her body to life and potential motherhood. She continues to seduce Michel, no longer sure that it is what she wants, but desperate to retain some sense of autonomy and agency, and to know that her desires *can* be fulfilled. However, despite her erotic freedom, externally, her sexual desire is a dangerous transgression. As Cixous and Clément remind us, all laughter is ‘monstrous.’¹²⁵

Once the revelry is over and the bailiff and watchman appear, Michel turns his back on her. Her Medusa head is revealed, and she is terrifying in her erotic and deadly potential. He grows afraid of the consequences of being pulled into her world: imprisonment, death and the subsequent loss of subjectivity. Without her hold on Michel, Mathilde is left vulnerable. The unmarried midwife was an easy scapegoat for men who felt guilt or anger at the death of their wives or babies, and the link between witches, Diana, and the sacrifice of infants was never far from public consciousness.¹²⁶ It was also socially accepted that the Sabbat involved not only incestuous and homosexual orgies with the Devil, but the ritualistic murder and devouring of infants, usually eight days after their birth, as an inversion of Christian baptism.¹²⁷ While this is not the Sabbat that Mathilde experiences, she is not entirely innocent of that which she is accused. Unlike Lucrezia, she is no longer able to retain balance between conflicting feminine images, and so is further removed from the ability to perceive masculinity as anything other than an oppressive force. This is not unusual in women’s experiences, and images of the goddesses Ishtar and Kali often arise as symbols of female anger.¹²⁸ For Roberts, Ishtar became an important image when she separated herself from

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.33.

¹²⁶ Russell, p.115; Clément, *Newly Born Woman* pp.31-32. One only needs to look at Francisco Goya’s famous ‘Witches Sabbath’ to see the striking power of the terrible mother/hag, sacrificing infants to the horned devil. *Witches Sabbath* (c.1797-98) Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid.

¹²⁷ Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* pp.31, 36.

¹²⁸ Murdock, pp.88-99. See also: Dickinson, Elinor & Woodman, Marion, *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness* (Boston: Shambala, 1997) pp.14-18

Christianity and its restrictive concepts of passive femininity. Ishtar represents ‘the dark side of the moon, the return of the angry, repressed feminine within patriarchy, the disrespected goddess coming to punish and kill, to bring about a harsh cleansing.’¹²⁹

Mathilde’s dark feminine arises as a violent revolt against the imposition of patriarchal control over her body. She aborts her pregnancy in defiance of the restrictions that it would place on her both socially and physically, and envisions squeezing the life from the most oppressive male villager, Erik. After the death of Catherine and the birth of Ursule’s deformed ‘monster’, an accusation of witchcraft is an easy leap for the villagers to make. Mathilde is imprisoned in a Witches’ Tower where she is tortured and interrogated about her involvement with the Sabbat and her relationship with the Devil.¹³⁰ Pinkola Estés argues that women’s rage is necessary, but she must be taught by it. The expression of rage, a roaring, breaking, shattering rage, will lead her to her unconscious, and will create new life again: ‘women who are tortured often develop a dazzling kind of perception that has uncanny depth and breadth ... in order to learn the ins and outs of the unconscious, the fact is, having lived through a gross repression causes gifts to arise that compensate and protect.’¹³¹ This, finally, will allow her to forgive, and in doing so, turn her empowering anger into psychological release, allowing her to return to a state of balance and calm. This is the task of Emma.

The Medium and the Hysteric

Emma is where the novel begins and ends, and perhaps this is because she features most prominently in the collective memory of contemporary feminists, but especially of those literary critics of the 1970s and 80s. She is the housewife driven mad with ennui, the

¹²⁹ Roberts, ‘The Woman Who Wanted to be a Hero’ p.60.

¹³⁰ In 2014, I visited the Witches Towers in the villages of Bergheim, Saint-Hippolyte and Riquewihr. In Riquewihr, the strappado still looms above a tiny grate in the floor. In a hole six metres below, the victim would be imprisoned between interrogations.

¹³¹ Pinkola Estes p.394.

hysteric that dissolves under opiates and rest-cures. But she is also the medium, the Sapphic, the suffragette. Emma becomes involved in Spiritualism after the death of her only child, Sophie. Having struggled with fertility, her loss is devastating. Her life at home is miserable, her husband has become aloof and increasingly alcoholic, and the repressive nature of her confinement in the home, coupled with the removal of her only productive role as mother, leads to a restless boredom typical of women diagnosed as hysterics.¹³² When opiates fail to restore her, she seeks her own recovery and is drawn to a spiritualist séance.

Spiritualism, the belief in not only life after death, but that humans are capable of communicating with the deceased, developed in upstate New York in 1848 and soon spread to England.¹³³ The dead could now not only be communicated with, but also touched, channelled, and in some cases, physically manifested. It emerged at a time when scientists and geologists were developing theories that threw doubt over the authenticity of the bible and man's place as part of a divine plan. The material nature of Spiritualism seemed to provide an answer to anxious Victorians by synthesising science and religion.¹³⁴ But one of the most significant anomalies of Spiritualism was that it offered women a position of prominence denied to them in the traditional church. Female passivity, the ability to be 'overtaken,' was seen as key to the reception of spirit, and this allowed many women not only to become successful, but to rise to positions of authority, even over men. According to Alex Owen, 'it is no accident that spiritualism, a movement which privileged women and took them seriously, attracted so many female

¹³² Showlater, Elaine *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 – 1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

¹³³ The Fox sisters, Kate, Maggie and Leah, experienced knocking and tapping sounds in their house and claimed they were being sent messages from a murdered pedlar buried in the cellar. This type of communication – through raps and knocking – became a prominent element of the Victorian séance, with coded systems facilitating communication. Table rapping is how Emma first communicates with Sophie. Gilbert, R. A 'Introduction' in *The Rise of Spiritualism vol.1: An Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes & Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations* by Adin Ballou (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 2000) pp iii – xix; Owen, p.18-19 .

¹³⁴ Owen, p.xvi.

believers during a period of gender disjunction and disparity between aspiration and reality.¹³⁵ The medium existed within a safely liminal space between the literal and metaphoric, just like the spirits with whom they claimed to commune, without the filtration of male control.

If the serpent Medusa is the threat of female sexuality and subversive, cunning agency, then her Victorian counterpart, I argue, is the Mermaid. The Mermaid wears the subordinate face of the Angel to disguise her Monstrous desires for knowledge, power and sexual liberty. Roberts' Flora Milk, in *In the Red Kitchen*, is perhaps a more obvious image of this Mermaid figure. As I discussed in chapter two, her trance utterance allows her to enact sexual desire through the projected image of Hattie King, and so she is able to enter the financially secure, and potentially lucrative, world of the upper class with the Prestons. However, her occupation in the public world relies heavily on what are traditionally thought of as 'feminine' qualities: passivity, receptiveness and lack of reason.¹³⁶ Kontou states that, 'Mediums, women who would otherwise be occupying themselves with domestic service or child-rearing, were able to perform and reinvent themselves through spirit communication. In the séance room, feminine "sensitivity" was an asset rather than a weakness.'¹³⁷ When these women were 'taken over' they were able to blur the lines of what was considered proper and improper, natural and unnatural. Diana Basham extends this, stating that the 'irresponsibility' of trance or automatic writing was particularly helpful to women as it enabled them to 'transgress taboos about female public articulacy without shouldering

¹³⁵ Owen, p.4.

¹³⁶ Doblas, Rosario Arias, 'Talking with the dead: revisiting the Victorian past and the occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters' *Affinity*' *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, vol. 13 (2005) p.89; Kontou, Tatiana, *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the fin de siecle to the neo-Victorian* (Houndmills: Pangrave Macmillan, 2009) p.9; Owen, p. 10; Parker, Emma 'Recovering Women: History, Trauma, and Gender in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*', *Contemporary Women's Writing Vol. 2.No.2 (2008) p.114*.

¹³⁷ Kontou, p.9.

the burden of individual responsibility for their performances.’¹³⁸ The Mermaid suggests a sense of formidable resourcefulness, rather than sly manipulation. This reclamation allows contemporary women writers, such as myself and Roberts, to explore Victorian taboos of femininity and give voice to the voiceless. We can see the ‘angelic’ face and body at the séance table, the ideal of Victorian femininity, but also her ‘monstrous’ tail, swishing about in the darkness underneath.

Emma approaches the séance and the strange, liberally minded people she meets there with caution as she has repressed that which may dangerously reappear and resubmit her to the risk of traumatic punishment.¹³⁹ But her intuition, however repressed, recognises something in Susannah and in the possibilities inherent in mediumship for a personal connection to her spirituality. But it is a confronting world. Emma has never had contact with people who flagrantly transgress many codes of Victorian social conduct.¹⁴⁰ The darkness and necessary intimacy of the séance admitted a breach of normative social propriety, including touching, kissing and undressing. This allowed for an open transgression of gender norms, and women were safely able to take on roles otherwise barred to them.¹⁴¹ This led to the threat of the doctrine of ‘Affinities’: a belief that two beings might find their ‘soul mates’ outside the bonds of marriage. According to Marlene Tromp, this is the ‘dangerous’ conclusion to the ‘carnavalesque’ transformation that took place in women’s mediumship.¹⁴² Emma cannot deny both her

¹³⁸ Basham, Diana, *The Trial of Women: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1992) p.124.

¹³⁹ I discussed this in chapter two.

¹⁴⁰ Janet Oppenheim explores both Christian and Anti-Christian Spiritualism in her study: *The Other World: Spiritualism And Psychological Research In England 1850 - 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁴¹ Many contemporary studies of Victorian spiritualism discuss both the transgressions of typical societal norms as well as its association with the contemporaneous Women’s Movement. Owen provides the most comprehensive study. See: Basham, 121-147; Owen, 1-22; Tromp, Marlene ‘Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage and Victorian Spiritualism’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31.1 (2003), pp.67–81; 71-75

¹⁴² Tromp, p.72.

sexual and spiritual desires, and does become intimately involved with both Spiritualism, and her own 'affinity', Susannah.

This is, indeed, a dangerous path, for although she is safe within the spiritualist circle, Edward, her husband, notices the changes in her and becomes deeply suspicious. But again, his role here is not simply to become her oppressor. Edward is caught in the capitalist, industrial machine, one that means that his path to success relies on meeting certain social as well as professional criteria. Within the respectable middle class, this means having a respectable middle class family, and thus the Angelic wife. As Emma's Angelic mask slips, Edward glimpses her monstrous tail, and believes that she must be suffering from hysteria.

The links between mediumship, witchcraft and hysteria were, for unsympathetic commentators, easy to make. In 1889, Dr Hake wrote that trance phenomena were 'only the old witchcraft restored, renovated and adapted.'¹⁴³ Trances were easily associated with hysteria. Cixous and Clément follow Freud in calling the hysteric the 'remembrance of the sorceress'.¹⁴⁴ The connection is very clear, both between the two figures, as it is between Emma and her own 'remembrance', Mathilde. As Cixous and Clément state:

We can follow the thread connecting them, or rather, we can read them in the same scene, caught in the same networks of language. These women, to escape the misfortune of their economic and familial exploitation, chose to suffer spectacularly before an audience of men: it is an attack of spectacle, a crisis of suffering. And the attack is also a festival, a celebration of their guilt used as a weapon, a story of seduction.¹⁴⁵

Trance allows Emma to connect with Lucrezia and Mathilde, but it is also how she opens herself to the dangers of transgression. Clément suggests that trance is rebellion: 'the sacred among women may express an instantaneous revolt that passes through the

¹⁴³ As quoted in Basham, p.111.

¹⁴⁴ Cixous & Clément, p.35.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.10.

body and cries out.’¹⁴⁶ Edward, like the psychiatrists of his time, does not ‘know how to deal with a “secular trance”’ because the sacred ‘is not among the classifications’.¹⁴⁷ The trance was seen as a state of psychological abnormality, ‘whereby normal consciousness gave way to a lower and more automatic level of mental functioning.’¹⁴⁸ The mind became prone to the delusions and profanities associated with hysteria. For women, however, there was an additional danger. As Emma embodies more and more the ‘Wild’ nature she unconsciously remembers, she becomes wilful and defiant of her husband. But such will is dangerous, as Elaine Showalter states, ‘an independent will could be regarded as a form of female deviance that was dangerously close to mental illness and nearly as subversive as adultery.’¹⁴⁹ The danger for successful mediums was not that they would be declared insane for claiming to have supernatural powers beyond their reach, but that they claimed *any* power.

Roy Porter draws close ties between spiritualism, madness and gender, particularly as it pertains to the diagnosis of ‘moral insanity.’¹⁵⁰ Higher expectations of social conduct were levelled against women, and as it was also believed their sexual functions made them more prone to insanity than men: a wilful and powerful woman was deemed unnaturally masculine, owing to a disorder of her sexual organs.¹⁵¹ If the chief danger to the Early Modern witch was torture and execution, the chief danger to a Victorian medium was incarceration.¹⁵² Porter makes this clear: ‘In retrospect it appears that the diagnosis of madness and the threat of certification could be used as part of a wider

¹⁴⁶ Clément & Kristeva p.10.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.9.

¹⁴⁸ Owen p.143.

¹⁴⁹ Elaine Showalter ‘Victorian Women and Insanity’ in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era* ed. Andrew Scull (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981) 313-338 p.352.

¹⁵⁰ Porter, Roy, Helen Nicholson and Bridget Bennett (eds) *Women Madness and Spiritualism vol.1: Georgina Weldon and Louisa Lowe* London: Routledge, 2003) p.7.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Victorian assumptions of the link between female sexual disorders and insanity are well established. See: Showalter 313-338; Owen pp.137-167.

¹⁵² Dr L. Forbes Winslow estimated in 1877 that there were 40,000 spiritualists incarcerated in American asylums. He claimed Spiritualism was the principle cause of the insanity epidemic among ‘weak-minded hysterical women,’ as quoted in Porter, p.5. Originally printed in *Spiritualist Madness* (1877).

exercise of social and sexual control by the medical profession, serving the broader interests of a patriarchal order, to deal with women who failed to conform to the feminine ideal of domestic submissiveness.¹⁵³ It was easy for husbands to have their sexually rebellious wives incarcerated, and so Edward has no trouble finding two doctors who agree with his opinion.¹⁵⁴ But Edward believes the diagnosis and acts according to socially prescribed concern. It is not simply a way to deal with having an inconvenient wife.¹⁵⁵

Emma's narrative ends with hope. She has not yet been able to overcome the prejudices of her social context, but as an individual she has begun to reach an understanding of how such systems have conspired to work against her. Emma and Susannah emerge together as a couple progressing towards the overcoming of gender binaries. Susannah's homosexuality, and Emma's bisexuality, are attempts to acknowledge the variations of masculine and feminine attributes beyond biological restrictions. Susannah is, like Jacopo before her, at peace with both the masculine and feminine within herself. She is not threatened by one or the other, and because of her fortunate position within a radical subset of Victorian society — a community of suffragettes, lesbians, free-thinkers and socialists — she is not beholden to the same social restrictions as Emma. Consequently, these become a source of internal balance instead of conflict and repression. Susannah and her brother John allow Emma the safety and space to remember what unity once was to her, a long time ago. I have not had space to adequately address the second set of paralleled characters in this thesis, Luca, Matti and John Emmett. However, briefly, as their names suggest, they function

¹⁵³ Porter p.7.

¹⁵⁴ Certification by two doctors was required for a charge of lunacy: Showalter, p.325.

¹⁵⁵ The famous case of Louisa Lowe, a spiritualist and early suffragette who was incarcerated by a husband who took advantage of lunacy laws to allegedly gain control of her considerable property is an example of such a case. Her case drew attention to the inherent misogyny of both the 'lunacy trade' and the magisterial system prior to the 1882 Women's Property Act. For more, see: Owen, pp.168-196. Lowe, Louisa *The Bastilles of England: The Lunacy Laws at Work* (London: Crookenden and Co., 1883).

as male mirrors of each protagonist, were Lucrezia, Mathilde or Emma's desires able to be expressed within culturally sanctioned forms. Emma's journey back to Lucrezia allows her to return to a remembrance of the Sacred Feminine, both as she has experienced it through the trance, but as valorised as an equal, but different, companion to the masculine. I hope that this ending signals a move towards Kristeva's third generation. A bisexual generation, where the masculine and the feminine are not biologically restrictive, do not combine into androgyny, but are understood as fluid, equal, and necessary in the pursuit of wholeness.

Conclusion

This thesis is an experiment in revisionist mythmaking located within Julia Kristeva's 'third generation' of feminism. My aim has been to develop the fundamental concerns of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous — the dissolution of the masculine/feminine binary through the body and the sacred — through revisionist fiction that reflects contemporary concerns. As such, my approach privileges the bisexual unconscious in order to locate repressed active desire in women of the past. Kristeva's 'third generation' offers a space in which to reimagine the dichotomy between men and women. This space recognises the importance of sexual equality in socio-political institutions — the goals of the first generation — but does not deny women their femininity. It also celebrates female difference in the formation of identity for women — the goal of the second generation — but does not separate them from culture and history.¹ The third generation is where the fundamental concerns of the past come together to envision a new future, one where women can enter history not as defined by the masculine imaginary, but through their own individual subjectivity. Kristeva imagines her third generation will one day entirely dissolve the 'fight to the death' between the sexes, where individual, not sexual, difference is free and fluid.

This is a radical process, and one that my thesis can only work towards, rather than offer the kind of revolutionary conclusion that Kristeva suggests. Additionally, as I have worked with revisionist historical fiction, the characters of my novel do not live in societies that can offer them this kind of radical change. Rather, I have used my position as a twenty-first century writer capable of experiencing and imagining Kristeva and Cixous' bisexual unconscious to locate active desire in women of the past. In this revision, I hope to demonstrate that the 'monstrous' drives for sexual and spiritual

¹ Kristeva, Julia, 'Women's Time' trans. Alice Jardine, Harry Blake, *Signs*, Vol. 7, No.1 (1981), 13-35

autonomy that so often endangered not only psychological wholeness, but the lives of women, were not unnatural, but emerged from the unconscious. The archetypal images from which I have drawn demonstrate the dark and light polarity cast onto women that, when internalised, caused damage not only to the self, but continued to perpetuate such myths over centuries. We have only emerged into a position from which to reimagine and hopefully, through multiple attempts such as mine, destroy such pervasive myths of femininity and masculinity. I do not wish to collapse the notion of gender and erase difference, but rather, acknowledge that *both* the masculine and the feminine exist in the unconscious. The feminine should be valued and celebrated alongside the masculine, and only then can the kind of fluid individuality and collapse of ‘identity’ Kristeva advocates come into being.

The heart of this thesis is *The Material and the Divine*. The concept of the novel emerged before I began to engage in detail with the various research trajectories that subsequently informed and shaped the final piece. Nevertheless, the core concerns regarding the subversion of female archetypes, the body, the sacred, and the power of the unconscious have been fundamentally present since its inception. My work has since, I believe, reflected Michèle Roberts’ remark that, ‘Good writing ... gains part of its power from the degree to which it skilfully articulates its author’s unconscious life and wishes. And the writing, of course, makes the writer’s unconscious visible to herself.’² While I can only offer a personal reflection on this matter, the way in which my work so strongly paralleled the concerns of French and Jungian Feminists well before I read their work, signifies to me, at least, that issues regarding the repression of the feminine and cultural images of women, their bodies and desires, remain vital in the twenty-first century. I would argue, however, that I am not alone in such thinking. As I demonstrated in my introduction, women remain locked in a struggle with the

² Roberts, Michèle, *Food, Sex & God: On Inspiration and Writing* (London: Virago, 1998) p.17

denigrated feminine in contemporary society. Female authors not only remain underrepresented in critical circles, their work is likely to be regarded as sentimental, trashy, domestic, childish, or merely ‘popular’.³ Similarly, current feminist concerns with body shaming, victim blaming, and rape culture highlight residual manifestations of that powerful and destructive dichotomy, the Angel and the Monster.⁴

Through a revisionist approach to mythmaking, I have let my three protagonists free from the limits of the feminine within the masculine imaginary. They have escaped linear time; through their marginality and the fluidity of their shared unconscious, they have disrupted the metaphors of their entrapment within the room, the tower and the asylum.⁵ So too have I returned each woman to her body, explored the implications of maternity, and allowed her access to the feminine pen. Finally, they have used the Sacred and the subversive potential of the trance to overcome the limiting cultural myths of the virgin/whore, the witch and the hysteric. This novel does not attempt to reproduce a version of historical ‘truth’. Such an attempt is impossible. Instead, it attempts to re-mythologise the experiences of women, women who have struggled to come to terms with active desire within themselves, and who have been punished as a result of its emergence. In my revisionist text, the creative unconscious allows them to confront the return of their repressed desires and come to a place of healing and acceptance within themselves, and so overcome the restrictions of the feminine, and utilise its powerful potential.

³ Weiner, Jennifer, ‘If you enjoyed a good book and you’re a woman, the critics think you’re wrong’ *The Guardian*, 25 November 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/24/good-books-women-readers-literary-critics-sexism>> [accessed 27/11/2015]

⁴ See: Harding, Kate, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What we Can Do About It* (Boston: De Capo Press, 2015); Healcon, Alison *The Politics of Sexual Violence: Rape, Identity and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Fraser, Courtney ‘From “Ladies First” to “Asking for It”: Benevolent Sexism in the Maintenance of Rape Culture’ *California Law Review* Vol.103, No.1 (2015) pp.143 – 145.

⁵ Reincarnation means that the failure of Lucrezia and Mathilde to literally escape the room and the tower does not mean their failure overall. Emma escapes on behalf of all three women, as they are, through their shared unconscious, one in the same.

In the construction of this thesis I have engaged with a wide variety of theories, ideas and methods, developing primarily through the creative unconscious of the practice-led process. This thesis engages with French Feminism, psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology, the Gothic, the Sacred Feminine, cultural mythology, Renaissance history, alchemy, the Reformation, Early Modern witchcraft, Spiritualism, and Victorian social and psychiatric history. The creation of this manuscript and exegesis has been a process of constantly surprising, illuminating and often synchronous research. As such, there are a number of fertile fields to be considered for further study.

Gothic theory became secondary rather than central to this thesis, but I believe there is scope to overcome binary limitations and archetypes through the Female Gothic and the uncanny. In writing this exegesis, I uncovered many parallels between women's experiences outside of the Symbolic Order and the uncanny, primarily through the return of the repressed and the dread of female sexuality. The uncanny emerges in a disturbance in the proper order, in the experience of strangeness, liminality and duplicity, echoing French Feminist concerns with the experience of marginal female subjectivity, the subversive potential of the female voice, and the multiplicity of experience.⁶ As such, I would argue that women within patriarchal culture are more likely to encounter the uncanny. Furthermore, strands of contemporary Gothic scholarship follow postmodern and deconstructionist approaches to the dissolution of the unified subject, and the decline of Enlightenment codes of rationality and universality. As such, many contemporary Gothic novels question the coherency of the world and society, as well as individual identity and cultural images. They complicate the villain/victim binary, and many writers, such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood,

⁶ Freud, Sigmund, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud et al. vol.17 (London: Hogarth, 1953) 217-256; Royle, Nicolas, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)

and Toni Morrison, subvert traditional Gothic tropes while working within the genre.⁷ Therefore, while the Female Gothic structured much of the creative development of this thesis, there is further ground to cover in regards to the contemporary Gothic's 'theoretical tools', particularly from a poststructuralist and postmodern perspective.⁸ I am interested in pursuing a revisionist approach to Female Gothic novels in order to locate a particularly uncanny female experience in future research and creative writing projects.

This thesis also does not address queer or post-colonial feminist concerns. While some of these are hinted at in the novel, I felt that as a middle-class white woman, it would be best to write to my own experience and respectfully leave significant analysis in this field to those better positioned to speak it. However, I do wish to highlight that as a third generation writer/third wave feminist, supporting marginalised voices within the already marginalised female subject position is important to me. I hope that the novel's ending, which subverts the heterosexual marriage or death paradigm, demonstrates this. Mine is just one of many possible voices, and one of many possible ways of overcoming the dichotomy of woman.

Today, because of the work of women writers who came before me, I can trace, through fiction, the threads of feminine spirituality that have existed parallel to patriarchal religion for centuries, to find the sexual and spiritual power that was inherent, but taken from women of the past. As Jane Caputi suggests, a holistic, gynocentric imagination seeks to 'restore to the divine ... those aspects of the whole that have been demonized and made into the "other" — the feminine and the female, chaos, emotion, soul, age, animality, the depths, darkness, dirtiness, lowness, decay,

⁷ See: Armit, Lucy, 'Postmodern Gothic' in *Teaching the Gothic* ed. by. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Heiland, Donna, *Gothic & Gender* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008);

⁸ Wallace, Diana, and Andrew Smith. *The Female Gothic: New Directions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p.34

illness, and natural death.’⁹ In my attempt to subvert these archetypes, I wrote characters who are all and none of these female images. They are not villains or victims, Angels or Monsters. They are, and are not, virgins, whores and hysterics. Indeed, by embodying each of these aspects, and their shadows, by illuminating their imperfections, their frailty, their selfishness, as well as their strength and power, we can see how they incorporate and transcend each of these limiting roles. As such, I hope that this novel can become part of Kristeva’s proposed third generation.

⁹ Caputi, p.13

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