

TURNING ROAD

(Fiction)

BLUEBEARD IN SHIRLEY HAZZARD'S THE

TRANSIT OF VENUS

(Critical Accompaniment)

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

.....

(Tristan Stein)

ABSTRACT

This is a thesis comprising two components: a portion of my novella and a dissertation. My work of fiction, *Turning Road*, draws loosely on the *Bluebeard* fairytale, as well as theories of identity and nation, as a means of exploring a young Australian woman's journey to London, a journey which is both symbolic and psychological.

The second component is the critical essay, which considers the extent to which Australian women's expatriate fiction can be read as a variation of *Bluebeard*. Australian women's expatriate fiction has been characterised as a journey involving a doomed love affair with a self-centred male in London.¹ To date, most critical attention on the genre has focussed on the extent to which it employs the Odyssean myth to consider gender and colonial identity. It is my contention that reading *Bluebeard* in *The Transit of Venus* highlights issues of identity and power in relation to gender and nation. Through its central themes of threat, sexuality, secrecy, self-knowledge and seriality, *Bluebeard* warns against prescribed gender roles/relations and limiting identifications, and works towards depicting a new liberating space between contrasting spaces identified as home and abroad.

¹ Diana Brydon, "Buffoon Odysseys: Australian Expatriate Fiction by Women" in *Aspects of Australian Fiction*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1990, 76.

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TURNING ROAD

For the fiction section of my thesis I have included five chapters from my novella, *Turning Road*.

Chapter Synopsis

Chapter 1: Lucy Moore leaves her hometown Perth, and her job as a radio reporter, for London in February 1997. In London she moves in with an old Australian university acquaintance, Oliver, who has been living overseas for years. Oliver, who is nearly ten years older than Lucy, is involved in an unusual sexual arrangement with his Australian friends, husband and wife Sarah and Michael (Sarah and Michael have an ‘open’ marriage: Sarah is sleeping with both Michael and Oliver, and Michael has various sexual partners). Lucy is invited to view a series of overtly sexual photographs taken by Sarah, which have been hung on Oliver’s back wall. Lucy develops an obsessive interest in both the shots and the glamorous photographer.

Chapter 2: Lucy visits the photographs on Oliver’s back wall when no one else is home. This becomes a habit, and she imagines the trips infuse her with an uncharacteristic boldness.

Chapter 3: Lucy is invited for drinks at Sarah and Michael’s house, along with Oliver and Michael’s cousin, Ainslie. Here she witnesses an unexpected argument between Sarah and Michael, which casts doubt on the immaculate veneer of their (sexual) arrangement and marriage.

Chapter 4: Lucy, who now works as a journalist for a television news program, arrives home to find Oliver searching for an undeveloped roll of film that Sarah had left with him for safekeeping. He finds the film, but is coy about its contents. Later, Lucy steals the film (substituting it with a dud roll) and has it developed. The photographs are of a young girl sleeping. Oliver's friend, James, arrives from Berlin and Lucy is immediately attracted to him. She assumes a link between her theft of the film and her bold new feelings.

Chapter 5: Lucy starts a secret and uncharacteristic affair with Englishman James, delighting in his perception of her as worldly. She is stunned by James's revelation that, the year before, whilst they were living in Berlin (a city Sarah apparently despised), Sarah and Michael had been trying for a baby. The sleeping girl in the photographs continues to haunt Lucy.

Chapters 6-10 (included in the thesis): After a day trip to Brighton with James, Oliver and Sarah, Lucy imagines herself part of their exclusive club and is thrilled. But things soon change when James moves out of Oliver's house and into his own flat. She comes to realise her relationship with Sarah, Oliver and Michael is fundamentally flawed. At Sarah's exhibition opening night, Lucy plans to patch things up with James, whatever the price. Her hopes are shattered entirely when she learns that Sarah and James are secret lovers. Ainslie reveals that the arrangement between Sarah, Michael and Oliver is a farce and Lucy understands it is time for her to move on.

One Sunday, James, Sarah, Oliver and I went to Brighton for the day, a last-minute plan fuelled by Oliver's late morning lament that we ought to *do* something: that the weather was unseasonably warm, the climate too Tony Blair and New Labour-inspired-buoyant to waste. It had only been a week since the election yet the new Prime Minister's vision for "A Better Britain" already seemed to be manifesting. The four of us would fit in Sarah's car—Ainslie and Michael were both working—and we set off in high spirits, talking excitedly of a sea fix and of eating hot sugared doughnuts.

I was still coming down—we had all been out clubbing the night before—but not unpleasantly so, and the fug in my mind seemed to somehow complement the tingling alertness of my body, the cellular fireworks at the merest brush of James's arm against mine in the backseat. We had still not told anyone about our affair: the self-imposed restraint required to disguise our intimacy in front of others seemed as exhilarating as torturous. Our late-night meetings in my bedroom were infused with the ardour of our denial. It had become a game now, more sex play than based on any solid concern, and my initial apprehensions had come to seem remote in the space of the week James and I had been sleeping together.

Over the previous few days I had barely thought of the film I'd stolen. Even scaling the steps to view Oliver's photographs seemed unnecessary in light of James's dazzling influence: it was as if these other things, at one point so

compelling, had merely been a dress rehearsal, preparing me for the main act. Other things too that had filled my days now felt pale and insipid in comparison to the intensity of the feelings James generated within me. Work had become an annoying distraction, my colleagues too demanding. It seemed as if my new life was now just beginning, that all my efforts so far unnoticed and unrewarded, were at last bearing fruit. I had Arrived. I had finally Arrived.

I had seen Sarah twice since James told me his story about their time in Berlin, and I imagined new warmth between us. I spent the days since meeting my new lover in a state of optimism, my thoughts dominated by fantasies of conversations and destinations we were yet to have and see. But every now and then a jabbing thought about Sarah and her longed-for baby punctured my general brightness, leaving me feeling benevolent and strangely inept. For as much as I was enamoured with Sarah, with the idea of her, I still felt awkward and wanting in her presence.

The previous afternoon, while the boys were occupied with Oliver's mixing decks, I'd asked Sarah and Ainslie to join me at a movie: a chick flick which looked light and fun. I hadn't suggested we three do anything alone before, and I knew that if it weren't for the combination of my James-infused euphoria and his revelatory storytelling, I probably never would have. The movie was ordinary but the afternoon memorable, not least because of Sarah's giddy excitement at the proposal and her tentative disclosure that, while she had female friends, she had never really been part of a girl group. It was, she said, on account of not having been "girly" enough to fit in, and though I took personally the mild scorn with which she spoke of the subjects of her exclusion, it occurred

to me at some level that her air of brusque imperturbability might be as much bravado as genuine contempt.

I was stirred by her announcement, inexplicably so, and felt on account of it a flush of undirected gratitude. It seemed to me, in that moment, as if the gift of James had come with a host of additional boons: that in gaining a new lover, I may also have discovered kinship with Sarah—one in which we were on equal terms—and perhaps even a new way of looking at the world. It is probably true that this feeling was one part cordial to the nine parts water, but it seemed that I never would have come to know such a thing about Sarah (so surprising and remarkable in its own way), and possibly many other things from now on, had I not invited her out that day, had James not told me what he did, had I never met James in the first place.

I came very close that day to telling Sarah about my affair with James, but Ainslie's presence stopped me. It wasn't so much that I wanted to exclude Ainslie as to ingratiate Sarah: to tell both of them would diminish the benefit and increase the risk of James's disapproval. I also considered broaching the subject of children, and at several moments during that afternoon at the movies had been on the verge of making some or other ephemeral reference to babies, in the hope it might prompt a declaration from Sarah. But on this count too, Ainslie's presence was an impediment, and I held back in anticipation of finding a more intimate moment some other time.

The trip to Brighton took several hours (the result of a missed turn and some serious doubling back) but it would hardly have mattered to me if we'd never got there at all. Sarah drove her old Volkswagon Golf with the windows down and the heater up, a compilation tape Oliver had composed blared

unevenly from the crappy stereo. It was hard to hear the music at all alongside the insistent rattling of the motor—a muffler issue I was told—but we could have been driving the flashiest of convertibles for the air of triumphant merriment we all seemed to share.

I recognised from the outset in Sarah and Oliver a particular carefree way, a giggling kind of glee that they both put down to the unexpected gloriousness of this spring day. It was still crisp, at least for Australians used to the scorching summers of home, but it seemed as if the sun had thrown off winter's heavy hand and was celebrating with a festival of radiated cheer.

There was something special about it just being the four of us too, and although Sarah or Oliver never suggested it, it seemed to me that the essence lay in Michael's absence. At other times when Michael hadn't been around, he'd always been expected and so seemed somehow attendant in anticipation, but today there was no suggestion or possibility of him joining us. It was then I realised how powerfully the notion of the arrangement loomed. How little it seemed to matter without him, Oliver and Sarah just like any other couple walking hand in hand along the street. Perhaps it was a flow-on from the weather as they suggested, but I found myself wondering that afternoon if Michael had any real awareness of how much Oliver was in love with Sarah. It was hard to know whether his arrogant demeanour was a foil for this knowledge, if it deflected the idea entirely. For her part Sarah too seemed in high spirits, if not exactly similarly enamoured. She seemed at pains to ensure none of us was favoured more than any other, bestowing her twinkling attention upon each of us equally.

Oliver had put aside his bristling attitude towards James, and although I didn't know if this were a fact of his own good mood, or Sarah's mollifying presence beside him, the upshot was a happy one. Nor could I sense any of the ire Oliver had suggested Sarah directed towards him in relation to the previously missing film. Whatever she had made of the dud film, for presumably she must have had it developed by now, his discovery had obviously ended her wrath. Of course, this was entirely speculation: Oliver hadn't brought up the film again since the night I'd walked in on his kitchen stakeout, and, after my own involvement, I sure wasn't going to either.

It was nearly two by the time we arrived and our priority was coffee and food, a hankering we satisfied with milky lattes and toasted paninis at a tiny café that Oliver insisted upon. After lunch we trawled the lanes of shops lazily, laughing over curiosities here and there, and then walked down to the ocean, hobbling across the pebbles to sit and watch the waves slap against the edge of the pier. I sucked in great salty breaths of sea air; felt the familiar connection with the murky ocean within me, but noted too, a surprise balk at the insistence of its briny whiff.

"It's not the same though, is it?" Sarah sighed, looking out towards the sea. I knew what she meant, had been thinking it myself. It wasn't like the beaches in Australia, it didn't even come close.

"It's the pebbles. They're all wrong," Oliver said. "A real beach has sand."

"There's not much I miss about Australia, but I *do* miss the beach." Sarah's voice had a faraway quality.

“You guys are crazy,” James laughed. “I don’t know why you all come here. Why you’d leave all that blue sky and sunshine to come *here*, where it’s cold and dark all the time.”

“Not all the time,” I smiled, “Look at today.”

“I’d love to live in Oz,” James said, “I will one day—kick back and go surfing every day.”

“Because that’s what everyone there does,” I laughed. But I was nevertheless thrilled. Unlike the others, I assumed I’d go back home within a few years, and James’s comment seemed to confirm the possibility of a future for us.

“My old man surfs the Net every day,” Oliver declared to no one in particular.

“I don’t ever want to go back,” Sarah carried on, “Not for anything more than a holiday. Two weeks at a time is more than enough.”

“It’s the crap you left behind you don’t want to go back to,” James jibed good-naturedly.

I could feel Oliver stiffen beside me. Perhaps he felt protective of Sarah, thought James had gone too far. Or perhaps James’s allusion was a reminder of their friendship, and he didn’t like it.

“Wanker!” Sarah was smiling but had declared the topic over.

“Too much sun fries your brain,” Oliver said, “Fries it like an egg.”

We sat for a while more and then strolled on to the pier, ate the doughnuts we had been pining for, cheered Oliver on in a committed but unsuccessful attempt to win Sarah a furry toy at the claw machine. Not quite ready to go back, we headed west along the sea path and watched as two lone windsurfers made the most of the fading afternoon light. It had turned cold again,

and though in several months the promenade would be thick with strollers at this time, it was now empty.

I had been to Brighton only once before, a lonesome daytrip just several weeks after I'd arrived. It was a wretched day, the proximity to the wind and water dredging up all my early-days homesickness, sending it slushing endlessly through me. But on this new day, strolling beside James, Sarah and Oliver, I recalled that day with a combined sense of empathy and mild repugnance. The town seemed a different place to me—more charming, less shabby. It was only my sad-girl shadow that reminded me I'd ever been there. There was a certain sense of grace, perhaps even self-congratulation in thinking how different from each other we were now, and the goodwill generated made me view my shadow-self with a fond wariness, as if for a slightly lecherous colleague, though on a lesser day I may have considered her a complete undesirable, some kind of stalker.

When the sun finally went down on the windsurfers, the sky put on a shifting spectacle of colour and light; a fleeting exhibition that seemed to infuse our whole frivolous day with blessedness, a sense of deliverance almost. A woman, power-walking, pushed past, grim-faced and panting, and then we were alone—at least this is how it felt—with the twilight again. Watching it I felt suddenly so light, as if the wind had swept me off my feet and into the clouds. In those few rapturous moments the whole near-empty beach was our secret, as if we were the only ones to see the glint of gold in amongst its rock.

On the way back up the hill towards the car, our backs to the dark ocean, I could see people moving about in their well-lit kitchens, heard the snippet of a television news report through an open window. It seemed in this fleeting

moment as if I had glimpsed the answer: that I might have found a way to secure permanently the elusive sense of wholeness I craved. If I came here night after night an enduring sea spray of resilience and optimism would build up on my skin, layer upon layer, protecting me once and for all from burning doubt.

The banality of a mild thirst drew me out of my reverie, and as we passed an open store part way up the hill, I motioned to the others that I was getting some water and would just be a second. James glanced at me furtively, and I suspected he was about to say he would join me when Sarah clapped a hand on his back and insisted she tell him about the free tickets I'd got from work to see the West End show, *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Denied the opportunity of a stolen kiss, I was touched by Sarah's clear attempt to chum up with me; congratulating myself again on the success yesterday's outing had turned out to be. It seemed in a round about way that I even had Sarah to thank: were it not for the photos on Oliver's back wall none of this might ever have happened.

When I stepped out of the store moments later my friends were some distance ahead of me, illuminated by the streetlights' timely activation. I considered calling for them to stop and wait, but there was a certain pleasure in the opportunity it offered me to study them without reserve. Their pace was lazy, Oliver's arm locked around the shoulders of his diminutive girlfriend, and James on the other side of Sarah, slightly apart from her. From this distance, it looked as if Oliver was Sarah's father, so slight was she beneath his possessive embrace. At one point Sarah reached across and touched James's arm lightly, perhaps to share a joke. I noticed that my lover had a lobe, one I'd never before detected in

the confines of my flat, or walking along beside him. This minor defect seemed to make him all the more perfect in highlighting his otherwise excellence.

But I was struck too by how deceptively ordinary the group ahead of me appeared, as if they had donned an everyman disguise to escape detection. Others walking past might have considered them regular, but I knew different. It was a smug thought but disconcerting too, for reasons I couldn't entirely fathom. I worried I might have become aware of their fabulousness only by chance, some inadvertency, without which I might have remained as clueless about them as the next person. These *were* people unlike everyone else. My friendship with them not only alerted me to this fact but also confirmed my own distinction, as if only in the good favour of those more obviously remarkable than myself could I stake any claim on the world.

The car ride home was low-key, but my mood quietly ecstatic, for it felt that on account of this day I had become a better person. The colours on the trees offered a clarity they had lacked on the drive out, and the rows of fenced houses I had eyed with mild repulsion now seemed charming, brimming as they were with loving parents and smiling children. Michael and Ainslie's arrival in time to share a late dinner was welcome and enlivening. Michael was in particularly good form and I wondered at his geniality with a startled kind of reconsideration: perhaps he wasn't so bad after all.

It seemed James had been moved by the day too, for his tongue that night seemed more purposeful than ever before, his kisses more deliberately placed. I imagined his intensity heightened by the fact that our time together at Ambrose Road was closing in—he would move into his own flat in only two day's time—and while I was plaintive about it, I also looked forward to the legitimization his

new lodgings would allow. Goodbye Fling, hello Relationship. This was not an expectation I had gleaned from any particular conversation for neither of us had broached the issue. It came from the space between our spoken words—the private messages I found encoded in his eyes and touch. It was a language I believed we shared with Oliver and Sarah, and I wished we could always be together like we had that day: just the four of us, the best of friends and lovers. I thought of this as James slid off me and came to rest by my side.

“Oliver’s pretty hooked all right.”

“Gone for all money,” James said lightly.

“I think she’s in love with him too.” It was a tentative assertion for it seemed a risk to speak of the arrangement with any measure of sentimentality.

“Do I detect a romantic?” James teased gently.

“Only in theory,” I countered, aware of seeming childish: it had been foolish to speak of it after all. “The whole thing seems pretty overrated to me.”

“My own sentiments exactly.”

“Oh yes,” I continued merrily. “I think it’s a mistake to put all your eggs in one basket.” I was parroting Sarah, whom I’d once heard justify the arrangement in this way, and although it didn’t necessarily hold for me, her words seemed to reflect some nebulous truth on new beginnings, our own wondrous prospects in the wake of broken relationships.

“You’re obviously much wiser than me. I’ve been a bit of a slow learner on that front, but I’ve come around to your way of thinking,” James chortled, moving across to nuzzle my breast.

“Better late than never,” I quipped carelessly, and laughed now too, for I was ticklish and it seemed what we had really been speaking of was clearing the

disenchantments of our past, his marriage and my own commonplace coupling with David; wiping our slates clean so that this unexpectedly magical thing between us could now be written.

I was late for work again, as I had been every day after having spent the night with James. This never struck me as a problem until the moment I entered the lift that would take me to my third floor office. Then came the realisation that I would have to walk past nearly everyone in the place before coming to my desk, which was located near a window at the back end of the open plan layout. Despite my best attempts at invisibility, and a ready excuse, I worried that there was something telling in the way I walked or smiled, an undeniable aura of sex, which sang out my arrival.

I snuck a sideways glance at the news director, Frank, who, in his glass box in the centre of the room was the only one with an office. He appeared to be head down reading something on his desk, twiddling his long moustache. I knew better than to be fooled: he noticed everything, whether he was in the office or not. I would have to make a point of being conspicuously early every day next week.

“Afternoon,” Martin said as I slunk into my chair. My desk was next to his, so there was no way to escape his notice. I feared my immediate boss’s recrimination much less than that of Frank in the glass box. Martin’s was a light-hearted reproach; I knew he didn’t care as long as things got done, and even on this front he usually wasn’t too demanding.

“Morning,” I said pointedly.

Sophie and Fran, the other elements of our four-person planning team, were seated at their desks on the other side of mine, and both stuck their heads around their computer terminals to say hello.

“Big night or early morning?” Sophie asked, laughing.

“Or both?” Fran said, offering me some of a custard pastry she had broken into bits and arranged on top of a paper bag. “Have some before I eat it all myself.”

I took some gratefully. There had been no time for breakfast. Although only ten years older than me, roughly the same age as Oliver and my new friends, the difference between Fran and me seemed generational, so that in my mind she was more akin to a mate of my mother’s than my own.

“So how is the lovely James?” Sophie asked.

“Lovely,” I said dreamily.

Martin feigned a vomit. “Oh God. I’m drowning in Mills and Boon. Sophie’s already loved up. Now there’s another one. Fran, don’t you start.”

We all laughed. Fran regularly regaled us with world-weary stories of her and her husband’s individual and joint misfortunes, so that the idea of her in the giddy throes of new love seemed to us—Sophie and I at least—utterly improbable. She was, we knew, reasonably happy, in the sense she was not in the least bit interested in changing anything. Our perception of their mutual complacency was so remote from anything Sophie seemed to share with her Colin, and I had come to wish for myself, that it was hard to imagine that she might feel as we now did, or that she ever had.

But the truth was, after that lovely day in Brighton, things with James and me had changed. Although he called me often, the times we met alone were

haphazard, inevitably arranged at the last minute, and always behind the closed door of my bedroom or his new flat. It was a pattern established at the outset, of course, but those early day encounters seemed so infinitely full of possibility that it never occurred to me that his moving out could be a kind of ending. So much had happened within our ten days together at Ambrose Road—time itself seemed to have stretched—that I was unquestionably confident its momentum would be sufficient to render geography, and any other impediment for that matter, irrelevant.

I felt an undeniable pleasure in making my way across town in the middle of the night under summons from a saucy call, so too in unlocking my front door before I went to bed so that James might steal in after a dinner meeting with clients, or some such. But increasingly there were moments too when the whole skulking aspect seemed banal, and I came to long for some ordinary camaraderie, the kind I had once snubbed as lacklustre in other couples on the street. Our clandestine liaison was approaching its own kind of monotony, the very thing I'd hoped our secrecy might avoid.

Inevitably, after a night with James such doubts would dissolve, scatter in every direction under his beguiling touch and soothing words, so that I left in the morning reassured. Only later they would gather again, as if somewhere under my radar, emerging fully restored to gnaw at me. At these times I longed for the company of our friends as endorsement. It was only to colleagues I had spoken of James, and without knowing him, they could not offer me the validation I sought. The simple solution seemed to be to go public with our affair, and while I'd imagined this an inevitable step, I felt some reluctance. I wanted it to happen, but not yet. Perhaps it was simply self-consciousness—the thought of Sarah's

quietly amused scrutiny made me squirm. And the spectre of the stolen film still loomed ... “I knew it!” I imagined Oliver might say. “I remember sensing something between you that night. Yes, I remember now. It was the night after I thought I’d lost the film.” And so the distant memory of that other thing would be revived ... I can’t say I thought our unveiling might *actually* lead to the discovery that I’d stolen the film, but it seemed more imperative than ever that all of it remain under wraps. Although inconsequential enough an indiscretion, it occurred to me exposure now might cost me in terms of James’s interest; a penalty far harsher than any censure I may have felt due from Oliver or even Sarah. So as much as I wanted to insist on a more formal arrangement—at least a more regular timetable—I felt that to do so could also put us further at odds.

It wasn’t so much I was losing sleep though, as approaching a level of concern. I was conscious too that James’s new job was now making significant demands on his time and energy, as was my own work. Over the last six weeks we had been gearing up for the launch of a new-look Friday night program, which was to go to air that night, and despite my recurrent tardiness, I’d for the most part been working long and late.

That morning was dedicated to finding a replacement for the celebrity who’d dropped out the night before on the basis of a raging throat infection. As I worked my way through the list of agents in our contacts file my renewed sense of euphoria gave way to a dry-mouthed dread: could it really be possible every famous person on our list was either ill or on location in Romania?

In those first days when James had been staying at Ambrose Road I had sometimes resented my work for keeping me from him, but it was in the times we were apart—on the train on my way to work, while on hold on the phone, in

the pause between writing one sentence and another at my office computer terminal—that I replayed in my mind what had taken place between us that morning or the night before, and imagined what great things were in store for us. In this way our relationship seemed to progress as much as when we were together. Such moments became fewer as work became more hectic, and I became less concerned with re-living certain moments as rescripting them slightly, adjusting them in such a way that James’s playful teasing was stripped of any possible ambiguity.

It was while on the phone to a celebrity agent of some promise—finally a bite—that I got a message from the secretary to call Ainslie. Apparently she ‘d tried my line a number of times and hadn’t been able to get through. It took me several moments to work out who indeed, Ainslie McGilivray, was. She’d never rung me at work before, and I struggled to place the surname, assuming for a moment it must have been an assistant to one of the agents I’d called, when it suddenly dawned on me. It seemed odd to see her name on the screen in front of me, so mundane and innocuous, and I felt unaccountably flustered by its flashing presence.

I resisted the urge to ring immediately, for it seemed somehow important to let the fact of her call settle, and I pressed on with my round of calls, telling myself I must ensure the program’s empty slot was filled before turning to anything personal. If I hadn’t got this far by midday, I would call her on the way to an interview I’d arranged for a story on a notorious but apparently reformed East End criminal who’d set up an animal shelter staffed by delinquent kids. So it was that a couple of hours later, a new celebrity interviewee on board, and

feeling virtuous about the morning's productivity, I dialled Ainslie's number. She answered within a couple of rings with a quick and almost breathless hello.

"Lucy," she said and then paused for a moment. "How you going?"

"Well thanks." I paused, expecting her to immediately launch into the reason for the call. There was a momentary silence. "And you?" I said finally, awkwardly.

"Fine," she said brightly. "I've got the morning off, been walking on the Common. It's a sensational day."

I turned towards the window, considered the colourless sky. "Yes."

"You busy?" she asked. It seemed peculiar, this small talk, at odds with her usual directness.

"Yes," I said awkwardly, trying for a lightness of tone I wasn't feeling. "We're working on this new program and I'm madly trying to fill in some gaps."

"Look, I won't keep you then," she said sharply. I was relieved to hear it, as much because she seemed to revert to her normal blunt self. "I just wanted to have a chat. Do you think we could catch up?"

"Of course," I said. "When?"

"Later this afternoon? Tonight?"

I hesitated. The afternoon was simply impossible and the night I had unofficially reserved for our post-program celebrations.

"Can we make it some other time? It's just it's the new program launch ..."

"Oh sure. Look no problem," she said casually. "I'm sure I'll catch you some time over the weekend anyway ..."

Our call ended with a cordial exchange of well wishes, but I put the phone down feeling unaccountably disappointed. Of course she was just being social: over the previous months Ainslie and I had become friendly in our way, yet even now I couldn't really imagine enjoying a drink alone with her. With an almost automatic movement I began to dial James's number—what would he make of Ainslie's call?—but then changed my mind—there was really nothing to tell—and put the phone back down on its cradle. In a few minutes time I would have to start making my way out towards the East End and I wanted to pick up a takeaway coffee from the downstairs café before I left.

That evening the new program went to air without a hitch, much to our sweaty-palmed relief, and afterwards a crew of us headed to the bar down the road, cheered by the generous words and surprise tab from Martin, who left after one drink for a weekend family holiday in Devon. Unusually, Fran decided to join us—"the young ones" she called Sophie and I—and her unlikely presence enhanced the atmosphere of triumphant solidarity in which we had been revelling since the end of the show. There was still quite a large group from the office when my closest colleagues decided to head off at around ten—Fran for home and Sophie to meet Colin at a bar in Soho—and not long after, fearing the extent of tomorrow's hangover, I decided to call it quits too.

I was buoyant, as much because of Martin's comment that I might now be in line for a permanent contract as the wine, and it was with certain joy that I strode the familiar path along the Embankment on my way to the tube station. The air was warm, and I considered the reflection of the streetlights twinkling on the river and the upcoming summer as emblematic of my own sizzling new self emerging from some more temperate clime. I imagined myself a couple of years

from now ... an industry awards night. James was there, smiling at me adoringly, and I was aware of the familiarly admiring looks of others, men and women. Oh, how they wanted me, wanted to be me!

Passing a billboard poster advertising a silent film series being run at The Barbican I thought again of how foolish I was to constantly doubt James's affection, although it was never really his desire for me that seemed to be at stake. Perhaps I should call to see if he wanted to come over to my place later that night? No, I reprimanded myself: he'd have to wait. I'd see him on Sunday night, as we had tentatively planned. It would be better that way. I hoped Oliver wouldn't be home—a late-night perusal of his back wall would offer its own consolatory reward.

Distracted by my thoughts, I was virtually upon the two bloodied teenagers before I became aware of them: one with a busted up face and carrying a brick, the other whose white shirtfront was almost entirely stained dark red. They were jovial, laughing loudly and goading each other as they swayed along the well-lit walkway, a conduct just as shocking in light of the boy's apparent injury, as the sight of all that blood. They had about them an air of unpredictable volatility and, as I walked between the two of them—it was simply too late to do anything else—I tensed for the possibility of the brick striking the side of my head.

I breathed deep with relief and incredulity on the other side. As I approached the footbridge I realised I was shaking—the boys must have been some distance from me by then—but it wasn't until I was half way across that I heard someone below me yell out in shock and pain.

I looked down to see the boys running off and a suited woman lying in a foetal position on the pavement, rocking slightly from side to side with her head in her hands. The brick I had worried might strike me lay at rest beside her handbag.

Immediately people began to gather along the bridge to see what had happened, while others on the ground ran to assist the felled woman. Within a moment a small group were kneeling around her—looking strangely as if they were feasting upon her—and all I could make out was the woman’s lower body and legs. “Bashing,” a man beside me announced matter-of-factly into the night, and I felt momentarily incensed that he should have determined himself the spokesman on the affair. The few others around me began to move on, aware that there was probably nothing to do to help, and I finally did too. But it was with a peculiarly conflicted sense that I took those final steps to the station. Though grateful to be walking away at all, I felt strangely guilty, as if she had taken a rap intended for me. It was ludicrous, of course, for the boy’s violence had clearly been random, and yet I couldn’t shake the sense that I was aligned in some way with their cruelty.

So disturbing was this impression that I found myself reluctant to pass through the turnstile to the tube—I couldn’t go on, for to board my train home seemed tantamount to indictment. The jubilation that had accompanied me on the first part of my journey home had completely vanished, and although my racing heart and shaking had gone too, I was now struck by a panicky sense of immobility.

“Some time before Christmas,” I heard a man sigh behind me, and then another more bullish, “Move it!”

Shocked into motion, I finally stepped back from the turnstile, noting as I did the exasperated headshake of the extremely overweight man behind me. At another time I might have shot him back an insult in return—what did a couple of seconds matter for God’s sake? Piss off, you fat fuck!—but I felt more rattled than righteous and was struck suddenly by a powerful urge to see James. It was a physical longing, but more his arms that I craved than his bed, accompanied by a suddenly cemented determination that our time for creeping around must come to an end. I wanted our affair to be known, identifiable and undeniable. The time had come. I would tell him that night. With a renewed measure of conviction I turned on my heels and joined the line waiting for cabs outside.

The thought of us finally going public was electrifying, momentarily distracting, and yet in the ten minutes it took to reach James’s Pimlico flat the image of the battered woman kept coming back to undermine me. I saw her splayed legs, the dark puddle of blood—no, it must have been urine for it seemed from the positioning of that gorging bevy of helpers that it was her head that had been struck. Some part of me knew it was indulgence that kept drawing me back to her, that my drunken self was even relishing the process in some way, but I seemed incapable, even perhaps disinterested, in putting things to a stop, so the impression of the woman grew more lurid with each minute that passed.

My voice as I thanked the cab driver outside James’s place seemed almost a squeak and I responded to his query as to my welfare with a deliberately ambiguous shrug, scurrying from the car as if under some threat. There was a certain theatre in my actions, of which I suppose I was aware, and it wasn’t until I spent several moments waiting for James to respond to my buzzing that I even considered he might not be home.

I rang the bell once more, thinking I might need to rouse him from sleep, and then moved back to where I could see the bedroom window of his third floor flat. The light was off—I could tell nothing of the rooms behind—and I was just at the point of thinking my trip had been in vain when I noticed a shadow pass across the window. I stayed put for a moment, expecting James might at this point open it and wave to let me know he was on his way, but when no acknowledgment came I moved back towards the entrance, still anticipating it would click open at any moment.

Perplexed, but not yet daunted, I rang again, and then again, convinced James was in there, and that he must have seen me standing below on the pavement. And yet he had not let me in?

My first instinct was one of concern—that he might be slowly dying, too ill to get to the door or phone—and although I almost immediately accepted this as the remotest of possibilities, my thoughts avoided the path towards an alternative conclusion. Mostly I was confused—none of this made sense to me—but the one thing I still felt certain about was the need to speak with James that night. So it was that when a man came striding down the street moments later and stopped outside the doorstep on which I was perched, I considered his arrival some kind of blessed affirmation.

“Sorry. My friend lives here. Said she’d be home by now!” I announced pre-emptively, lest he worry I might be some nutter, as I stood to allow him entry.

“Sure,” the man smiled briefly, working his keys into the lock and pushing the door open in front of him.

I waved as he went inside, shaking my head in mock exasperation, and moved to reclaim my position on the doorstep. But before the door could click shut again I thrust my hand inside and, sure my unwitting associate was safely inside his own flat, I slipped quietly inside and went straight up to James's door.

"James," I started quietly. "James, it's me! We need to talk."

I had imagined getting inside the building would in its way guarantee admission at the next post, but there was no magical opening of James's door and I could make out no sounds coming from within.

"James," I insisted. I knocked again, more loudly. "I know you're in there ... I saw you at the window. I need to speak with you."

At some point I became uncomfortably aware of my full bladder, a sensation intensified by the stagy effect of the fluorescent security light illuminating the stairwell landing. I wondered at my options—leaving was not one of them, and I noted the camouflaging quality of the murky brown carpet with a flicker of possibility. Perhaps if the landing light was less of a faithful spotlight?

"I've lost my keys ..." I started, and although it was a lie, I felt my case immeasurably bolstered, as if it might soften James's peculiar resistance and finally see him open the door. "Come on, I'm busting here."

I can't tell how long my tirade continued, perhaps it went on for only a minute or two, but after some time the door of one of the neighbouring flats opened and a sleepy-eyed man, probably in his early thirties, asked me what was going on. Perhaps if his questioning had been harsh or accusing, in the way of the fat man at the tube station, I may have been frightened off and fled, but

instead he appeared to me as an ally and I found myself telling the stranger of my plight, as if he could make the difference I couldn't.

“You want to use my loo?” he said finally, wearily, and it seemed in that moment there was nothing I could do but to follow him back inside his flat. Some part of me registered it could have been dangerous, but I had by now almost fully convinced myself of those lost keys.

We talked for some moments, and although I can't recall the details of our conversation, I remember well a small, framed picture of a waterlily in the bathroom and an overwhelming sense of gratitude that he should offer me his couch to sleep on. It was only when he retired to his own bedroom and I was left alone in the unfamiliar décor that I began to feel as if I had fallen—or perhaps been dropped—into somebody else's bad dream, the kind in which irrationality and inescapability are married. I had an impression of the walls closing in on me, a sense that could only have been exacerbated by the living-room's plush baroque wallpaper, and felt a sort of damned curiosity to reach out and touch what seemed a manifestation of the convoluted coils of my own mind. To my eye the wall appeared patterned with lustrous velvet, but when I touched it I realised it was an illusion: under my fingers the maroon swirls were flat and hard, paper instead of luxurious pile.

When I woke it was with gasping breath and a terrifying sense of being smothered. A cat was wrapped around my head, and it mewed accusingly as I shoved it away from me into the still darkened flat. I lurched slowly upwards. My shoes. I had to find my shoes.

I stepped out in the dull grey of the early morning with a complicated sense of relief and apprehension, glanced furtively up at James's bedroom

window—the curtains were drawn, there were no apparent signs of life—and hurried on down the deserted road. Even in the fresh air, I couldn't escape the acrid smell of stale smoke and alcohol on my skin and clothes, and though repulsed, I was unusually grateful for the deadening reprieve of my encroaching hangover. On the bus on the way home, I was aware of my night before clothes, their neon announcement. A pock-faced boy—the Tesco's name tag on his white shirt announced him as Clay—sought to catch my eye and when I was too slow to avoid it, he smiled at me: something between a leer and a nod of complicity. He must have been annoyed by my failure to respond for it was with a terse jerking motion that he plucked the previous day's *Evening Standard* from his lap and opened it in front of his face, blocking me from his line of view.

At home I rifled through the flotsam in my bag for my key and slid it awkwardly into the lock. My hand felt strangely bloated, as if too large to perform the task easily, and the sense of forcing entry into my own home seemed suddenly shocking to me. A snapshot impression of the browning carpet on the landing outside James's door formed in my mind, along with an image of the stark fluorescent spotlight, the unwavering boldness of which had somehow fuelled my own doggedness. I saw my pleading self there and shut my eyes against a rush of queasiness. It occurred to me that today was my grandmother's birthday, or was it the next day, and then I remembered the woman who had been hit by a brick on the Embankment, the awful way her legs were awry. I heard someone laugh loudly, the timbre at once familiar and yet unidentifiable, slightly out of the grasp of my memory. It sounded as if it had come from the street but when I looked around, I could see no one. I felt a sudden searing headache, as if bludgeoned with something hard and blunt, and then overwhelmingly bilious.

I ran inside to the toilet and the hurling that followed was so violent it seemed as if certain unruly parts of myself were forcibly ejecting themselves in the streaming mess of bodily fluid: vomit, spit and tears. Even worse than the prospect of James's rejection was the thought I might have ruined things completely: it didn't occur to me to question the decency of his behaviour. When there was nothing left, I staggered to my bedroom on quavering legs, useless in every way imaginable.

I woke to hear Oliver clattering around upstairs, and from the light coming in through my bedroom window, I understood an entire day had passed and it was morning again. In some far off way the sounds reminded me of my mother—of me routinely rousing to the crash and hum of her dawn activity—and, as if by habit, I got up and showered to join him. The new day brought with it another comfort, for with the passing of yesterday's heavy hangover had emerged the hope that James had been out on Friday night after all; that the shadow I saw was a hallucination, a cruel trick of the night. I could expect his call today, I told myself hopefully, and we would make plans to meet as if nothing had happened. I convinced myself of the scene's humour, went even so far as to marvel slightly at the sense of liberation attached to such a base declaration of need. All on the basis that James had not been around to witness my show. The only real foolishness was my doubting that had James been home he would have opened the door.

Oliver's typically jovial greeting as I entered the living room seemed to confirm my right thinking and I was immediately grateful for plans we'd made during the week to go to the markets that morning. Earlier in bed I'd considered cancelling, but it occurred to me as I poured myself a coffee from the pot on the stove that it would be best to fill this day with activity. "A watched kettle never boils," I heard my mother's droll counsel.

“Feeling better?” Oliver queried from his position on one of the brown beanbags. He was seated in front of the television, an empty plate and mug at his feet. I had emerged from my bedroom yesterday only for sporadic trips to the bathroom and on one green-gilled occasion had run into Oliver as he was heading out the door.

“Much,” I said smiling gingerly, taking up the empty bag next to him. I was hungry but not sure of what my stomach could handle. “Still a bit dodgy though.”

“Hope it was a good night ...” Oliver sang in mock-reprimand.

“Post launch drinks,” I explained. “The new show went really well.”

It suited me for Oliver to think I was suffering the mother of all hangovers, and although I blamed it less on the alcohol than certain other aspects of the evening, it was true I didn’t feel entirely restored by my long sleep. Only one thing could bring that about.

For his part, Oliver appeared bright and breezy. He had been out the night before, claimed the mega multivitamin pill he downed with black coffee and honeyed crumpets would offset his few hours sleep. He spoke of the previous night’s curry, what it was doing to his intestines, and of the early hour impromptu dance session at Sarah and Michael’s place after the pub closed and they started playing around on the mixing decks.

Oliver’s own set of mixing decks, which had been delivered the week after I moved in and occupied the whole end of the living room, had hosted many similar parties, and it had become something of a competition between Oliver and Michael to see who was the most expert of the two: who could merge the tracks more seamlessly, come up with the most interesting combination of

sounds. Often I would come home at night to find such sessions underway, but still more frequently Oliver would be practising by himself: the lights out, an earphone against one ear and a look of earnest concentration on his face; dancing in the slightly giddy, manic way which seemed to punctuate all his movements.

Despite my own distractions, I pictured the night before with amusement: Sarah singing the praises of both, encouraging each in turn, and their light-hearted rivalry along with it. It was a safe battleground I guess, for removed from their relationship with its requirements of appropriate behaviour and improbable maturity.

“You guys are hopeless,” I laughed, the image of it playing in my mind. “I don’t know how Sarah puts up with you.”

“Boy’s night,” Oliver hooted. “She wasn’t there.” Encouraged by my mirth Oliver launched into a description of what each had done, how he had clearly outperformed Michael. At the memory he broke into dance, cutting the air with his hands as if working an imaginary mixing deck.

“You’re sooo cool,” I laughed, shaking my head at him.

“You’re sooo gorgeous,” he chortled back, leaping up and squeezing my shoulder as he danced past to drop his empty dishes in the kitchen. “I’m going to have a shower. Let me know when you’re ready to get going.”

Oliver disappeared out of the room and down the hallway, still drumming to an imaginary beat. “I can’t believe they trust you to design systems people base their entire businesses on,” I called after him.

“I can’t believe they trust you to tell stories that might impact on people’s voting decisions,” came his muffled reply from the stairs.

Through the living room window I watched a mother on the sidewalk attempting to fit a red hat onto the wriggling child beside her. The woman seemed to be yelling, although I could hear nothing, the girl who struggled against her grip remained gleeful in her attempt to escape. Oliver's company had buoyed me, but the scene outside inexplicably depressed me. An impression of James's enigmatic smile formed in my mind. Call me, I silently pleaded. Call me.

I was still fixed at the window when Oliver came back downstairs dressed in jeans and the new designer shirt he had just paid a fortune for. I knew he loved such lurid patterning, but I thought it was awful, attention demanding in the most blatant of ways.

"You like?" he asked

"Very dapper" I assured him dully.

"A little more enthusiasm wouldn't go astray."

"Sorry. You'll have to cut me some slack today," I entreated.

"Cheer up, sunshine. There's plenty more fish in the sea."

I knew Oliver's comment was general in its nature—it seemed a matter of private amusement that he'd attribute even the most general displays of apathy to some kind of love-related disappointment—but I felt unexpectedly annoyed. Recently, I had often found myself privately short with Oliver like this, as if the rush of irritation I felt towards him on that first night with James had never fully dissipated, only retreated out of sight to re-emerge at the slightest of provocations. At such moments I should have liked to lash at him saying "I know what's on the film". For I had long felt some superiority in possessing this knowledge, although its significance remained indistinct. It was a private

consolation—I never had said the words out loud, and nor would I—but the potential force of even this rebuttal now seemed diminished, all of a sudden uncertain in the way of my future with James.

“I’m fine,” I stammered. “Just tired.”

“Of course you’re fine,” he laughed. “And much more than that!” There was innuendo in his reply, ambiguous, but generous in its appraisal. I felt instantly cruel for having thought badly of Oliver or for having wished to slight him, when he had meant only to engage me in a harmless conversation.

I blew him a kiss, a small act of contrition that was as conveniently concealing as it seemed to be considerate, and turned again to the window. The street was empty now, the mother and daughter had moved on, and I thought absent-mindedly of the small girl’s red hat.

An hour or so later we were riding the bus past Kings Cross Station to Camden when Oliver jumped up and called at the driver to stop, pulling at me to get off as we did.

“Come on,” he insisted. “Let’s go and see Sarah. We can get the tube from here ... go on to the markets after that.”

I resisted at first, unsure I could face such fabulous self-assuredness on this tentative day, but I realised my half-hearted opposition was insufficient match for Oliver’s flighty persistence and that it could do me some good to see Sarah.

Oliver let us in to Sarah’s house with a key from his own ring. I assumed he expected Michael and Ainslie would be out for he made no attempt to yell for anyone but Sarah. When there was no answer he waved at one of the couches and instructed me to make myself at home before bounding up the stairs with

such force I found myself wondering about the adequacy of their construction. I scanned the stuffed bookshelf as I waited for Oliver to reappear and, when he hadn't after several minutes, I wandered across to the door at the end of the room and stuck my head into the black-and white tiled kitchen on the other side. There, sitting at the wooden table with her legs tucked up in front of her and bare feet on the chair, sat Ainslie.

“Hi,” she said casually, looking up from the paper in front of her.

“Hi. God, sorry, I didn't realise you were in. I ...”

“No bother,’ she cut me off lightly, apparently unconcerned. “You weren't looking for me.”

“Oliver's gone upstairs to find Sarah,” I announced dimly, hoping to justify my presence in their kitchen. I felt awkward suddenly, reminded of her telephone call on Friday and the unsettled way in which it had concluded.

“I know. I heard.” And then, as if she'd read my mind: “It's not surprising he got lost. It's like a jungle up there.” She growled softly in affirmation of her point, and then laughed loudly.

Ainslie told me Michael would be back shortly, that he'd just slipped to the shops for bread and eggs, and it was then I realised that we'd been expected all along. I said Oliver and I were just passing on our way to the markets, but she looked at me with bemusement and said simply “but Sarah rang.”

I remembered Oliver had spoken briefly to someone on his new mobile as we walked to the bus stop, but from the brevity and tone of the call I hadn't assumed it would be Sarah. “Work?” I'd suggested as he put the phone back into his jacket pocket, for it was not unusual for him to get such calls at any time of the day or night. He had raised one eyebrow in what I assumed was

confirmation before jumping up and down a couple of times in a harried kind of fashion and suggesting that we run.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t meet on Friday,” I started tentatively.

“It’s no problem,” Ainslie said breezily, looking up only briefly from her paper. “I just had some time ...”

It was clear she didn’t want to discuss the issue any further, and I assumed from her reply that she was either embarrassed or irritated by my having even raised it. But I felt rather more bolstered than insulted by this and privately vowed to consider her more from now on.

Nevertheless, Ainslie’s half-hearted musings from the paper about the news of the day didn’t engage my attention nearly as much as what was going on upstairs, not least because of the coital grunts I became convinced I could make out above the kitchen radio. Ainslie’s apparent refusal to acknowledge that anything unusual was going on stopped me from asking, but, once my surprise at Oliver’s audacity gave way to annoyance, I no longer cared to appear nonchalant.

“God, what are they doing up there?” I said, making a show of checking my watch.

“And you wonder why Michael always goes out,” Ainslie laughed, but with such uncharacteristic iciness that for the first time I questioned her own seeming ease with the arrangement. She had always appeared non-plussed, not in Sarah’s vague and blasé way, but in a practical sense, as if the details were largely irrelevant in the scheme of life and not worth wasting her time considering. Her corroboration cemented my infuriation. I was weary of the

game now and would go: leave a message for Oliver that I couldn't wait. It was a mistake to have come here after all.

Ainslie asked if I really had to leave, saying the others would be disappointed not to have seen me, but her goodbye seemed to conceal an element of smug encouragement that I felt sure was more directed at the randy couple upstairs than at me. You're right not to put up with it, her eyes seemed to be telling me, even as she announced in their defence that they would only be a couple of minutes more, that Michael had just slipped out and was probably just around the corner.

"See you soon," she called as I left. I noticed her wrapping her arms around her chest and scanning the street before hurriedly closing the door.

I had nearly reached the corner when Michael walked around it from the other direction, a clutch of shopping bags in each hand. He was walking with his head down and I would have avoided being recognised entirely if the odd sight of a man in a balaclava, driving an open convertible, hadn't distracted me. As it was, I nearly walked into him.

"Lucy!" he exclaimed through puffing breath. "Where are you going?" Michael was so insistent that I come back for brunch that I felt I couldn't refuse. I retraced my steps, a bag of groceries in hand and my plans for the morning shelved. By the time we walked in, Oliver, Sarah and Ainslie were seated around the kitchen table chatting, a mug of tea in front of each.

"Food!" Ainslie announced, leaping up to relieve us of the bags. "We're all starving."

Oliver tapped on the table with a jumpy restlessness. I guessed this was an expression of sheepishness, but there was no sign of the unspoken disapproval

I sensed in Ainslie in the moments before my earlier departure. I felt a low level betrayal, the source of which appeared shifting. I had thought, at the time, that Ainslie supported my decision to leave, perhaps had even admired it, but I now wondered what she had said to Sarah and Oliver in my absence. Her back, the only part of her visible to me now as she cracked eggs into a bowl on the kitchen bench, offered no clues.

It was then I noted the open packet of photographs on the table and froze. Could these be from the bogus film I had planted in Oliver's jeans pocket? It was an irrational thought, but one that called directly on the sense of woeful trepidation that characterised my lingering hangover—and worse, the entire weekend—as to seem momentarily likely. But with the briefest second look I recognised the photos as those Sarah had taken on our day out in Brighton. There was one of Oliver, James and I larking on the pebbled shore: I was wearing the red jumper I had bought with James in mind several days before the shot was taken. I was struck by how very young I looked. While it was a relief to think I hadn't been sprung in relation to the film, the stabbing sense of bygone days left me, in its way, equally perturbed.

Before I could say anything Sarah slipped out of her chair and clasped one of my hands. "You're back," she cooed and lead me to sit down in the empty chair beside her. "Sorry darling, we didn't mean to ...". She trailed off, closing her eyes to receive Michael's kiss to her cheek as he passed by her to the kitchen bench.

"I found her wandering along," Michael announced.

“She’s back so what does it matter now?” Ainslie said, moving across to the table to pick up an almond croissant from the selection of pastries Michael had set down.

“So she is,” Sarah announced to no one in particular.

“We’ll go to the markets next week,” Oliver said jauntily, as if by way of afterthought. “Make a day of it.”

I imagine it was an attempt to soothe me but I found his placation empty, a condescension that struck at the heart of my fragility. Could I be so easily appeased? Oliver knew I’d be unlikely to make a fuss: understood instinctively, I think, that my inclusion meant more to me than this one small humiliation, that the good impression of certain others generally was worth the indignity of being occasionally sidelined—though, perhaps, this had not always been the case. Without James my place in the world seemed suddenly insecure: the extent of my marginality had never been more apparent, nor the price of my compliance more starkly revealed.

My grandmother had once given me an old velvet ring box to store my baby teeth—she was the only one who knew I still had them. I kept it in a shoe-box under my bed, alongside the photographs of the sleeping girl. Even as a child I thought these bony artefacts too precious to surrender to the tooth fairy: it seemed injurious in some way, a stacking of the odds against yourself, to give away a piece of yourself, even one for which you no longer had a use. So I held on to them for years, taking them with me from place to place, and never really knowing quite what to do with them. It was only very occasionally that I pulled them out, as I had done that morning as if a celebratory gesture to my ageing

grandmother's birthday. As on every occasion that I'd held them, it seemed I was holding my young self in my hand. It was for this girl that I had wanted to cry ...

"It doesn't matter," I blurted, all of a sudden on the verge of tears.

I fixed my gaze on the front page weather forecast on the paper Oliver was now reading opposite me; took some solace in the smiley face symbol indicating it was to be a clear day. A sign of good things ahead, I told myself. It was with some horror then that it occurred to me, upside down as the paper was, the smile of the sun could from my angle be considered a frown.

Despite my best efforts, the food on the kitchen table appeared inedible, too glossy, like the hairspray-styled perfection of a magazine spread; my tepid coffee seemed an insufficient anathema to this sickly arrangement. I felt queasy again. It was to deflect attention from my tenuous state of my equanimity that I said what I did next. He had been on my mind the whole day but at that moment his name seemed to escape from my mouth unbidden. "James", I said.

Michael laughed loudly at the mention of his name and launched into the telling the story of a minor traffic accident in which James had been involved in the week before. I had not heard about it before now.

"A hearse of all things. Ran straight into the back of it ... only one dead at the scene."

Ainslie laughed and groaned and Oliver shook his head. Sarah said nothing but I felt her bore into me. When I turned to face her she looked away but I caught in her sideways glance a penetration that was beyond my capacity to grasp.

"Just joking," I heard Michael carry on. "The car was empty. Luckily no coffin ..."

It was the last I recall before making a beeline for the door, my instinct for composure capable of no more than a fumbling announcement of forgotten plans to meet Wendy and a faltering round of goodbyes. Such politeness seemed somehow of the essence, a last-ditch effort not so much to save face as to reinstate it.

For the next three days I didn't go to work and hardly went out. I only got up when I knew Oliver would be at work and scurried back into my bedroom when I heard the scrape of his key in the door. When he knocked I told him I had the flu and was best left alone.

I slept through most of those days. Once I woke up in the middle of the afternoon on the living room floor, not sure of how I had managed to get there. I disregarded Oliver's notes on the kitchen table; the various phone messages. My colleague Sophie had rung several times—Oliver must have told her I was ill for she sent a get well card along with a bunch of lilies that I left untended on the kitchen table and later discovered transferred to a vase on the bench. For a day I enjoyed their prettiness, albeit in an abstract way, but after a time I felt sickened by their pungency and dumped them outside to rot. The few times I went out to buy food, my trips were characterised by the furtive scurries of a creature under siege. It seemed imperative that I be seen as little as possible, as if the eyes and smiles of others offered a physical threat, and despite its poor options I went no further than the corner store. I was aware at some point that I needed to go and see a doctor, at least to justify my absence from work, but the energy required seemed beyond my ability.

When I thought of anything at all during those days, it was mostly about James. I found myself trying to imagine him as a stranger would; as if it might be possible to gauge his attractiveness objectively, without the inadvertent aphrodisia of the photographs on Oliver's back wall and my theft of the film. I wanted to understand the immediacy of my attraction, the unexpected thud of it when first we met, and how it stupefied me so. Yet, it was impossible for me to not imagine being moved by the authority James seemed to exert, how even when asleep he had seemed to exude the salty virility that had enamoured me the day we met. A cad, my grandmother might have surmised, someone to be spurned on the grounds that a woman's reputation was still a thing she ought protect.

Strangely, I also found myself thinking of David, as I had not in a number of months. The night before I left home it had been sweltering, and our flat felt oppressive with heat and the smell of burnt garlic from the chicken dish we had cooked together earlier. I had announced my decision to leave only a fortnight before, and although I said I wanted him to come (David said he wished I would stay) there had never been any talk of a compromise. In this way we had been able to avoid making any particular decision on the future of things, but I don't think either of us believed we would not find our way into something new. My new black suitcase—which by a happy accident my mother had given me for my birthday—sat packed in the corner of the bedroom. Across the top of the case lay the white llama-wool coat that I had stumbled across in my grandmother's wardrobe and which had, in its way, prompted my decision to leave. I imagined it to have a certain vintage chic, and whatever the case, it would do until I could afford to find something else. I knew David was awake beside me in bed that last

night, I could tell from the steady rhythm of his breath, but I didn't say anything or reach out to touch him. Instead I had tried to imagine what it might be like to sleep without him, in training it seemed for the next night when it would no longer be possible to roll over and touch his arm, or leg, even if I still wanted too.

My sickness started to lift, but I emerged from those few days of torpor as if into another, milder world: its palette more muted, less glittering. The weekend now seemed a distant, unlikely dream as, I now surmised, was the prospect of James's call.

“Ready love?”

I shivered in my thin dress, having guessed, rightly as it turned out, that something black and elegant would be the most appropriate attire for an event of this nature, nodded at the mini-cab driver who was idling outside in an ageing brown Vauxhall. My chariot had at least arrived on time. The familiar landscape of Upper Street looked strangely unreal, a set constructed for a movie, and I noted the bustle on the evening streets with muted suspicion. Our trip south was agonisingly slow, at one point it was so stop-start I could make out the hard line of blush streaking a striding woman’s face. Though I had anticipated heavy traffic, I now worried it might have been quicker to catch the bus and then the train after all. Certainly I could have saved time by freshening up in the office bathroom, as Oliver had planned to do, but the quick-stop home had seemed imperative and I had savoured the prospect of some time alone, as much in order to ground myself, as to groom. I had chosen carefully, a dress James had once commented on favourably, and spent a small fortune on new shoes that seemed more necessity than extravagance. The ones I’d have normally worn were those I had on the Friday night before. In my mind’s eye they remained indelibly sullied. Again I steeled myself for the prospect of seeing him.

However disconcerting the previous week, and however little I understood what had happened, I knew that I wanted a solution and, more than this, I wanted one with the best possible result. I wanted a new life that was

nothing like the one I had left behind in Australia, and I wanted it to include not only James, but Sarah, Oliver and even Michael and Ainslie (if this is what it took). I wanted us all to be together like we had been that day in Brighton, and it seemed reasonable to me that what once had been could be that way again.

It was true I had made a wrong move, a horribly rash and unflattering blunder, but I figured that it was only one step in a dance of many. I'd been working hard, burning the candle at both ends, and perhaps failed to consider how this could blur my understanding of certain things; how it might have influenced me to read undertones into certain situations where really there had been none. The key to proceeding was to be thick-skinned and light-hearted: the best and only thing was to pretend Friday night had never happened, as, for all intents and purposes, James and I had never happened. It seemed to me that this might be the ultimate lesson for me of the arrangement: its boundaries were fluid, and in order to fix things with James, with all of them, I must be too. It wasn't so much a question of compliance as flexibility: to ensure my survival in this brave new world I needed, above all, to be adaptable.

During the course of the drive my thoughts became clearer and more confident. There were many things about which I didn't know, perhaps never would. I didn't know the exact number of kilometres between London and Perth, or the name of the capital city of Mozambique. I didn't know how to speak Italian, or how to read sheet music. I didn't know everything about James, including why he hadn't opened the door that night. But I knew that I might love him, and over the course of the last week there seemed no fact more relevant, more singularly compelling than this.

I tried to take some comfort from the knowledge that my behaviour, prior to and since last Friday night's misdemeanour, had been impeccable—I had not even set to dialling him once! Even more encouraging, I was headed to Sarah's exhibition opening, the timing of which appeared an omen of good fortune. If Sarah's photographs on Oliver's back wall could prompt the beginning of my affair with James, as I felt they had, then these fresh images might restore whatever the severed link was between us.

My first sight of the gallery was a blur as we passed by without stopping (we had finally picked up some speed and my driver seemed reluctant to relinquish it). It was only on our shark-like re-approach that I recognised the sleek, white frontage and stylishly trimmed pots of hedge at the door. The May Gallery was one of those terraced buildings that had been overhauled, internally gutted to include a large square window at the front and a white-walled expanse of space inside. A discrete silver plaque between the door and the window confirmed visitors were at the right place, although it was more than obvious on the night from the small crowd milling outside to smoke cigarettes and drink wine on the otherwise quiet street.

With a dream-like—almost premonitory—sense of familiarity, I walked the steps to the door and pulled it open. Scarcely late at all in the end, I was surprised to find the party fully in swing. It seemed from the laughter and competing voices as if it could have been going for hours rather than mere minutes. The main room and corridor were crushed with people, and my first impression was not of Sarah's work but of how few of the people I recognised. There were some, of course: Michael and Ainslie appeared in a huddle at the far

end of the main room, and Oliver was in animated conversation with a man whose face looked familiar, but I couldn't place.

Over Michael's shoulder I could see Sarah, glowing in the oyster coloured slip that I recognised as the Ghost design she had talked of buying a few months before. As she turned her head I saw she was wearing tiny flowers in her hair and I imagined myself a guest at her and Michael's wedding. She looked delicate, just as James had once insisted, and I felt peculiarly as if I had been deceived by my own inability to recognise this before now. I had thought her striking, dazzling even, but there had seemed a formidable forthrightness to her looks and manner—one that I had sought to emulate with my weight loss and structured clothing—which somehow had precluded a softer assessment. I don't know why this should matter so much, but it struck me that I might be still playing the game by old rules, while others had gone off in a new direction. Sarah seemed to be engaged in conversation with a short, stout man, but I could tell from the distracted way she glanced about that she was scanning the crowd, either in general or for someone in particular.

It was at that moment that I turned and almost literally bumped into James, who appeared headed somewhere in conspiratorial haste with a blonde woman by his side. He seemed abstractedly exalted, his cheeks burned with colour and the hair around his temple was darkened by sweat. I wondered if he was high, assumed it more than likely, and berated myself vaguely for not having thought to prepare myself with a similar fortification. I knew why I hadn't, although any conscious awareness of my reasons were hazy: I had wanted to ensure an imperturbable impression and had sensed in the guarded reserve of my normal sobriety the most likely chance of success. But I seemed to have

overestimated my will, or perhaps underestimated my terror for, at the first sight of a drinks waiter, had lurched across James to fetch myself a glass. It had taken some considerable degree of self control to stop myself from necking its contents in one long gulp.

“Lucy! You’ve met Nat?” James gestured towards the woman beside him with a disconcerted wave.

“It’s Natalie. Natalie Collins,” she said brightly, extending a manicured hand towards me. Her hair was sleekly styled but her smile irregularly red and wide: I had the sudden and unsettling impression of her lipstick smudged around the base of James’s erection.

“Lucy Patterson,” I announced unsteadily, counselling myself as I did to remember that whatever had happened, and whatever was to happen that night, I must remain breezy.

“Nat works here ... Lucy lives with Oliver,” James carried on solidly, continuing to fan his face with the exhibition catalogue as he did.

“Oh, you’re the reporter?” Natalie gushed slightly.

I nodded. James had spoken of me to her? I tried to meet James’s eye, but he remained unreachable, his glaze set to glassy resistance.

“Oliver mentioned the story you might be running. I wanted to thank you. Really, it would be a great thing for us ...”

“Oh yes,” I said falteringly, reminded of a conversation in which Oliver had suggested I cover Aussies in the London art scene for the new program. I put up the idea, and though my editor hadn’t been enthusiastic, Oliver seemed convinced it would happen.

“I’ll give you my card. Please, call me if there’s anything you need.
Anything at all ...”

“Of course.” I could feel the throb of a blister forming on the back of my heel, as if it were my heart beating uncomfortably. I had left the plasters on the vanity in the bathroom at home. All at once the situation I had found myself in seemed untenable and I was anxious to start over. I needed to speak with James, and, though I should have liked simply to shove Natalie sideways, I knew my only hope was to remain patient, and seek an opportunity when later it arose. But as it was this conversation was unendurable. Making platitudes about the event’s obviously fabulous turnout, I very deliberately inserted Natalie’s card inside my wallet and issued my evacuation excuse: “I haven’t even seen her work yet ...”

As I turned I caught sight of the back of Sarah’s head. She had escaped the stout man and was moving through the crowd at the other end of the room.

“What?” James’s voice registered confusion, then a shrill laugh of comprehension. “What are you waiting for?”

I heard his last question as if from some distance for had already begun to move in the direction of the rows of photographs lining the walls, but nevertheless it struck me as one of particular gravity: what *was* I was waiting for?

“She’s young and beautiful, but so perfectly vague,” James went on, in the background. It took me some moments to register that he was talking to Natalie about me. By now I stood in front of the introductory notes by the gallery’s entrance, reading with stupefied ambivalence about how, amongst other things, the highly stylised nature of Sarah’s images worked to subvert standard notions of identity.

The photographs were positioned along two long stretches of white wall in order to be viewed sequentially. All of the same size, and they were no more than twenty centimetres squared, the images were contained in black box-like frames which forced you to look into them, as if through a keyhole, to see what was inside. In each was a close up of a different young girl's face with her head back as if against a pillow in sleep. The girls ranged in colouring and age, I guessed most would have been between roughly two and eight. What united them was their languid positioning and the spangled ruby choker around each of their necks. The jewellery was positioned slightly differently on each—the clasp showed on one girl but not another, on one it appeared to have been turned inside out—but in all there was an element of deliberate distortion that made it clear that such adornment had been superimposed.

It is possible that without the discomfiting aspects of the framing and jewellery the images could have been viewed as a celebration of childhood innocence. But, as it was, the effect was much more sinister: were the lips of the girls parted in the suggestion of sexual consummation or death? For while it was beautiful, the ruby necklace was evocative of a slit throat. It was obviously Sarah's intention to create such an unsettling effect, but my own reaction was magnified by the dawning realisation that one girl had not made it up onto to the wall. It must have been her plan to include the girl in the photographs under my bed as part of the display. I felt my own throat constrict, as if in substitution, and a hot, tingling sensation travel down the length of my back.

Long enough after the initial shock has worn off, I can now begin to appreciate the work as something distinct from me, see what Sarah was trying to do. Even admire the skill and vision with which it was executed. The memory

still invokes for me a nebulous kind of regret, but I can see how her framing of the images drew on ordinary fascination (I accept this now), the fascination of people to peer into the closet lives of others and the erotic thrill it invokes. I can see too that her repeated images, the sheer number of bejewelled girls, imposed upon them an anonymity that reflected in some ways Sarah's own life choices—her serial lovers—as well as those closest to her. I include myself in this category. We were, in our own ways, garrotted by the underlying force of her fixation. For better and worse, I might add. But I run ahead of myself ...

When I saw the neatly rowed images I reeled, as if the whole thing were some elaborate and sick joke at my expense. The abstract, and yet somehow relevant, memory of Sarah's sly examining look the last time I had seen her rose up in my mind, and as I moved from one image to the next it occurred to me with increasing assurance, and the demented reasoning of my own obsession, that Sarah knew of my fascination with Oliver's back wall, had predicted my affair with James, and perhaps even knew of what had happened that horrible Friday night before. It was if she saw right into me and had, through her images, intentionally or otherwise, stripped away any claim I may have to a secret, or even certain, self. I had never been discovered ogling the pictures on Oliver's back wall, but it seemed as if my fantasy of exposure had come to pass after all.

I felt in that moment a strange sense of the black and white images merging into a milky grey. I didn't so much move forward to view them, but they were impressed upon me, layered, in a single momentary experience. I had another more obscure, but oddly pertinent recollection: of the three-dimensional—built up with layers of paper and glue—Holly Hobby pictures my sister and I had above our beds as children. The pictures, which had been

Christmas gifts, served less as decoration than opportunity for retribution: whichever one of us had been offended would secretly strip away a layer from the other's Holly until there was nothing left, just the outline where once she had been.

"They're a piece of work don't you think?" Out of nowhere Oliver had come up behind me and was now standing so close I could feel his hot breath on my neck. I was alarmed by his proximity, as if his presence at my side was inadvertently alerting the crowd to the fact that the girls in the boxes were really aspects of me.

"A thin veil, wouldn't you say?" He laughed bitterly and gestured towards the image of the bejewelled girl in front of us. "Much like the one she wore on her wedding day ..."

Oliver didn't appear to be looking for a response, and in any event, I had none to offer. His talk seemed gibberish—I had no idea what he was on about—but the regret in his voice spoke volumes to me, as if it had been plucked from some dark and abandoned place within my own soul.

It was then that Oliver jerked his head suddenly sideways and I followed his gaze to take in the sight of James posing with his arm around Sarah—a social pages shot I presumed. With a shudder I recognised in James the same possessive air I had spied in Oliver that day in Brighton. It occurred to me with sudden clarity that Sarah and James were lovers. Her evasive look when last I had seen her remained beyond my comprehension, but I had guessed that its elements included pity and incredulity. Sarah didn't have any psychic insight into my vigil outside James's house that Friday night: she had been there.

“I knew as soon as he arrived he was out to cut my lunch. He couldn’t leave things back in Berlin. Had to try and go there again ...”

Oliver carried on beside me, his voice barely audible and marked by a faraway quality that suggested it was coming from some place other than from where he normally communicated. I was only at the edge of understanding what Oliver was talking about, but at the very least I knew both Oliver and I had been dumped: that much was clear.

It dawned on me then that there was no longer any reason for me to be there. I had hoped the occasion of the exhibition might reignite the spark between James and me. But the images had provided me with none of the solutions I hoped for: in fact, had only served to confuse things. I suppose it was something to have found an answer to the riddle of his waning affection and refusal to open the door that night, if indeed Sarah was the answer. But the understanding of this produced an even more discomfiting sense of my own misplaced vanities, of which the packet of photographs of the girl under my bed now seemed an even more lurid reminder.

I searched the crowd for Ainslie—she seemed the most appropriately qualified of my options—and led Oliver over to her, depositing him before her with a grim salutary smile. It seemed too dangerous to speak, and so I did not, but she must have understood from my expression the nature of his incapacity, and perhaps even my own, for her eyes broadened with unexpected tenderness and she dismissed me with a brief, but not unfriendly, nod.

I turned from them and walked to the door, still hoping James might intercept me, and stepped outside onto the pavement with unwilling legs. I did not look back. I hobbled past an oddly placed hardware shop, slowing outside the

chocolate shop on the corner only to slip off my cutting shoes and ran down the street.

When I got up the next day there was a message from Ainslie on the answering machine. She had my address book. One of the gallery staff had found it on the floor at the end of the night and she had offered to take it; would deliver it back to me after work that afternoon.

As forewarned, I was summoned from the couch by the doorbell, sometime about four. Although in many ways I deplored the prospect of Ainslie's visit, I had nevertheless spent the day in anticipation, making sure that I had returned from a lone stroll of Upper Street in time and picking up some pastries in case she wanted to come in for tea. I'd got home to find the house quiet, as it had been when I left late morning, but Oliver's bike no longer cluttered the entry hall. On an ordinary day I might have assumed he'd gone to meet Sarah and Michael, but today that seemed unlikely.

I'd never seen Ainslie in her nurse's uniform before and her unfamiliar attire was strangely disconcerting, as if I had been expecting to find somebody else entirely standing outside the door. I gestured at her to come in—it didn't occur to me to there might be an option—and as I trailed her primly clothed *derriere* up the stairs, I regretted my own dishevelled appearance: the shabby house clothes I had changed into when I got back from shopping—my deliberately careless and unwashed hair.

Ainslie walked into the kitchen, as I suggested, and placed my address book at the end of the table, taking what had been James's usual position, the

seat opposite the bench and closest the window. Out of habit I put the kettle on as I walked into the room and it babbled in the background as I sat down.

“Thanks again,” I offered awkwardly. “I’d be lost without that thing.”

“I know,” she smiled, kindly it seemed to me. “And like I said, it’s no bother.”

Ainslie was in no way as immediately endearing as Sarah; she wasn’t cajoling or conspiratorial, as Sarah could be on a good day, and yet she was more dependable too. With Sarah one was always left slightly guessing, although I suppose this was a good part of her allure. By comparison, Ainslie suffered on account of her regularity, in looks and manner: she was not so much staid as overshadowed. But grateful for Ainslie’s benevolence, both the previous night at Sarah’s exhibition and today, I reminded myself of my earlier decision to make more of an effort.

“You know, I love this place,” she continued, gazing out of the kitchen window to the garden below. “It’s not cramped like so many of the places here.”

“It’s true,” I agreed. But it seemed a fact of some cheerlessness. A flash impression of Oliver’s airy loft bedroom formed in my mind, along with it the photographs on the back wall, and I felt a sudden wrenching regret. “Are you still looking for a place?”

“Supposedly,” Ainslie laughed, a raucous snorting that stopped just as abruptly as it had started. “Sarah keeps saying I shouldn’t bother, that I should just shut up about it and stay with them.”

“You can have my room if you’re interested. I’m thinking about moving in with one of the guys from work.” I hadn’t even considered it before now, and, although surprised to hear the words as they came out of my mouth, I knew I

would ring about the room I had seen advertised on the bulletin board in the office.

“Really?” Her voice contained a mild excitement. “It would make things easy I guess. I’ve always thought that when Michael and Sarah went back to Berlin I’d head off too, maybe do some of the travelling I’ve been talking about ...”

“They’re going back?” This was news to me.

“Next month,” she said distractedly, weighing up her own options presumably. “Michael reckons he’ll have finished the final plans for the technology centre by then. It’ll be easy to fly back and forth to supervise the building.”

“But Sarah hated it there,” I spluttered. Oliver’s lament of the night before, largely incomprehensible to me then, echoed in my head. Although strangely conflicted by the possibility, there was a deep and perverse sense of relief attached too. If Sarah and Michael were leaving London and us behind—Oliver, Ainslie, me—James would be forsaken too.

“Sarah’s pregnant,” Ainslie stated. “They’ve been keeping it under wraps. But it’s not exactly one of those things you can keep a secret forever ... People will smell a rat sooner or later.” She laughed again, looked up at me directly. Something unspoken passed between us.

“Don’t worry. I’m good at keeping secrets, if that’s what you mean,” I said. I was rocked by her revelation.

Ainslie smiled gently but I sensed that she was indulging me: I had misunderstood her. I don’t know if it was the trace of maternal concern I thought

I saw hurry across her face—as if for a small, wounded animal—but I began to cry, a soundless freefall of tears.

“Oh God, Lucy. What’s wrong?”

Ainslie plucked a tissue from her bag—I could have guessed she might have some—and reached over, patting my limp hand across the table.

“The arrangement?” I blurted unthinkingly.

“It’s not what you think,” she said softly, but with a hint of impatience. She paused, appeared to be making a consideration of the situation. “Oh fuck, I suppose it makes no difference anymore ... I thought you’d worked it out yourself, felt sure that day you left Sarah and Michael’s house before brunch. I was wrong obviously, but ...”

The kettle had begun to squeal urgently: Ainslie stood up and flicked off the stove.

“Michael shoots blanks,” she said matter-of-factly, pulling two mugs from the cupboard above her head. “So, it was never so much about the sex as the sperm.”

The word “blanks” seemed to reverberate in my head, and I heard myself repeat the word out loud in a whisper. I recalled Sarah’s comments about what a cruel place Berlin had seemed, as well as James’s story about her longing for a child. Although only dimly aware of what Ainslie was saying, I was aware that some terrible deceit had been perpetrated, or perhaps various deceits, of which none of us were entirely innocent. An impression of the stark newspaper headline formed in my mind: *The Arrangement A Scam*.

“And Oliver?” I whispered.

Ainslie set the tea before us on the table and sat down again, wincing slightly, as if on account of a periodically recurring irritation. “It’s not like he was unaware of the potential consequences ...”

“You mean he doesn’t *know*?”

“I’ve wanted to tell him but Sarah won’t have a bar of it. She never expected he might fall in love with her.”

Ainslie registered my expression of incredulity.

“Oh, I know people always feel insulted when they’ve been kept out of a secret,” she continued. “But sometimes it’s better not to know ...” Her voice cracked, fell away. It seemed that if ever once she had been fully convinced by such a position—and I assumed Sarah’s blithe reasoning would have appealed to Ainslie’s no-nonsense side—it was now one of fraying sway.

“Oliver wouldn’t see it that way. Or even Michael for that matter ...” I had recovered myself by now and, although my statement was driven by an angry concern, I felt strangely distanced, as if my emotions resided somewhere outside of me, nearby but not within reach.

“It was Michael’s idea, Lucy. A little plan he and Sarah hatched together in Berlin.”

“But ... Why couldn’t they have taken one of the more traditional routes?” I stammered.

“I would have thought this was one of the more traditional routes, Lucy,” she countered grimly. “Age old. And we all know how much Michael loves to play the big swinging dick about town ...” Abruptly, she stopped speaking, turned her attention to a pile of unopened mail at the end of the table.

I had been through Friday's delivery earlier, scouring the motley shaped pile for one of the blue airmail envelopes from home. With family and friends I communicated mostly by phone, but every now and then I would receive a letter in the post from my mother or grandmother, their handwriting instantly recognisable and in itself a small cause for glee. It was with impatience that I tore open such letters and, while I had already heard most of the news in each, they offered small details that our other modes of communication didn't. My grandmother's handwriting had become shakier and it alerted me to her fragility in ways even a meeting might have been unable to. But there were no such envelopes today, just a few letters for Oliver and statement from Barclays for me, which I had skimmed and then discarded with a vague sense of alarm—where did all my money go?

I have no idea what Ainslie was thinking during the period of silence between us, but my overwhelming feeling was for Oliver and of how I had let him down.

“Was there anyone else?” I asked finally, thinking of James.

“No, that was never necessary. And Michael insisted Oliver was the only suitable candidate ... Look, it's their business, not mine. I really don't know much more than that.”

She seemed either bored or annoyed by my insistence: it would have been superfluous to point out that she already was involved, that we all were.

“How can they live with such a thing?” I half-whispered. “If they'd only asked. I'm sure he would've agreed.”

“Everyone has secrets. I know you must understand the appeal.” There was weariness in Ainslie's tone now, as if this were a ground she had been over

many times before. “Sarah and Michael are having a baby. That’s it. They’ve had so many disappointments. I can see why they might have felt this way was safer, how it could offer a greater chance of success—as much as these things can ever be guaranteed.”

“But surely he’ll find out. What then?”

“Who’s going to tell?” There was no threat attached: it was simply stated, as if she might have been announcing a preference for lamb over veal.

I found myself thinking of the horrible night I’d stood knocking outside James’s front door and he had not let me in. But it was with none of the normal shame that saw me desperate to banish the memory. Rather, I considered the scene with a kind of stricken interest, as compelling as it was confronting. It seemed that the father of Sarah’s baby could just as well be James as Oliver. And that I might be the only one other than Sarah to know this.

To tell Oliver would be to expose myself, but it was more than the question mark over the baby’s father that occupied me in those moments. Who and what might be served by telling what I knew. Certainly truth, whatever that might be, seemed too subjective a notion to hold an overwhelming sway.

It occurred to me then that, for all the bravado of the arrangement, Sarah and Michael were less interested in the experience of intimacy than in deflecting it. Theirs was a disinterested curiosity, or perhaps a curious disinterest. Ultimately though, despite an insistence on living a less ordinary life—on pointedly rejecting ordinariness, and even choosing cruelty in preference—there was nothing brave about it. I saw too, finally, that Sarah and Michael’s carelessness—like its driving partner, desire—was born not from strength but from deficiency, from a kind of lack.

I thought again of the photographs of the girl under my bed. Sarah's niece I had presumed, with some disappointment, after getting them developed. It occurred to me now that it didn't matter who she was, Sarah's niece or someone else entirely. She had escaped the fate of the others at Sarah's exhibition. And perhaps in saving her from such a fate I might have inadvertently saved myself.

At some point Ainslie must have spoken again for I became aware of the questioning way in which she was looking at me, as if in expectation of reply.

"Pardon?" I said.

"I suppose you might despise us now." It came out like a statement, but I could tell from her uncertain expression that it was intended as a question, and I was surprised to think that she might care.

"No," I said quietly. Not Sarah, by whom I now felt the most deceived, or James, or any of them.

I looked down at the garden through the kitchen window. The rusty white chair, overturned through the winter, had now been turned upright again. I felt world-weary, a sudden powerful longing for my downstairs bed, of being wrapped in the comforting acidity of my sweat-smelly sheets. I wasn't outraged or even so much sorry. To the extent I was feeling anything it was a vague revulsion, one no more directed at Sarah and Michael, or even James and Ainslie, than myself.

"Do you ever get the sense that we're just playing to some script that's already been written?" I asked calmly.

Ainslie looked at me with a puzzled scepticism. "You mean destiny—that things have been preordained?"

“No, not like that so much. Just that we keep doing the same things over and over, performing the same old show but on different stages.”

“Community theatre,” she scoffed mildly, but I felt sure she understood what I meant. I managed a small laugh, but was saddened too by the rupture that lay open, unbridged between us, between all of us, though presumably it always had.

We spoke of other things for some moments, for it seemed we had exhausted the topic of the arrangement, or perhaps been exhausted by *it*. Then I wished she would go.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m really tired ...” I started.

I stood and walked across to the room. Ainslie followed me down the stairs, came to stand opposite me in the open doorway.

“See you then,” she said. “I’ll let you know what I decide about the room ...”

I was amazed that she might actually be considering it, but perhaps it was not so surprising after all. I leaned across to reciprocate her kiss to the cheek—it seemed somehow churlish not to, for more than likely I would not see her again, nor Sarah and Michael—and I watched in bewilderment as she headed down the street. It was only when she had nearly reached the corner that I called out to her suddenly, “Does James know about any of this?”

Ainslie stopped and turned; she was still close enough for me to make out the furrowing of her brow. With a shrug she shook her head, and then made off again, on her way. I like to think I would have told her truth about the roll of film I stole, about James too, if she’d asked me.

Oliver and I were in our own ways crushed by Sarah and Michael's departure, but it was something we rarely referred to. Friendship sometimes relies upon discretion for its survival, certainly something less than full confession, and I sensed it was a relief for us both to avoid conversation that might have left us open to the other's disapproval.

I moved out of Ambrose Road on a Saturday, one improbably warm day, even for August. And yet my cleared-out room seemed to reveal the same cold emptiness that it had on the wintry day I had moved in nearly eight months before. Too much had happened while living there to make leaving easy but looking around the emptied room, it seemed I had left no trace. This sense was exaggerated by the knowledge that Ainslie would be moving in, some time during the following week.

When the packing was done I put my suitcase and extra garbage bag of clothes in the hallway, and wandered upstairs to leave a note and an extra week's rent—a conciliatory gesture, technically unnecessary—on the kitchen table. I was strangely wary of touching anything, and after an aimless stroll through the living room, headed back down the stairs, pausing only momentarily on the landing that could have taken me upstairs to Oliver's loft bedroom. I would wait out the front for the minicab that would take me to my new Battersea home.

From the front doorway I noted the yellow bin a few metres down the road and it seemed obvious what I must do. Ducking back inside, I fetched from amongst my posse of belongings, the shoe box that had lived under my bed—amongst its contents James's telephone number, Sarah's photographs, my baby teeth, a birthday card from David. I walked across the road and held it open above the bin. With abstract fascination I watched as a soy sauce snake from a

discarded sushi box spilled over the top of the packet of photos, sliding down it gently like a silken lock of the girl's own hair.

When it was done I went back across the road and sat on the steps outside the house, thinking of what had been. Sarah and Michael were back in Berlin now; her pregnancy might even be starting to show. I contemplated the angry references Sarah had made about Berlin on the day I moved into Ambrose Road. Berlin had represented to her the heartbreak of not being able to have what she most wanted and she had personified the city in turn as unfeeling and cruel. I wondered what London might embody for me.

A short time ago it felt as if I had been denied what I most wanted. But now I was not so sure. Diana was dead and the city was in mourning but the trees lining the pavement of the street were studded with green. Tomorrow I would sleep in and then go shopping along the King's Road, maybe spend the afternoon reading in the sun at Battersea Park.

BLUEBEARD IN SHIRLEY HAZZARD'S THE TRANSIT OF VENUS

(Dissertation)

In this essay I discuss the importance of the tale of *Bluebeard* in Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*, an iconic example of Australian expatriate fiction. Australian women's expatriate fiction has a long history in Australia, dating back to Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901), but the genre was really established by Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1945).¹ Drawing on the genres of travel and romance, Australian women's expatriate fiction revolves around a physical and emotional quest, the central theme of which critic Diana Brydon bluntly describes as "a self destructive love affair with an egotistical male in a foreign place".² In this sense, women's expatriate fiction inevitably explores power relations, most obviously in regards to gender, but also, on account of its employment of the motif of expatriation, the relationship between colonised and colonising nations. The *Bluebeard* fairytale offers a framework for considering the twin issues of gender and national identity, and for showing how *Bluebeard* might work to question the status quo and portray national and individual independence.

The *Bluebeard* fairytale is essentially about a girl who leaves her home to marry a murderous husband. The young wife discovers the mutilated corpses of

¹ I use Karen Brook's definition of the term 'expatriate' to refer to a voluntary geographical relocation that involves "a conscious unhousing in the physical and spiritual sense, that simultaneously requires dramatic social and psychological adjustment on the part of the individual". Karen Brooks, "Odysseus Unbound: Singing with the Sirens\ Liminality and Stasis in Glenda Adams' *Dancing on Coral*", *New Literatures Review*, No. 28, Winter 1994, 55.

² Diana Brydon, "Buffoon Odysseys: Australian Expatriate Fiction by Women" in *Aspects of Australian Fiction*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1990, 76.

Bluebeard's previous wives in his forbidden chamber. Bluebeard plans to murder this wife too, but he is killed first. The presence of *Bluebeard* in Australian women's expatriate fiction allows for its themes of threat, sexuality, secrecy, self-knowledge and seriality³ to warn against prescribed gender roles/relations and limiting identifications, contributing to the creation of a new and genuinely liberating space between home and abroad. The following discussion considers the discrete traditions of *Bluebeard* and Australian expatriate women's fiction before linking the two in an analysis of Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980).

Women's Expatriate Fiction—Critical Interpretations

In one of the most critically discussed works of Australian expatriate fiction, Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1945), Sydney-born Teresa Hawkins goes to London where a tumultuous love affair leads her to marriage. The novel has been recognised by critics as a model of the genre in its use of the metaphor of expatriation to consider gender and colonial identity.⁴ It is less common for critics to explore the significance of *Bluebeard* in Stead's novel. However, *Bluebeard* and its theme of sexuality is referred to directly by Stead. One of Teresa's "favourite private movies" is "insatiable Bluebeards in some gloomy northern castle, surrounded by pale bright hosts of condemned women" (84). The castle—containing the forbidden chamber where Bluebeard murders his wives—

³ Seriality refers to a form of repetition which allows the author to create differences as the text proceeds.

⁴ Brydon, "Buffoon Odysseys", 83.

is often considered symbolic of Bluebeard's psyche.⁵ For Teresa, Bluebeard's country and England itself are one and the same:

These things were not thick black shapes of fantasy, but were real. It was a country from which she, a born citizen, was exiled. She struggled towards it ... Without these orgies she would have nothing to look forward to. In a reasonable way, her trip overseas ... [was] part of this grand life that she lived without restraint ... She was a girl for any man, geared for a long night of love. (84)

“The country from which she, a born citizen, was exiled” refers less to Teresa's actual country of birth, Australia, than her desire for a sexual life and for England. In Australia, she feels a misfit and hopes to satisfy her desire for a more exciting life by moving to London. In Teresa's Bluebeardian view of the world, she is surrounded by a series of trapped women—cousins Malfi and Anne, sister Kitty, and Mrs Percy.⁶ Teresa's lover, Jonathon Crow, whom she follows to London, is portrayed as a Bluebeard and is repeatedly described in predatory and sinful images, once as “satanic” (448).⁷ The theme of seriality is central to *Bluebeard* in that each marriage ends in murder. In *For Love Alone* the seriality conveys a sense of history repeating itself so that it can be rewritten. This is made explicit in the novel's final scene when Teresa runs into her former lover in the street and comments: “I can't believe I ever loved that man ... It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated forever, he—and me!” (502). In Stead's novel *Bluebeard* works to question generic gender and cultural codes by establishing Crow as a Bluebeard figure and England as a site of personal and cultural oppression for the Australian protagonist.

⁵ Mererid Puw Davies, *The Tale of Bluebeard in German Literature From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, 175.

⁶ Andrea Mitchell, *Female Quest in Modern Australian Fiction*, MA, 1983, Australian National University, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

In another Australian women's expatriate novel, Barbara Hanrahan's *Sea-Green* (1974), the young Australian artist Virginia escapes oppressive parents by taking a sea voyage to London. An on-board love affair with an Italian crewman leads her into the arms of Englishman, Dannie, to whom she falls pregnant in London, and stays with until she can raise the money for an abortion. Virginia eventually leaves Dannie and finds love with fellow Australian expatriate, Jem. As it did in *For Love Alone*, the theme of seriality underscores *Sea-Green* as Virginia escapes one oppressive situation (her parents) to find herself in another (her love affair at sea), and another (her relationship with Dannie). On the ship to England Virginia feels she is sailing "to something strange I feel afraid of" (22) suggesting England is a powerful and ominous place. During the trip "hands that were cold ripped something precious away" (158) suggesting lost innocence. But English Dannie is the figure who most resembles Bluebeard, and it is in England "in another city as snow flew at the window and icicles hung from the pipes" where she finally falters—"snared" (158). Virginia's pregnancy is depicted as an entrapment: "[she] saw the cruelty [in Dannie], the sickness. But she had to submit; to let him bruise her, to tell her what to do" (168). Her abortion is the equivalent of the escape of Bluebeard's wife, and, as in many feminist versions of the fairytale, she emerges from her ordeal more independent: "no more was she afraid of being alone ... Never again this dependence on someone else. She was only afraid of not being able to pretend" (168). In Hanrahan's text *Bluebeard* highlights the linked issues of gender and imperialism, forcing a reconsideration of generic codes and re-presenting the relationship between England and Australia.

In Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) an elderly woman returns to Australia after years of living in London. The narrative tells the traditional *bildungsroman*⁸ in retrospect, recounting Nora Porteous's unhappy marriage with Colin and her later divorce; her escape to London and her love affair with a married man on the ship that led to her pregnancy and abortion. As a result, Nora changes: she vows chastity, has a facelift, attempts suicide, before finally returning to Brisbane. While drawing heavily on Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shallot' (depicting a woman who can only survive as long as she doesn't look out of the tower in which she is trapped) *Bluebeard* aspects are evident. The tower in the text might equally refer to Bluebeard's castle. In *Tirra Lirra by the River* and in *Bluebeard*, the heroine survives and is wiser for her ordeal. Another aspect linking the novel and *Bluebeard* is serial murder. In a twist on the *Bluebeard* theme, it is not her husband, but Nora's childhood acquaintance, Dorothy Rainbow (established as a parallel figure to Nora), who murders her husband and children with an axe, and then commits suicide. Gender concerns are a central consideration in *Tirra Lirra by the River* and the murder scene is reflective of anger Nora feels but doesn't express. The centrality of the theme of seriality is expressed in Nora's response to a friend's statement that Dorothy had been a gentle woman: "Perhaps when she was one of her true selves. But how many other selves did she have? And how many of those selves did her life call upon?" (180). *Bluebeard* works in this text to question the status quo, most obviously in relation to gender, but also, on account of the novel's use of the expatriation motif, of the relationship between England and Australia.

⁸ This is characterised by young person's growth to maturity. Elaine Barry, *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996, 71.

In Glenda Adams' *Dancing on Coral* (1987), young Australian woman Lark Watter yearns for adventure away from home and this takes the form of a cargo ship journey to New York with cosmopolitan Australian friend Donna Bird. In New York she meets up with her lover and American anthropology lecturer, Tom Brown. When they marry and split up, Lark continues on her journey alone. *Bluebeard* enters the text when Lark and Donna fear that the cargo on the ship contains a dreadful secret, possibly corpses. Lark experiences "terrible fear" when the Captain warns them not to go looking around the ship (92). Lark's symbolic decapitation is suggested when she marries the cruel-tongued Tom: "'You can't go bareheaded,'" says Elizabeth. "Beheaded? Oh, bareheaded'" (228). Tom's power over Lark is psychological not physical and is, in this way, characteristic of many 20th century variants of *Bluebeard* written by women.⁹

More recently, Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights* (2004) recounts the life of Australian Lucy Strange. Orphaned as a child, Lucy and her brother Thomas are sent to live with their uncle. The trio travel to London, where they live for seven years, before Lucy's uncle asks her to go to Bombay as part of an arrangement with his friend, Isaac Newton (to whom he owes money). On the ship to Bombay Lucy has a love affair with a fellow passenger, who is married, and later discovers she is pregnant. Newton offers to marry Lucy, which she accepts, but she then returns to London (not long after the child is born) and dies from tuberculosis a short time later. *Bluebeard* aspects of the text include a pervading sense of threat and repeated imagery of bloodshed. In *Sixty Lights* the repeated imagery of blood, "bucketsful of blood" (23), is first established when the

⁹ Puw Davies, *The Tales of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 252.

children imagine that their carer, Mrs Minchin, might have been “murdered ... her throat cut” (23). Her brother also gruesomely recounts English history: “Thomas beheaded so many old queens and princesses that Lucy felt herself quake for all the violence that bodies might attract” (82). After witnessing an Indian man’s bloody death when he falls from a ladder whilst holding a mirror, Lucy “could not help herself; she thought of repetition” (156), alluding to the repeated imagery of spilt blood and more subtly, to English history. Another theme central to both *Sixty Lights* and *Bluebeard* is secrecy. Lucy’s discovery of her mother’s belongings, the significance of which is revealed only as the text unfolds, positions her as a “code breaker in a system of secrets” (45). In a Bluebeardian sense, Lucy is holder of the key to the forbidden chamber. The key gives Lucy the means to overcome her situation and to emerge as the powerful one. A *Bluebeard* reading shows the text questioning the status quo by placing Lucy, who is both female and Australian, in a position of power, normally reserved for her male/colonising counterparts. By suggesting the power relation between Australian and England is gendered (England as male, and Australia as female), the texts brings about a reconsideration of traditional gender relations, as well as the colonial relationship between England and Australia.

Before addressing the *Bluebeard* theme in more detail, it is necessary to ask why a female travelling back to “Empire” to seek love is such an enduring theme in Australian expatriate novels? Brydon suggests that, in these narratives, the conventions of the heroic quest story combine with the genre of romance to expose tensions and highlight the dilemmas of the colonised, in this case Australians and women.¹⁰ In her argument, Australian women writers employ

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the metaphor of expatriation in a gendered and parodic treatment of the traditional and masculine Greek *Odyssey*. Brydon describes the parodic treatment as a “buffoon Odyssey”¹¹, which doesn’t so much as reject Australia as find a “new way of belonging that does not depend on [women’s] subordination or erasure”.¹² Brydon’s model is Stead’s *For Love Alone*, in which protagonist Teresa declares “every Australian is a Ulysses”.¹³ In the works she examines, Australia is less “the parent to be denied than ... the accidental birthplace of a misfit”.¹⁴ In buffoon Odyssey the protagonist seeks her true home through travel, but discovers she can only survive by “embracing impersonations”—that is, parody and ironic inversion—in whatever she does.¹⁵

Karen Brooks, who draws heavily on Brydon’s work, argues that Australian women’s expatriate fiction attempts to balance colonial factionalism with “frictional” subversions. In other words the genre seeks to balance the desire for Australians to seek validation from Europe/America (while trying to avoid Euro/Americentrism) with their engagement in “fictitious discourses that interrupt the certitudes of nationality, tradition, gender, and even self”.¹⁶ In their appropriation of the Odyssean journey, Australian writers deconstruct its assumptions: the journey is no longer a solely masculine device, the notion of home is no longer static, nor the protagonist self-assured and urbane.¹⁷ Rather, expatriation itself and the expatriated subject become diverse as a series of

¹¹ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 73-74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹⁶ Brooks, “Odysseus Unbound”, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

liminal and contested sites.¹⁸ The limen being the dynamic threshold at which geographical, cultural, psychological, social and gender binary oppositions start to break down and/or can be transformed.¹⁹

Brooks differs from Brydon in her argument that the inversion of the Odyssean myth in Australian women's expatriate fiction does not simply rely on the parodic, but also involves an exploration of liminal space. It is on this count that Brooks rejects Brydon's claim that *The Transit of Venus* fails to offer a new way of belonging. Brooks argues instead that Hazzard's novel celebrates the limen as an alternative space between the various recognised sites of nation and gender (amongst others).²⁰ My argument is that it is also restrictive to see *The Transit of Venus* purely in terms of the Odyssean myth. The association of *Bluebeard* with Australian women's expatriate fiction enables the investigation of traditional and mythical themes, and an understanding of how writers have subverted them. As Kevin Paul Smith argues, fairytales have become more central in novels since 1970 because their formulaic nature offers a gendered framework for postmodern contemporary fiction writers to show the "fundamental desire for stories".²¹ The revision of fairytales "can be used to make a metafictional point about how we understand our lives through stories, and a political point about who controls the stories and the nature of representation in hyper-real societies".²² Reading Hazzard's text as a variation of *Bluebeard* draws out the issues of identity and power in relation to gender and

¹⁸ Karen Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass: Terrestrial and Psychological Oppositions in the Expatriate Condition in Shirley Hazzard's The Transit of Venus*. Bendigo: Department of Arts, La Trobe University, 1998, 24.

¹⁹ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ Kevin Paul Smith, *Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 168.

nation. Via its central themes of threat, sexuality, secrecy, self-knowledge and seriality, *Bluebeard* warns against stasis and urges (national and individual) independence, providing a scenario in which the limen, as the in-between space between dominant meanings or interpretations, comes into being. This provides a space for alternative readings and opens up a dialogue to a way of belonging that combines and transcends dominant binaries, such as conventional male/female behaviour, colonised/colonising roles and New World/Old World societies.

***Bluebeard*—Critical Interpretations**

The *Bluebeard* story itself is situated in liminal space in that it moves from the outside—in the domain of the familiar and everyday—and then to the realm of the interior; exotic, dangerous and barbaric.²³ One of the interesting aspects of the tale is that, unlike many fairy tales which trace a path of rags to riches ending in marriage, *Bluebeard* starts with marriage and ends with murder and the end of innocence. In its trajectory it tackles issues related to “the nexus of knowledge, sexuality, evil and mortality”, themes which are familiar from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, as well as from myths such as Prometheus’s theft of fire from the gods, amongst others.²⁴

The Perrault account of *Bluebeard*, which was first published in 1697, is recognised as headlining the *Bluebeard* canon.²⁵ It tells the story of a marriage in which a woman’s desire for wealth overcomes her distaste for her husband’s blue beard. Soon after his wife has moved into his lavish castle, Bluebeard leaves on a journey and gives her a set of keys with the instruction that she can go anywhere

²³ Maria Tatar, *Secrets beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and his Wives*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, 1-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁵ Puw Davies, *The Tale of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 242.

she likes, except into one particular room. When the wife opens the door to the forbidden chamber, she finds within the strung-up corpses of his former wives. In horror, she drops the key and is then unable to remove the telltale bloodstain left on it. Bluebeard returns home to discover his wife's transgression. He is about to behead her when, at the last moment, she is rescued by her brothers and Bluebeard is killed.²⁶

In contrast to Perrault's version, which stresses that the wife's curiosity is a transgression, many 20th century (mainly feminist) interpretations of *Bluebeard*—most notably Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983)—focus on the resourcefulness of the heroine and celebrate her curiosity as necessary, not only for her physical survival but also for her psychological survival.²⁷ To this end, psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estes interprets the tale as a representation of a “Wild Woman” archetype. Pitching it as a story that could empower women to take control of their lives, Bluebeard is represented as the predator in the psyche.²⁸ In other variations of the myth in the late 20th century Bluebeard is depicted neither as tyrannical husband or hero, but as what Puw Davies describes as “an oppressive, psychological principle which has been internalised by women”.²⁹ In these texts a blurring of boundaries makes it clear that the female protagonists are not

²⁶ Charles Perrault, “Bluebeard”, trans. A. E. Johnson and Others in *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*. Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1961, 78-88. Tatar refers to the two morals Perrault included at the end of the story as suggestive of two different readings. The first moral concerns the idea that a woman's curiosity will cost her dearly. The second moral suggests that modern wives are more likely to be the “master” than their husbands, Tatar (*Secrets beyond the Door*, 24-25).

²⁷ Tatar refers to the way in which various fairytales, including that of *Bluebeard*, retain their relevance through a process of constant alteration, adaptation and transformation to suit new cultural contexts. Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door*, 11.

²⁸ Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Women Archetype*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, 44.

²⁹ Puw Davies, *Tales of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 233. Examples of this include the German works *Das Buch Franza* by Ingeborg Bachmann (1995) and *Das Haus der Krankheiten* by Unica Zürn (1988).

simply victims but are complicit in the *Bluebeard* story, whether through their own masochism or through their imposition of his order on others.

As well as being a story of female independence and/or masochism, the other main story that *Bluebeard* shares with the genre of women's expatriate fiction is that of the question of national identity, an enduring theme in *Bluebeard* (at least in German literature).³⁰ In earlier variants this played out in a tendency to posit Bluebeard as a foreigner. For example, in Alexander von Ungern-Starnberg's *Blaubart* (1850), the female protagonist is German, while Bluebeard is French, and in Gerd Winkler's *Mike Blaubart* (1967) she is German and he is Dutch-American. Later 20th century versions tended towards an emphatically German protagonist whose wives were foreigners, divided from their husbands by the absence of a common language.³¹ More recently in Germany, the tale has symbolically featured in stories set in mid-twentieth century history, which specifically associate the Nazi gas chambers with Bluebeard's forbidden chamber.³²

Bluebeard in The Transit of Venus

In G. Raines' article on fictional treatments of Australians abroad, he notes that the predominant images are of thoughtful and observant, yet often insecure people. While accepting that many Australians abroad might experience delight in other cultures, he argues that, in fictional representations, "more often they experience suspicion and disillusion, and, almost invariably apprehensions of suffering and death in a place which in most cases seems alien and, in some

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233-236.

³² *Ibid.*, 235.

cases, even malicious towards them.”³³ Raines finds that the “death-perceiving” he detects in many imaginative accounts of Australians travelling in Europe is not evident in English travel stories.³⁴ He asks:

Are the authors of these images offering accounts of a malaise generally experienced by Australians travelling here? [Europe] Or are they too unrepresentative a group of sensibilities for it to be useful to reflect upon their almost unanimous finding—that Australians in Europe encounter, in varying degrees, a journey into a kind of Heart of Darkness? If this is not the case and the tales are telling it truly, there remains something they do not reveal clearly: and that is whether the darkness discovered is in the heart of the Australian self and brought out by the European environment; or whether it is peculiar to the continent the Australian visits, unseen by its own inhabitants, but revealed to eyes used to the clearer light of the antipodes.³⁵

Although Raines’ survey does not discuss Hazzard’s text, his description applies to Caro and Grace Bell, the main protagonists in *The Transit of Venus*. They too experience “suspicion and delusion”, as well as “apprehensions of suffering and death” in an England that often feels “alien” and “malicious”.³⁶ Like Hazzard’s earlier works, *The Transit of Venus* is ultimately a spiritual quest, mapping the lives of the Australian sisters, Caro and Grace, who journey from Sydney to London seeking love and an escape from the suffocating influence of their step-sister and guardian, Dora. The Bell sisters are starkly contrasted, although “indissolubly bound” (9) by their childhood experiences in Australia, including their parents’ drowning in a ferry accident. The two women are binary opposites and in sum, show the main choices available to women in the 1950s. Caro is dark-haired and “as yet unfinished”. She takes up a position in a London office traditionally reserved for men. Grace (already engaged) is fair-haired and “completed if not complete” (10). She chooses a life of domesticity and

³³ G. Raines, “Travellers’ Tales” in *Australian Studies*, No. 6, 1992, 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

childrearing.³⁷ Caro, in her indirectly expressed quest for an alternative future, becomes the central character of the novel, specifically in relation to her love affairs. In spite of their differences, the sisters are aligned throughout the text by their silent suffering and through Grace's tragic affair with Dr Dance towards the end of the novel.

Hazzard's text has been criticised as failing to offer an alternative to the status quo in its failure to invert the Odyssean journey.³⁸ I argue that reading *The Transit of Venus* as a variation or inversion of the *Bluebeard* fairytale shows the novel's alternative approach. In my analysis, I draw on the work of Jacques Lacan, whose theoretical framework has been recognised by other critics of Australian expatriate women's fiction as a particularly useful way of reading such texts; "it connects textual expression to the psycho-dynamics of the expatriate experience without implying either simplistic causation or reductivist uniformity".³⁹ My focus on *The Transit of Venus* doesn't postulate a single theory relating to all Australian women's expatriate fiction, nor is it my intention to make the text secondary to theoretical frameworks. Rather, my aim is to focus on the twin issues of gender and national identity in the genre of Australian women's expatriate fiction. The approach I adopt is an intertextual one, drawing not only on Lacan's notion of the split subject, but on Julia Kristeva's reconsideration of Bakhtinian dialogism.

³⁷ When Caro finally marries she has a teenage step-daughter but has no children of her own.

³⁸ See Brydon, "Buffoon Odyssey", 79. See also Bronwen Levy, "Constructing the Woman Writer: The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*", in *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels*, ed. Carole Ferrier. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985, 188.

³⁹ Brooks, "Buffoon Odyssey", 8

For Kristeva, every text is “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning)”.⁴⁰ On this basis every term in narrative is “at least *double*”⁴¹ and meaning can never be wholly attributed to a defining “original” source or intention. In this respect, every utterance is a juxtaposition of discourses from various times.⁴² As Bakhtin writes, language is “heteroglot from top to bottom” representing “the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth.”⁴³ In this Bakhtin/ Kristeva cruciform model, the text lies at the horizontal crossroads of authors and audiences and at the vertical intersection of one work with the corpus of other works among which it is positioned.⁴⁴ It is of little relevance then whether or not Hazzard intended to invoke aspects of the Bluebeard tale in *The Transit of Venus* because, as Kristeva puts it “every text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”⁴⁵ This does not deny, of course, that there may be other intertexts at play too, which in the case of *The Transit of Venus* (as in other Australian women’s expatriate fiction) includes the myth of Odyssey.

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and the Novel” (1966), trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Leon S. Roudiez, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴² Bliss Cua Lim, “Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford” in Robert Stam and Alessandro Raengo (eds.), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 164. Bakhtin employs the term “utterance” to refer to the active creative capacity of language, and the evaluative nature of meaning which makes context essential. Pam Morris (ed.), *The Bakhtin Reader*, London and New York: Arnold, 1994, 4.

⁴³ M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in Michael Holquist (ed.), in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin; London, University of Texas Press, 1981, 291.

⁴⁴ Bliss, “Serial Time”, 165.

⁴⁵ Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and the Novel”, 66.

Threat

One of the most obvious themes linking *Bluebeard* and *The Transit of Venus* is the notion of threat. This refers to an actual and impending, as well as imagined, sense of danger, which is conjured in the novel from its opening line. It reads: “By nightfall the headlines would be reporting devastation” (1). With only this knowledge the reader is introduced to Caro’s friend and future lover, the poor but up-and-coming English scientist, Ted Tice, as he makes his way through a storm to Peverel, the English countryside home of the eminent and much older Professor Sefton Thrale.

Bluebeard casts a shadow over the text, a kind of “apprehension of suffering and death”.⁴⁶ Ominous imagery includes the way that, during the fierce weather, “purple silence petrified the limbs of trees and stood crops upright in the fields like hair on end” (1) and how “every nerve—for even barns and wheelbarrows and things without tissues developed nerve in these moments—waited fatalistic” (1). As John Colmer notes, Tice first appears as if “some folk hero from out of the storm”, an impression enhanced by the “painterly and theatrical terms” in which the scene is depicted, reinforced by the old folk song he is singing.⁴⁷ Approaching Peverel “[Ted] observed from a decisive turn of his own stillness, as if on some great clock he saw the hand fall to the next stroke before his eyes” (2). The imagery draws on the fairytale significance of the clock striking midnight (specifically, *Cinderella*) adding to the impression of impending transformation.

Another important link between *Bluebeard* and *The Transit of Venus* is the castle (which is next door to Peverel) that Ted spies on his way—“grey,

⁴⁶ Raines, “Traveller’s Tales”, 78.

⁴⁷ John Colmer, “Shirley Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus*”, in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 19, 12.

tumid, turreted, and not unsuited to the storm” (4). Symbolic of Bluebeard’s psyche in the fairytale, the castle represents the decay of an old world order in *The Transit of Venus* (as will be discussed).⁴⁸ It also has a powerful role in anticipating secrets as yet unknown, and indirectly providing a link between various characters and Bluebeard (as will be discussed).

Sexuality

Bluebeardian imagery also characterises the reader’s introduction to Caro Bell, who is a guest at Peverel on account of Grace’s engagement to Professor Thrale’s son, Christian. When Hazard introduces Caro (who is waiting for a new job to start in London), she evokes another fairytale figure, Sleeping Beauty: “her lips were parted, tender, as they might have been in sleep” (10). The parting of Caro’s lips is reflective of either/both death or sexual consummation: images that draw on Bluebeard’s entwined themes of threat and sexuality.⁴⁹

In the beginning, Caro and Grace are naïve (emotionally and sexually), like Bluebeard’s young wife. They travel to England because they have reached an age and stage of maturity at which they must take responsibility themselves (prior to this, Hazzard writes, the girls “had not yet begun to act” [10]). The girls’ naivety is a condition from which they will be rudely awoken, implying their journey is as much about attaining self-knowledge as physical relocation and travel.

⁴⁸ The notion of the castle as representative of Bluebeard’s psyche evokes Lacan’s image of the fortress as symbolic of the inner reaches of the human subject (and the fortifications around it). Puw Davies, *The Tale of Bluebeard in German Literature.*, 175.

⁴⁹ Smith argues that the simplicity and formulaic nature of fairytale (along with the fact that fairytale is the primary oral narrative in late capitalist societies) gives it lasting power over the imagination and accounts for its frequent intertextual use in postmodern fiction. The continuing popularity of classical fairytale also makes it likely that readers will understand the intertext. Smith, *Postmodern Fairytale*, 165-169.

The fairytale motifs continue, with the observation that “the girls’ necks were intolerably exposed as they spooned their custard: you could practically feel the axe” (17). In the tale of *Bluebeard*, decapitation is the means by which Bluebeard seeks to dispose of his wife after he discovers she has entered the forbidden chamber. The symbolic decapitation of the girls in this scene at Peverel links the two sisters with Bluebeard’s wife, and links the Thrale’s, the aristocratic English home owners, to Bluebeard’s murderous regime.

By setting up this opposition between the young Australian girls and their English hosts, the text establishes the English, and colonial England, as sites of colonial oppression in the text. Specifically, Hazzard establishes the power relation between England and Australia as gendered: England as male and Australia as female. This is reflective of the link between gender and colonialism established in Laura Brown’s analysis of eighteenth century English literary texts. In Brown’s analysis women represent “difference” itself, that is the “radical heterogeneity of sexual, racial, or class dissimilarities”.⁵⁰ As such, in English cultures “women are connected with sexual instability, class instability, native, the colonized; and the potentially threatening, unassimilable other”.⁵¹ By employing *Bluebeard* in *The Transit of Venus* the link between gender and imperialism is even more starkly highlighted: England as Bluebeard opposes Australia as the initially innocent wife (discussed in the following section).

The character of Bluebeard is suggested a number of times in the novel in relation to different male figures. Sefton Thrale, in his role as a ruling patriarch of Peverel, takes on the Bluebeard persona in the decapitation scene described above. Later, when Caro is jilted by her lover Paul and flees Peverel for London,

⁵⁰ Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the mildly sleazy Captain Cartledge, who she runs into at the train station, briefly takes on the Bluebeard role: “‘You’ll be much better off in North Audley Street. Where I take Australians.’ He offered her the flask again, the sun glinting on it as on a gun-barrel’ (111). Captain Cartledge then coaxes Caro into this “dark cab” (112).

However, no single character in the text represents Bluebeard more than Paul Ivory (Caro’s later lovers include husband-to-be Adam Vail, and then after Adam’s death, Ted Tice.) Before the two become lovers, Caro learns Paul has been watching her from the castle window (readers now know it is owned by Paul’s fiance Tertia’s family).

In the transparent morning he created a moment of night silence: Caro unaware in the garden, and Paul watching. From his hidden elevation he created fragrant darkness round them both ... In the valley a line of osiers flinched at the last breath of air. (76-77)

The sinister imagery of the scene—conjured by suffocating heat and dying flowers—exacerbates the air of threat. The castle is a relic from a bygone era and, in this sense, symbolic of death. Ted refers to the way in which Paul’s marriage to Tertia meant he was “marrying that castle”, implying that Paul had aligned himself with a Bluebeardian regime representative of stasis over progression. Specifically, the castle represents England’s idea of itself historically, or at least one particular idea of itself, as aristocratic and chivalrous:

They [Caro and Ted] both stared at the solid, sunlit figment of history’s imagination, on its dated elevation. As a spouse it inspired some apprehension. (74)

When he finally chooses Tertia over Caro, Paul becomes aligned with death and decay, and death of the old order. In this way, the *Bluebeard* theme of sexuality in *The Transit of Venus* establishes the young Australian female protagonists as innocent, but capable of transformation, and certain English male characters as

fatal, at the least (sexually) predatory. This is emblematic of the imperialistic relationship between England and Australia, and one that is forced into reconsideration as the novel progresses.

Self-knowledge

In its title, *The Transit of Venus*, draws on another of the central themes linking the text with *Bluebeard*: the attainment of self-knowledge. Referring to James Cook's almost accidental discovery of Australia when he was on a scientific voyage to study the transit of Venus across the sun, the title is a pun on the way in which predictions about love are often pathetically off course. For John Colmer, this "generates the larger idea that the consequences of our actions are rarely those we expect and that they sometimes have indirect and unexpected benefits".⁵² In Perrault's version of the fairytale, without unexpectedly finding the corpses of her husband's previous wives in the forbidden chamber, *Bluebeard's* wife would not have obtained the benefit of "becoming the mistress of all [Bluebeard's] wealth".⁵³

In *The Transit of Venus*, it is through similar losses and startling discoveries that sisters Caro and Grace come to a path of self-knowledge, as in Carter and Atwood's versions of *Bluebeard*. While Caro comes "to look on men and women as fellow survivors" who had "contained, assimilated or put to use their own destruction" (171), she notes how they had all "involuntarily, be[come] part of some deeper assertion of life" (171). That is, Caro discovers that, in spite of her losses, she has experienced life more deeply—an indirect benefit of the consequences of her actions. Meanwhile, the narrator refers to Grace's "inward revelation" after her affair with Dr Dance: "It was not quite certain Grace had

⁵² Colmer, "Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*", 14.

⁵³ Perrault, *Bluebeard*, 87.

remained a spectator. Those who had seen her as Caro's alter-ego might have missed the point" (324). Grace's affair left her heartbroken, but she gains insight into her life, and morphs from an essentially passive character into a pro-active one.

In the tale of *Bluebeard* the murderer ends up slain, while the young wife emerges from the ordeal of her marriage victorious (if not unscathed). At the very least, she is no longer naïve. In *The Transit of Venus* the Bluebeard-like Paul does not meet his own death, but he does confess to the murder of his blackmailing ex-lover, Vincent Locker, in the year before he met Caro. Paul tells Caro that after leaving his lover sleeping on the riverbank, he had run into a policeman who told him they were clearing a stretch of river in order to flood it and prevent a future deluge.⁵⁴ Paul saw an opportunity to end the blackmailing and assured the officer he had seen no one on the bank. Vincent was subsequently found drowned. (The only person who might have been able to expose Paul was Ted, who had earlier passed Paul and Victor together whilst out walking.) Paul's revelation to Caro (the contents of his hidden chamber) arises from his grief for his terminally ill son (representative of his own psychological death). After the shocking murder confession, Caro's innocence is shattered and she is forced to "assess the ignorance in which she had passed passionate years of her life" (310). To this end:

All pride and presumption, the exaltation of her own beliefs, the wish to be humane, the struggle to do well, were reduced to this: a middle-aged woman wringing her hands and calling on God. She had wanted knowledge, but not to know this. Knowledge had become a fearful current in which a man might drown. (310)

⁵⁴ The image of the lover sleeping on the riverbank evokes again the *Sleeping Beauty* fairytale.

As is the case for the wife, in both Carter and Atwood's versions of *Bluebeard*, Caro's discovery seems too much for her to bear, but in the end, it is crucial for her (psychological) survival.

Secrecy

Secrecy is important to *The Transit of Venus* for the "power and control that it may place in another person".⁵⁵ Paul and Ted Tice both have guilty secrets (the former's secret is driven by the desire to maintain social respectability and the latter's by instinctive humanity). Paul's secret is that he murdered his lover, while Ted's is that he allowed a prisoner of war to go free without alerting authorities. When Caro divulges Ted's secret to Paul she inadvertently supplies him with the power to protect himself, a 'key' in the Bluebeardian sense. As Paul says, Ted "could never raise the question of Victor without exposing himself" (312).⁵⁶ During Paul's confession, Caro felt "an almost physical barrier to recognising the role of Ted Tice" (310), by which she means recognising her own role in protecting Paul by divulging Ted's secret. As shocking as this is for Caro, Paul's confession provides Caro with a 'key' of her own, and is the basis on which she finally rejects Paul in favour of Ted (as will be discussed).

Paul's Bluebeardian secret—on which the plot of *The Transit of Venus* rests—is not revealed until chapter thirty-five, very near the end of the book. The bombshell aspect of Paul's confession leads to the subsequent resolution of relations between Caro and Ted.⁵⁷ Paul's secret is hidden from both the reader and (the majority of) characters alike. His confession allows the events and situations of the story to be retrospectively reconsidered, or re-read, both by Caro

⁵⁵ Colmer, "Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*", 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁷ Colmer notes it is wholly justified by the work's underlying theme of secrecy. *Ibid.*, 18.

to whom Paul has confessed, and by the reader.⁵⁸ This same scenario is played out in *Bluebeard*, when, at the instant of discovering the forbidden chamber, the young wife and reader come to understand that she is not so much the lucky bride, as in grave danger. As awful as this might be, it is only on account of her discovery that Bluebeard's murderous reign is brought to an end, and, in this sense, the knowledge is ultimately empowering.

Seriality

Seriality is the final dominant theme of *Bluebeard* and Hazzard uses repetitive imagery to suggest both representation and re-representation in *The Transit of Venus*. The liminal space of a staircase is repeatedly the setting for significant moments in Caro's life.⁵⁹ Stairs represent an 'in-between' space, and are particularly significant in relation to the text's exploration of in-between, liminal spaces between established gender and cultural (amongst others) binaries as will be discussed. Staircases could also be considered representative of hierarchy, and serve to highlight power relations between various characters in the text, both at an individual and nation level. The reader is introduced to Caro standing at the top of a staircase, and it is from this vantage point she first sees Ted (who, for most of his life, loves Caro unrequitedly). Caro and Paul first make love in a room at the top of the stairs, and they resume their affair at Paul's house in the "top room, and also the largest, not having stairs above" (130). It is on the staircase that Paul comes to understand Caro has "surrendered" to him again, a memory he retains for a lifetime:

Unlike many images of Caroline Bell he later sought to preserve, this one did fix itself in Paul Ivory's memory: the stark wall, the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

stairs up and down, her red dress, and the flare of her breast, which she left gravely revealed, like a confession. (133)

The “confession” is a reference to Paul’s later murder confession, as well as Caro’s general honesty in their relationship compared to his secrecy. When Caro and Paul part again, on account of Paul’s English wife Tertia’s pregnancy, “they went downstairs in single file, both of them recalling that earlier scene on the landing” (155). English Paul is established at the top of the staircase, that is, at the top of a symbolic social hierarchy. Australian Caro is allowed to join him briefly, but she is ultimately rejected by him, and relegated to the bottom of the stairs and out the door.

The repetitive imagery is most often employed to highlight Paul’s serial desire for and rejection of Caro, as if she herself were a succession of wives. After Caro and Paul’s on-again-off-again relationship is finally over, the two continue to be thrown together culminating in Paul’s confession to Caro that he had murdered Vincent. In the accidental meetings between Paul and Caro, he is depicted as a threat. A park at which they run into each other is referred to as “deathly” and the seemingly benign reference to a dog sniffing around their feet becomes a warning to Caro when the owner calls out its name: “Split! Split!” (170). Paul is not only a literal murderer, but also the symbolic murderer of Caro. In this sense, Paul is a serial murderer: “Like Paul, to whom there were other resemblances, death had its own key and awaited Caro’s return [home] in the evening” (167). In a later section Caro’s grief is referred to as:

A pathos as bad as someone else’s death. Confuses the issue. No issue, died without issue ... The deed of death has no hypothetical existence—or, having its hypothesis is everyone, must be enacted to achieve meaning. Then meaning is total, as for nothing else. A phenomenon known as the Black Drop.

It is no less than logical. There are dying conditions as well as living conditions. Venus can blot out the sun. (167)

While Venus is most often associated with love, its capacity to blot out the sun means it can also kill. In this reference, Hazzard aligns blind love with death, and the title of the novel becomes a warning of the dangers of such naivety.

In the final chapter of the novel it is Caro who dies (not Paul), but her plane crash death does not emanate from any specific Bluebeardian act of violence. Puw Davies suggests this ending is characteristic of some *Bluebeard* texts written by women, arguing that in 20th century German variants, women characters died from the “delayed effect” of familial and cultural oppression, but never on account of brutal murder or imprisonment.⁶⁰ According to some critics the novel required the reunion of Ted and Caro but “what happens after that is of no consequence”.⁶¹ To the contrary, I argue Caro’s death is significant as a potential “delayed effect” of her on/off relationship with Paul. This links to an early reference in the text that “going to Europe was about as final as going to heaven” (37), which equates England itself with death, as will be discussed. Caro’s death in a plane crash could be suggestive of a “new beginning”⁶², another aspect of the travel that dominated her life, and, in this sense, another example of her liminality.

Another of the ways in which seriality is expressed in the text is a constant journeying back and forth between gender, cultural, geographical, psychological and social binaries. To this end, the text sets up a cast of characters who structure their lives according to prescribed cultural and gender codes. In the

⁶⁰ Puw Davies, *The Tale of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 252.

⁶¹ Colmer, “Shirley Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus*”, 20.

⁶² Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 83.

novel, others who welcome change and progression encounter these characters.⁶³ Characters who remain resistant to change and outside influence include Paul, Professor Thrane, Christian, Tertia, Dora, Mr Leadbetter (Caro's boss) and Major Ingot (Dora's husband). All of these are characters are English, except for Dora, who is Australian, but strongly identifies with English culture. Progressive characters in the text include the Australian sisters Caro and Grace, Ted Tice (English) and Adam Vail (American).

One of the primary ways Hazzard establishes a distinction between static and progressive characters is in relation to their attitude to foreign languages, in other words their openness to cultural difference. The static characters resist other languages, while progressive characters embrace them. For example, in a scene introducing Major Ingot as Dora's new husband, Caro is established as having a "gift" for learning new languages (125). The Major expresses surprise, assessing that this is "unusual in an Orstrylian" (125), establishing 'Australian' itself as a different language. Dora remarks that "her own language was good enough for her" and the Major goes on to tell a joke about an Australian nurse in a military hospital that mocks the Australian accent (125). Later in the novel, when the Major abandons Dora in Portugal, Caro asks Dora's friend if her step-sister might be able to find work. Mrs Pomfret is doubtful: "It's a pity she never picked up the language. Even though circumstances are different, I have picked it up" (164). Although this engagement with different cultures is depicted as essential to her survival, Dora remains resistant and clings to her 'Englishness'. In a letter she writes to Caro: "I long to leave this awful place [Portugal], as you

⁶³ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 66.

can imagine ... and these unspeakable people. Thank Heaven England still stands for something" (165).

The static characters are associated with death, cruelty and/or immorality. The link between death and stasis is emphatically stated in the narrator's reflection that "there were those who enlisted Death on their side, as stimulus or instrument: Paul, Dora, Charlotte Vail" (313). Paul's wife Tertia is repeatedly referred to as lifeless. She had pupils "insensate as the bronze discs applied as eyes to ancient statues" (75). By contrast, Caro is described on the same page as possessing "virile strength". And, "when she [Tertia] touched her dress with near-derision, mere life in others was made to seem like a commotion" (83). The Major is similarly linked with death: "It was hard to imagine the Major in a wooing mood. One suspected he had never courted anything, except disaster" (165). The narrator refers to how 'when Sefton Thrale said the word "global" you felt the earth to be round as a small ball, or white and bland as an egg' (11). Christian Thrale felt that "there were intervals when he knew he was the one in need of rescue", not Caro and Grace. But this "health was hard to maintain: self-importance flickered up like fever" (23). However, no single character in *The Transit of Venus* is less resistant to change, or more immoral, than Paul. When he confesses to Caro the murder of his ex-lover it forces her into a reconsideration of everything that has gone before. But Paul remains unaffected so that "it was remarkable how he could recover and clothe himself, in a jacket and normality, even now" (315). That is, Paul remains unchanged: he is resistant to outside influences or views.

The characters who welcome transformation—Caro, Grace, Ted and Adam—reject identification with any position of superiority, but instead enter

into a dialogue with it.⁶⁴ Their constant movement across and between boundaries reflects this. For example, Caro's journey to London is reflected in her later travels to Spain, New York, South America, and finally her death in a plane crash. Her movement across boundaries is also evident in her relationships with Paul, Adam and finally Ted. For Ted, movement and progression are largely represented by his eagerness to explore new countries, including work all over the world, his general attitude to life, and his intellect, which allows him to enter a world previously unattainable, on account of his background.⁶⁵ Ted notes to Caro that it seemed in England one was always near a town; "he had begun to look with antipodean eyes, because of Caro" (26). Ted is the opposite to Paul, as directly expressed in the narrator's statement:

There was the sense that Paul Ivory and Ted Tice were both marked men, and symbolically opposed. It was not merely that the world had set them at odds. More irrationally, it seemed that one of them must lose if the other were to win. (71)

The reference to one losing "if the other were to win" refers both to Caro's love, and the concept of movement versus stasis generally. Ted's love for Caro remains unrequited while she is in love with Paul. After Paul's confession, Ted wins Caro's love, and, at the symbolic level, movement wins over stasis.

The progressive/ transforming characters celebrate freedom and undertake acts of moral fortitude. Caro and Grace bequeath their small inheritance to Dora, Grace only has an extramarital affair after her husband Christian does first, and Adam Vail—"whose patience and ... energies were inexhaustible" (246)—dedicates much of his time and wealth to rescuing

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

political prisoners in South America from execution. Finally, while Paul's secret related to a murder, Ted's secret (that he allowed an escaped prisoner of war to remain free) is an offence that even Paul recognises has, over time, come to be linked with virtue. To this end, Paul remarks: "That happens to any humane action if you wait long enough. My trespasses, on the other hand, are only compounded with time and concealment" (314). This sentence not only alludes to Bluebeard's secret but also to trespasses imposed by colonising countries upon the colonised, secrets which have only been revealed over time, and include, for example, Captain Cook's crews' treatment of Tahitian women (as will be discussed).

Lacan, Gender and National Identity

In relation to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of the split subject, *Bluebeard in The Transit of Venus* works to caution against binary gender roles and fixed notions of Australian identity, while creating liminal spaces between binaries as alternative, newer, freer realms.

In *The Transit of Venus* the themes of *Bluebeard* establish oppositions between the young Australian female protagonists and the older English male characters, representative of colonial England, as a site of patriarchal and cultural oppression for the young Australians. One of the most obvious examples is the way in which the text opposes English male characters to Australian female characters in the (symbolic) decapitation scene at Peverel (described earlier).⁶⁶ In this scene, Caro and Grace are aligned with Bluebeard's wife, and Sefton Thrale, with Bluebeard. The violence of the decapitation leaves no ambiguity about the

seriousness of the perceived threat, that is, the danger implicit in the patriarchal and colonial status quo.

Feminist theorist Hélène Cixous identifies female decapitation as a fundamental cultural myth, in which the female desire for knowledge becomes self defeating as it involves the loss of the head, the physical (and rational) locus of knowledge.⁶⁷ She states:

It's a question of submitting feminine disorder ... to the threat of decapitation. If the man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head.⁶⁸

Cixous' reference to castration draws on Lacanian (and Freudian) theories of subjective development, which posit that entry into full consciousness is accompanied by the traumatic threat of real or symbolic castration (the wounding connected to sexual identity).⁶⁹ For Lacan, one is not born a subject, but becomes one through the process of internalising culture. This occurs when the individual enters the symbolic order of language. The child moves from the dyadic Imaginary phase (mother/child) to the triadic formation when the 'Father' enters the equation via the Mirror Phase (at which point the child can recognise his/her own image in front of a mirror).⁷⁰ The father signifies what Lacan refers to as the 'Law', represented by his signifier, the phallus, symbolising the wider social, linguistic network of which the child is a part. The phallus comes to represent separation and loss for the subject because, at this point, the child is forever split from the unity experienced with the mother. In its place there develops an

⁶⁷ Puw Davies, *Tales of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock Publications, 1977, 19. The subject adopts an "armour of alienating identity" through the image of its physical form in the mirror, which in turn represents the subject's "entire mental development". *Ibid.*, 4.

incessant longing for a return to that unified dyadic state, one that can never be wholly satisfied. It is the repressed yearning for a return to the original dyadic identity that constitutes desire, which Lacan perceives as lack.⁷¹

The suggestion that the young Australian sisters are symbolically decapitated in the Thrale's home, not only speaks of issues of gender and sexuality, but also questions Australia's relation to England. As discussed, the text establishes a gendered power relationship between England and Australia. Caro and Grace, as *young, female, Australians* are aligned with all that is new and under threat from, and threatening to, the older, patriarchal society. In opposition, Thrale is a *powerful, older, English, male*, and Peverel, his house, is a masculine domain ruled by Thrale as the patriarch who "claim[s] supremacy" (2) over the landscape. Thrale's dominance is further established via his status as professor, which posits him as a 'gate-keeper' of knowledge and history. Complementing the political and historical relationship between England and Australia, the girls have originated from a different and allegedly inferior Symbolic Order.⁷² The difference between the English and Australian Symbolic Orders is expressed in the text by Thrale's discomfort with the fact that Grace is from Australia:

Australia required apologies, and was almost a subject for ribaldry. Australia could only have been mitigated by an unabashed fortune from its newly minted sources—sheep, say, or sheep-dip. And no fabled property or so many thousand acres or square miles, no lucky dip, attached itself to Grace. On the contrary, Grace came encumbered with a sister; and even with a half-sister, happily absent on a holiday at Gibraltar. Sefton Thrale would explain, "Christian has got himself engaged"—implying naïve bungling—"to an Australian girl." And with emphatic

⁷¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, 165-167.

⁷² Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 47. The Symbolic Order refers to the "pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society." Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 167.

goodwill might add that Grace was a fine young woman and that he himself was delighted, “Actually.” (11)

For Thrale, the fact of Grace’s inferior originating nationality can only be offset by great wealth, without which it remains a liability, and lower in social status than his ‘Englishness’.

The difference between the English ‘here’ and Australian ‘there’ is emphatically expressed in Caro’s early declaration to Christian Thrale that “London is our achievement ... Having got here is an attainment, being here is an occupation” (22). At this stage, Caro and Grace (like Thrale) consider England superior to Australia and their move to London an accomplishment in itself, an “attainment”. In considering London an “occupation” Caro suggests their highest aspirations have already been met, despite the fact she is awaiting test results to see if she will be offered a prestigious job normally only available to men. It could also refer to the centrality of work for these Australian girls in London. Later, Caro and Grace discover that the social, gender and cultural discourses that underpin English society are no less limiting than what they left behind in Australia. As in Brydon’s “buffoon Odyssey”, they learn that the “apparent freedoms afforded by the cultural centres are as illusory as the supposed freedoms of the new world”.⁷³

The girls’ illusory perception of England is represented as linguistic, symbolic and essentially textual. The girls are represented as essentially brainwashed by their English literature education to the extent that Caro and Grace come to think of English flora as more “natural” than Australian. The scene is reminiscent of the way Bluebeard charms his wife into seeing (or rather

⁷³ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 75.

not seeing) his blue beard. The narrator refers to the way in which English literature had, for the sisters, “placed Australia in perpetual, flagrant violation of reality” (31). While English history was represented as vibrant and colourful, Australian history “dwindled into the expeditions of doomed explorers, journeys without revelation or encounter endured by fleshless men”(32). That, “even bath water wound out in the opposite direction” reminded Australians that they could “only pretend to be part of all that and hope no one would spot the truth” (32). So complete was the girls’ sense of English superiority that the narrator states how, after the Second World War, it seemed to them “a pity one could not have a better class of saviour: Americans could not provide history, of which they were almost as destitute as Australians” (46). Significantly, Caro’s future husband, Adam—whom she refers to as her saviour after her affair with the English Paul ends—is American. Caro states: “I died; and Adam resurrected me” (326). While historically England occupies a position of superiority, Caro’s choice of husband suggests England’s diminished significance, both at an individual and global level, and highlights America’s growing significance post World War Two as the ‘new world’. As an American (rather than English), Adam is an example of the border-crossing that characterises Caro’s life—both physically and in terms of her love life—and helps to establish her liminality in the text.

The chapter on the girls’ English literature education in Australia associates colonial England with death—representative of the ultimate domination—and draws on the *Bluebeard* theme of threat and murder. While watching the boats set sail from Sydney Harbour for London, the girls and their half-sister Dora were “subdued at witnessing so incontrovertible an escape” (37) and understand “going to Europe was about as final as going to heaven” (37).

That is, the journey is symbolically like a death. For the two young women, going to England is “a mythical passage to another life, from which no one returned the same” (37). In Perrault’s *Bluebeard*, when the young wife escapes Bluebeard’s attempts to kill her, she is changed forever; in Carter’s feminist version a smear from the bloody key remains as a permanent mark on her forehead.⁷⁴ In *The Transit of Venus*, the last scene’s plane crash is a literal representation of this death. As a “mythical passage to another life”, Caro’s death can be seen as a move into another realm and further establishes her liminality.

In Lacanian terms, England as ‘Other’ is the location of a two-fold cultural inscription that (doubly) splits and alienates the girls as subjects.⁷⁵ The first of these ‘splits’ is generated by the text’s reference to English literary representations of Australia as Other (31-32).⁷⁶ The second is evidenced by Sefton Thrale’s reaction to Grace’s nation of origin (11). In response, the sisters (as representative of the Other) constantly and unconsciously remind the English of their own fractured psychosocial states.⁷⁷ While the girls’ education sees their understanding of Australian culture filtered through an English interpretation, an Australian sensibility is still evident in their refusal to be constrained by English manners. In some ways this suggests their differences as positive and suggests an apparent unwillingness to be intimidated by the English signification of their Australian heritage. For example, Christian Thrale is unsettled by the way the girls seem “uncommonly self-possessed for their situation. They seemed scarcely conscious of being Australians in a furnished flat” (21). Paul’s wife Tertia

⁷⁴ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories including ‘The Company of Wolves’*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1989, 49.

⁷⁵ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 37-38.

⁷⁶ In an earlier section (described above), the dog that sniffs around Caro and Paul is called “Split” (170), suggesting a possible direct reference to Lacan’s notion of the “split” subject.

⁷⁷ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 48.

experiences a similar discomfort in that “she could not manage to put these two sisters in the wrong or shade” (67).

The ‘double’ splitting and alienation of the girls’ experience mirrors the ‘double’ punishment Caro receives when she divulges Ted’s secret to Paul:

[Paul] said, “You loved me enough, then, to accept anything I’d done, even murder.”

“Yes.”

“But I knew, since you’d told Tice’s story, you’d ultimately tell mine. If I told you about Victor, one day you’d love someone else enough to confide in him.”

“So I was doubly punished for that.” (312)

Paul employs Ted’s secret as a weapon against Caro, denying her access to the Symbolic Order. Caro’s blind love for Paul is reflective of her early blind love for England, and in both cases, she is “doubly” punished for her naivety. This plays out in the text when Paul rejects Caro in favour of the English woman, Tertia, for a second time.

The nature of Paul’s control over Caro is psychological.⁷⁸ While at first glance this might seem to diminish his link with Bluebeard, it is consistent with texts that link Bluebeard with a particular Symbolic Order, rather than a particular person. As Puw Davies states:

That Symbolic Order comes to be identified with many of the structures and processes of civilisation, such as conventional aesthetics or an obsession with order and classification, all of which are experienced as subliminal or manifest forms of violence.⁷⁹

In Lacanian terms then, Bluebeard is a “shifter” that names something abstract which has been internalised and which is embodied by the narrator.”⁸⁰

Understood as such a “shifter”, Bluebeard no longer exists entirely outside of the female protagonist, for she has both “become and internalised” the phallus. As

⁷⁸ Puw Davies, *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

such, Caro is complicit in perpetuating the very Symbolic Order that oppresses her.⁸¹ The conflicted ending, in which Paul is established as a criminal and Caro is revealed as partly responsible for protecting him (by having revealed Ted’s secret to Paul), is characteristic of versions of *Bluebeard* written by women.⁸² According to Puw Davies, these retellings illustrate that in *Bluebeard* the “feminine subject is resistant to reductive classifications or fixed identifications or fixed identifications a la Bluebeard”.⁸³ However, Caro’s understanding of her complicity in protecting Paul (and by extension the Symbolic Order he represents) denotes a significant step towards invoking “a new way of belonging that does not depend on [women’s] subordination or erasure”.⁸⁴ Moreover, while Caro provides Paul with a ‘key’ of self-protection (when she tells him Ted’s secret), she is availed of a similar power when Paul finally tells her his own secret. Caro symbolically opens up the dark secrets of Empire (the forbidden chamber of the English Symbolic Order) and in doing so, generates a reconsideration of the relationship between England and Australia that suggests resistance to or a reshaping of colonial relations and identities. This links to Brown’s perspective that aligning “categories of difference” in a text—in this case women and Australia—can generate resistance to the dominant ideology.⁸⁵ In subtly linking issues of gender and colonisation in *The Transit of Venus*, Hazzard highlights the need for a reconsideration of both.

This rewriting of history is a process of doubling back, whereby the relationship between England and Australia is reconsidered. Structuralist theorist Gérard Genette identifies this approach as “double narrative” in which a deferred

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 222, f.n. 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 83.

⁸⁵ Brown, *Ends of Empire*, 22.

interpretation “retroactively confers on the past episode a meaning that in its own time it did not yet have”.⁸⁶ It is a technique, Teresa Dovey argues, consistently employed by novelist J.M. Coetzee as a means of articulating a “crisis of representation” through Lacanian “allegories of irony”.⁸⁷ The result for Coetzee is a body of work that critiques the “forms of discourse which have provided the legitimising of representations of various phases of imperialism”.⁸⁸ This re-reading of history by the colonised plays out in *The Transit of Venus* through its *Bluebeard* themes of repetition and seriality.

Paul’s reinscription of the traditional romantic hero as a bisexual married man is an example of such a double narrative. As such, Caro’s love affair with Paul is a pivotal means by which the text inverts standard romantic conventions and problematises essentialist structures generally, including generic gender and geographical binaries. For example, Paul initially presents as a traditional romantic hero: “Paul has all the qualities” (13) and has a “handsome, fair and fortunate face” (69). Wherever he goes, Paul brings “the sun and his luck with him” (70). Paul as the traditionally romantic hero is reinscribed eventually as a married bisexual. When Paul announces his bisexuality as part of his murder confession, Caro says she had always known (302). Caro’s acceptance of this helps to establish her as a liminal figure who journeys back and forth across gender, cultural, geographical, psychological and social binaries.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972, 56.

⁸⁷ Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J M Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. Cape Town: AD. Donker, 1988, 393.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. Lacan’s argument is that narrative itself is a “compulsive repetition of traumatic fantasy of the fragmented body”, which underpins the mirror stage and the difficult process of entering into the Symbolic Order (law and language), as enforced by the threat of castration (dismemberment and wounding). Puw Davies, *Tales of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 216, f.n. 20.

⁸⁹ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 50.

In Brooks' reading of *The Transit of Venus*, she invokes the myth of *Odyssey* to point out Lacanian features, which include understanding Caro and Paul's relationship as "an almost unhealthy mutual eroticism and psychopathology ... reliant on their identifying each other as Other".⁹⁰ Brooks' reflection on Paul and Caro's relationship calls upon Lacanian theories of romantic love as "deference" to the "Other". On this basis, the search for love is a search for unity/ wholeness that is ultimately an illusion which drives the subject, and rarely satisfies her/him. Love, as lack then, both alienates and divides the subject.⁹¹ In the text, this plays out through Paul's serial desire and rejection of Caro: he is at first inspired by her but she later threatens to "bring down his entire construction" (311). In Lacanian terms, Paul symbolically castrates himself by rejecting Caro and replaces that gap with another signifier, Tertia (who later becomes his wife).⁹²

In my Bluebeardian reading of *The Transit of Venus*, Lacanian features apply in that Paul's symbolic castration, by rejecting Caro and replacing the gap with Tertia, aptly describes the ambivalent, serial relationship between Bluebeard and his wives. While at first solidifying Bluebeard's position in the Symbolic Order, his wives (as phallic signifiers) simultaneously highlight his alienation from himself. Bluebeard symbolically castrates himself by killing off his wives, replacing one after another in an ultimately futile attempt to fill the gap left behind. In *The Transit of Venus*, although Paul is said to love Caro more than anyone, he "resented this historic position she had established for herself in the momentum of his life, and because of it would like to see her broken" (155). In an earlier scene, he acknowledges "it was recurring loss that bound them" (151).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 40-41.

Hazzard earlier indirectly alludes to Lacan's notion of lack as the driving force of desire in a seemingly benign scene in the early pages of the text in which Caro and Ted discuss the differences between English and Australian summers. When Ted suggests how "tame" the English summer must appear to her in contrast to Australian summer, Caro responds: "I was thinking the summer is violent, rather than tame ... Australian summer is scorching, without a leaf to spare. Out there, the force is in the lack, in the scarcity and distance" (26). This is one of the subtle means by which Hazzard links the search for love with a search for (personal and national) identity.

The pattern of use and then rejection that characterises Paul and Caro's relationship is analogous to the exploitation by Captain Cook's crew of the Tahitian women. Paul, like Cook's crew, is interested less in psychological contact than in sex, and risks his construction falling apart in order to satisfy his lust. While venereal disease became a colonial legacy for the Tahitian women, Paul's legacy is his dominance of Caro's thoughts.⁹³ As Puw Davies identifies, *Bluebeard* enables such violence to be represented as normalised and invisible.⁹⁴

Caro's love for Paul is identified as "like a loss of consciousness" (151), aligning it with innocence, and more specifically 'unknowing', just as Bluebeard's wife is considered innocent before she learns the truth. Such innocence is representative of death, and links to Caro's earlier symbolic decapitation at Peverel, as well as her literal death at the end of the novel. Her destructive relationship with the Bluebeard-like Paul is contrasted with other healthy relationships with characters representative of progression and change, specifically Adam Vail and Ted Tice. It is only in these relationships that Caro

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 41, f.n. 27.

⁹⁴ Puw Davies, *Tales of Bluebeard in German Literature*, 252.

experiences any real sense of joy or fulfilment, although, in line with the text's celebration of flux and impermanence, these moments are brief and momentary.⁹⁵ Consistent with this approach, Caro's husband Adam dies of a heart attack and Caro dies in a plane crash shortly after telling Ted she loves him. In Lacanian terms, anything beyond Caro and Ted's brief coming together would be suggestive of an illusory sense of psychosocial unity, and in this sense, impossible.⁹⁶ Moreover, Caro's death equates to a loss of innocence, which in this sense is less tragedy than a celebration of her life's movement and liminality.

When Caro relinquishes ties with Paul after his confession and declares her love to Ted, she symbolically rejects stasis (and the Symbolic Order Paul personifies) to embrace the dynamic liminal space Ted represents. That is, Caro not only celebrates the space between established cultural, geographical and gender binaries, but further establishes her own position as a liminal character within the text. Caro has discovered that Other places and Other people can be just as limiting as those she left behind in Australia, and seeks to establish a subjectivity that goes beyond what Brooks refers to as "the comfortable dyad of nation/self".⁹⁷ In this sense, Caro's journeying (geographically, and in search of love) leads her to an understanding of her own split subjectivity.

The fragmentation or splitting Caro had experienced through her love affairs mirrors her fragmentation as an expatriate. In a scene when Caro compares spring in the Andes to spring in Australia she thinks: 'All these places glimpsed in transit. She could not remember who had once said to her, "Not travel, but dislocation." It might have been Adam or Ted Tice' (248). (The reflection on dislocation, made to Caro by one of the other characters, implies a

⁹⁵ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

similar sense of subjectivity in Ted and Adam.) In recognising the movement that characterises her life as dislocation, Caro implies that psychosocial completeness is an illusion (in accord with Lacan).

In summary, I have explored the work of *Bluebeard* in *The Transit of Venus* to consider the women's expatriate fiction text as a narrative of gendered power relations. Specifically, this reading of *The Transit of Venus* draws attention to the way in which the text questions traditional gender relations, as well as re-configures the colonial relationship between England and Australia. The text associates England with the murderous Bluebeard, and the Australian protagonists, Caro and Grace, with Bluebeard's wife. In feminist versions of the fairytale, the initially naïve wife triumphs: she loses her innocence but escapes the marriage otherwise unscathed, while Bluebeard is revealed as a murderer and killed. In *The Transit of Venus*, the young, Australian protagonists are divested of their innocence, but emerge as agents of forward movement and transformation, in contrast to certain English, male characters, who are aligned with death and decay. Despite having originated from a different (and traditionally considered inferior) Symbolic Order, the female, Australian protagonists emerge as powerful (though not prevailing), and resistant to reductive classifications or fixed identifications of gender and national identity.

Turning Road

My own fiction, *Turning Road*, involves a young Australian woman's journey to London. In the most basic terms, Brydon's "self destructive love affair with an

egotistical male in a foreign place” is an apt description.⁹⁸ *Turning Road* tells of Lucy Moore, who leaves home for London in her early twenties in search of a more exciting life. It is 1997; the year Tony Blair comes to power and Princess Diana is killed in a car crash in Paris. In London, Lucy meets up with dazzling expatriates Oliver and Sarah, whose glamorous lifestyle and mysterious sexual arrangement opens her up for her a new world of possibilities—including a devastating (but ultimately liberating) relationship with the elusive Englishman, James.

Originally I envisaged the creative component of this dissertation would centre on the story of an Australian schoolboy whose intellectually disabled older sister is abused by two local boys. The boys’ accomplice in luring their victim was to be a girl who lived in the same street, and on whom the protagonist had developed a secret crush. Once I started writing, however, I found I could not find a way in to the piece: every attempt, from numerous different standpoints, felt awkward and overly laboured. Meantime, I started a regular ‘writing practice’ with a view to developing a writing routine. The ‘practice’ piece now forms the fiction element of this thesis. Perhaps not surprisingly, the central themes of the new piece are the same I had planned to deal with in my original idea and I have reached the same place—at least in terms of broader drives—by way of a different vehicle.

During this period I became particularly attracted to feminist interpretations of *Bluebeard* because I found the themes of secrecy, self-discovery, threat, seriality and sexuality pertinent. The “indirect and unexpected

⁹⁸ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 76.

benefit”⁹⁹ came when I started my dissertation and noted parallels with other Australian women’s expatriate fiction. In the sense that *Turning Road* is based loosely on *Bluebeard*, it also has a number of unintentional parallels with *The Transit of Venus* (discovered after I completed the first draft). *Turning Road* deals with an Australian woman’s loss of innocence in England through a narrative of exposed secrets. While James is the only English character in *Turning Road*, expatriates Sarah, Michael and Oliver are pseudo-Europeans. In this sense they are in tension with the young, Australian protagonist, Lucy and are ‘Other’ to Lucy in a Lacanian sense. A sense of impending danger also pervades *Turning Road*, and although vulnerable, Lucy becomes empowered: she emerges from her ordeal damaged but more enlightened, as does Caro. In Lucy’s case, this is partly because she fails to follow English convention: she is disrespectful of private space and actively voyeuristic in the sense of a tourist who wants to know what the ‘natives’ are doing. More significantly, Lucy (like Caro) comes to possess a ‘key’ in the Bluebeardian-sense; knowledge that gives her a certain power over the Others she encounters. Specifically, Ainslie tells Lucy that Sarah and Oliver’s sexual arrangement was “more about the sperm than the sex” (55). (That is, Sarah was using Oliver to try to get pregnant.) After this, Lucy comes to understand Sarah’s affair with James in a different light, and sees that he, rather than Oliver, might be the father of Sarah’s baby. Ainslie’s revelation, which comes towards the end of *Turning Road*, forces Lucy and the reader to reconsider everything that has gone before (as in Hazzard’s text).

⁹⁹ Colmer, “Shirley’s Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus*”, 14.

Conclusion

On the basis of an Odyssean reading, Brydon concludes that *The Transit of Venus* fails to offer “a new way of belonging that does not depend on [women’s] subordination or erasure”, that is, it fails to question the status quo.¹⁰⁰ Brooks argues that an Odyssean reading of *The Transit of Venus* establishes expatriation, and the expatriated subject, as a liminal act/site at which gender, cultural and geographical binaries break down.¹⁰¹ This study has argued that the *Bluebeard* themes of *The Transit of Venus* show how mythical and traditional themes highlight issues of identity and power in relation to gender and nation. Specifically, the text links gender and imperialism, thereby establishing England as male, and Australia as female. A Bluebeardian reading associates certain English male characters (and imperialist England) with Bluebeard, and the female Australian protagonists (and colonised Australia) with Bluebeard’s wife. While the Australian girls in *The Transit of Venus* originate from a different and (traditionally considered) inferior Symbolic Order, the text unfolds a rewriting of history in which traditional power relations are reconfigured. In this sense and ironically, as Brown suggests, “a cultural proposition that seems to shore up the status quo and to serve dominant ideology can sometimes become a perverse means to its undermining”.¹⁰² Rather than shore up the status quo, the presence of the *Bluebeard* tale in the text questions traditional constructs of gender and national identity and supports cultural difference. In cautioning against prescribed national and gender roles/relations, a *Bluebeard* reading creates a

¹⁰⁰ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 83.

¹⁰¹ Brooks, *Through the Looking Glass*, 24.

¹⁰² Brown, *Ends of Empire*, 22.

scenario in which a liminal space is opened to alternative readings and a dialogue for a new way of belonging that both combines and transcends dominant binaries.

When *The Transit of Venus* is read as a variation of *Bluebeard*, it comes as no surprise that in the 1984 Boyer Lectures *Growing Up in Australia*, Hazzard suggested a mythic and fairytale scenario when she said: “if there is to be maturity, the phantasm of a perennially innocent Australia will have to be laid to rest”.¹⁰³ Reading *Bluebeard* in Australian women’s expatriate fiction allows for the genre’s themes of threat, sexuality, secrecy, self-knowledge and seriality to warn against prescribed gender roles/relations and fixed notions of Australian identity, working towards the creation of an alternative, dynamic, and differently constituted realm to emerge from historically-constructed power relations between home and abroad.

¹⁰³ Brydon, “Buffoon Odysseys”, 79.

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