

Fragments from a Paper Witch

Currently living in Melbourne Marion May Campbell grew up in Sydney and Perth. Her novels *Lines of Flight* (1985), *Not Being Miriam* (1988), *Prowler* (1999) and *Shadow Thief* (2006) have been shortlisted for major Australian awards and twice for the Canada-Australia Literary Award. *Not Being Miriam* won the 1989 Western Australian Literary Week Award for Fiction. Two works for the theatre, *Dr Memory in the Dream Home* (1990) and *Ariadne's Understudies* (1992) were performed at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. She has taught Creative Writing at Murdoch University and the University of Melbourne.

Also by Marion May Campbell

NOVELS

Lines of Flight (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1985; rpt 1992)

Not Being Miriam (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988; rpt 1994)

Prowler (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)

Shadow Thief (Pandanus, 2006)

THEATRE

Dr Memory in the Dream Home with Director Andrew Ross &
Composer Stuart Davies-Slate (Perth Institute of
Contemporary Arts, 1990)

Ariadne's Understudies with Director-Dramaturge Noëlle
Janaczewska, (PICA, 1992;
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Fragments from a Paper Witch

MARION MAY CAMPBELL

With a preface by Gail Jones



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To the friends who made this possible

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Preface to Marion Campbell's Fragments from a Paper Witch

By Gail Jones

WRITING ARDOUR

A poet's prose is the autobiography of ardour. So wrote Susan Sontag of the Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva. The boundary of form, that is to say, is finally less real than the ardour it flexibly promotes. Poetry, prose, autobiography: to an artist who takes for granted the transitivity of aesthetic practices, there are no divisions, only re-sitings, no sequestrations, categories, labelled products for consumption, only the spaces in which ardent word-play finds each new intensification. And just as ardour connotes erotic charge, the *frisson* of oblique contact, the enlivening conjugation, the wondrous ramifications of libidinal desire, so too it is an earnest attitude of inscription, an aroused way of regarding the entire body of the text. Writerly ardour is emphatic, impatient, charged and provocative. It is the almost unbearable wish for expression as exhaustion.

Sontag's insight serves as a guide to this extraordinary volume by Marion Campbell. Irrepressibly virtuosic, a 'writers' writer', Campbell energetically assumes the transfigurations of ardour. She assumes that poetry, prose and autobiography—and indeed what we might loosely call works for voice and performance—are mutually responsive and interpenetrating literary incitements. The occasion of writing she calls *vagabondage*, a restless journeying between different registers and modes, an impulsive bestirring. It is filching for nourishment, finding shelter from the storm, entering the storm. It is words *unhoused*, in a sense, radical in possibility because they refuse complacency, the well-built home of the comfortably conventional writer. It is words cross-nationalised, garnering from

the French in particular, lexicons of both the vulgarian and the sophisticate, words refashioned—let us say—by someone who might choose to sleep in a tunnel to better frame the night sky in a circle.

The poet Mallarmé once called words *the luminous evidence*. Campbell is a writer preoccupied, like Mallarmé, by the profundity of what literature as a category of experience might mean, by what intimacies and revelations attend acts of reading and writing. What luminosity is this? What evidence, after all? What does it mean to believe so thoroughly in writing that it carries with it a tormented awareness of what happens when words fail us? It is rare to meet a true innovator but in Marion Campbell we have one. Here then is a constellation of audacious works, each utterly distinctive, each propelled by a singular and brave imagination. This is writing given to risk and deterritorialization, to the anguish and delight of ardent upheaval.

WRITING GLORY

How then might we approach these exemplary pieces? We must, from the beginning, open ourselves to *exorbitance*. In her early novels, the brilliant *Lines of Flight* (1985) and the beguiling *Not Being Miriam* (1988), Campbell signalled her refusal of tight domesticity and the constrictions of a life without the dimension of *glory* to animate and excite it. (This epigram of melancholy: ‘*to think that glory was once one of her words.*’) Campbell’s further narratives concerning the desirousness of women’s lives, *Prowler* (1999) and *Shadow Thief* (2006), are each bent on a vision: the selves that we have are plural and this is both our burden and consolation. We are creatures of chance, or more accurately *hasard* (the French term), with its invocation of the contingency that is also a principle of creativity, with its almost panicky, Mallarméan multiplications: *Every thought*, he once wrote, *emits a dice-throw*. Almost perversely alert, Campbell’s characters are also painfully sensitive; they are the wide-awake witnesses of difficult times.

Exorbitance exists in part as mythopoetics, classical models that characters recapitulate in allegorical narratives. In the opening prose poem of the volume it is the figure of Ariadne, she who *knew* the labyrinth, that inspires a riff on the topic of the monstrous, the hero and the self representation of the mother, Pasiphae. The writing is sumptuous, excursive and unafraid. Derived from *Not Being Miriam*, this piece announces Campbell's preoccupation with mythic relay and misrecognition (the self that is *mythtaken* in its duplication) and also her feminist investigation of women who are framed or are somehow *beyond* the frame. In the brilliant poem *Icarus*, it is *his work*, being *his bird*, that melts the figure who would otherwise enjoy the sun's blaze. Masculine artifice is enticing—spectacularly so—but also traducing of female aspiration. Women risk the dazzle of a *radiance they cannot name, of [my] undoing*.

For readers familiar with Campbell's contribution as a novelist, what is surprising here is the excellence and sophistication of her poetry. That which is little tolerated in prose—since ours is a culture repressive of passionate eloquence—here finds a compact and strenuous expression. The poetic form *becomes her*; Campbell's image-making and word-play is refined by gap and concision. The elegy entitled *the word here* is an especially lovely example, the strain of grief finding itself pared to precise formalism and the particularity of memory.

The most compelling use of myth is the drama script entitled *The Half-life of Creonite*. Antigone's distress is staged in an intensive care unit, grieving over the bashed, comatose body of her brother, Paul. Unsentimentally—shockingly—Campbell conceives tyrannical power as it is written on the wounded body, the body caught in the culture of razor wire, border-protection, conscientious grief nominated *black armband history*, a state in which activism is misread as fanatical narcissism. The work of *Security*, a bashing, makes no-one feel secure; with this central metaphor Campbell constructs her critique of the Howard Government regime and its malicious deformation of civic culture. Just as Anouilh adopted Sophocles' Antigone to attack the Vichy government in France (and Cocteau

also considered its moral compass), so Campbell has taken Antigone's grief for the unburied Polynices as a code to examine the denunciation of feeling in a culture that cannot honour the violated body. Infantilizing Antigone as 'Tiggy' or 'Tig', Creon, the toxic leader, is able to vitiate dissent by claiming control of the comatose Paul. Yet it is an imagining of the wound, a *writing of the wound*, as Maurice Blanchot would have it, spliced with real-estate materialism, the condescension of agents of the State, and the 'embarrassment' of Antigone's affective despair, that give this piece of writing such astonishing and harrowing power. Antigone can *see for the blind*: she is the anti-Oedipus who repudiates the Law of the Father that would mock and discredit every suffering protest.

The writing in *The Half-Life of Creonite* reminds us of the political power of the monological. So much of the discourse of the State here works by strategic occultation and by abolishing multicultural understanding that is the true sign of a democracy. It is polysemy and pun that expose the *borderline disorder* and the *Coilition of the Killing* as the symptoms of *the State of Compromise*. Campbell reveals the commodity fetish for real estate as the *unreal state* and mourns the loss of privacy and personal ardour. Creon is pathologically dismissive of a black ontology, a way of seeing that might comprehend the violence and loss written into the constitution of the nation. He is smarmy, duplicitous, inauthentic and cruel, a politician of bad faith and realpolitik. Antigone is the impassioned and grief-stricken woman for whom injustice evokes a moral courage. In this dark psychodrama there is no redemptive arc. There is no recuperation. There is no false solace. Yet ironically there is a genuine glory to Antigone. *The Half-Life of Creonite* is a splendid achievement; its discursive complexity and tough poetics operate in a text without peer in the literary genres of protest in Australia. This is no merely casual or decorative neo-classicism. It is rather a mobile device by which to recover the scale of political evil and the dangerous honourability of true dissent. It is classicism as anamnesis, as literature *engagé*.

The links between politics, language and the body are everywhere exemplified. In her poem on Louis St. John Johnson, a nine-

teen year old Aboriginal man who died in an explicitly racist attack in Perth in 1992, Campbell insists that the *white window shopping* of a measured historical gaze is no longer sufficient: *there's something tacky/ on the glass we can't dismiss*. It is the wounded body that is again at the centre of vision. The poet does not flinch from describing the moment in which *white violence taps/the window of the text*, obliging a politically engaged response. Elegy is one of the functions of the serious artist. This is writing given as a gift in the service of sorrow. This is mournfulness as writerly activism.

WRITING IMPERSONATION

The shadowing of individuals by mythic figures is part of a consistent epistemology of character that governs Campbell's writing. 'Awesomely intelligent,' as one critic wrote of her work, Campbell is aware of the many ways in which self is composed of projections and introjections, copies, identifications, even unconscious and vexing alliances. A high modernist by affiliation, she is also sceptical of *ab nihilo* versions of textual generation and critical too of naïve models of inspirational election. In this volume there are many pieces that combine an inquiry into the nature of writing with a parallel consideration of the complicated textuality of selfhood. Motherhood is a particular focus; the maternal self is a monster, a spectacle, a dream *elastically other*. Imagined not as a category of merit but a drama of self, the mother generates some of Campbell's most impressive writing. Children as love-objects are also re-made; the anxiety and intensity of mothering, the magnification of feeling, form the basis for a linguistic and corporeal excess that constructs the child in an amorous relation.

Campbell's early writings refigured Jean Genet's *The Maids* (in which sisters Claire and Solange perform their lacerating and passionate identifications) and Racine's *Phèdre* (in which Phaedre tragically falls in love with her stepson); in each case the French literary tradition, as well as Greek myth, provided rich material for thinking through the transferential mysteries of writing and

performance. In *Fragments from a Paper Witch*, however, it is Mallarmé who paradigmatically *haunts* the text, both a figure for contemplation—as one might contemplate an icon, rich and strange in metaphysical resonance—and as an example of intertextual writing. The poem *Unnaming Maria* is a dazzlingly beautiful tribute to Mallarmé, a meditation on how grief is a continual slippage of the sign into nothingness. Mallarmé’s mother Elizabeth died when he was five, and his sister Maria at fifteen. This establishes a symptomatic vulnerability by which Maria switches to Marie (his wife), Méry (his mistress), into precarious and always elliptical metaphors and then into echoing half-syllables of the sister’s returned name. The slip-sliding culminates in the death of Mallarmé’s ten year old son, Anatole: ‘*on this your syntax broke . . .*’ This poem delicately honours Mallarmé’s own image repertoire and enters the spirit of his obscurely difficult and broken-hearted imaginings. A second verse piece, *Nuit Bis*, is also in this mode, yet for all its night-blackness it achieves the luminosity of the Mallarméan example, longing as it does for the future-perfect tense of healing.

WRITING LOVE

In this volume is included what might be considered a manifesto of writing practice. Provocatively entitled *i, of the swarm*, this is a disquisition, in many registers and paratactic form, on the way every writer participates in and perpetually negotiates their own community of writing. It condemns the glamour industry of publishing, its mean duplicities, but is also alive to the more private *far-fetched couplings* of writerly attachments and identifications. Using Mallarmé again as an example, it considers how even his house in Tournon is a seductive apparatus, how his images infuse place, relationships and the author’s own writings and readings. However, this is not idol worship or illusioned admiration. Rather, Campbell is aware of the troubling pre-eminence of male texts in women’s imaginaries and curious as to how this might predispose, or dispose of, another form of saying. Not subordination, but

connection, is what Campbell judiciously affirms. She rehearses Mallarmé's phrases taken from Edgar Allan Poe, and discusses the case of Paul Celan, diminished by the co-option of his most famous poem, *Death Fugue*, into the instrumental loquacity of anthologies and teaching. 'I' is 'of the swarm' inasmuch as the work of a writer involves negotiating the axis between theft (*le vol*) and flight (*le vol*), a homophonic puzzle at the conceptual centre of Campbell's first novel, *Lines of Flight*. All writing is haunted by its precedents, especially those secured by the power of identification. All writing is *a prose swarming with the words of others*. Thoroughly French in her theoretical derivation, Campbell insists that (post Barthes) writers must release the Author, burnished by its own centralized and ideological authority, for a drastically open model of writing as turbulent dispersal.

At this point in my reading—to speak more personally now—I was confronted by my own significant indebtedness to Campbell as a writer. Although we worked as university colleagues for only one year, I have read avidly all of her published works and have also, from time to time, lectured on her novels. In reading so honest and vigorous an essay about interconnectedness, about the ways in which we may elaborate others, sometimes in tribute, sometimes in theft, sometimes in unknowing (or self-deluding) mechanisms of mimicry and iteration, I realized how suggestive and inspirational her work has been to me—and no doubt to many others. That this preface is marked by italics signals how fundamentally she has developed her own tropological territory and writerly rhetoric, how *distinctive* Campbell's work is as a literary exemplar. The daring of her writing hinges on the solidarity and humility of interconnection, but equally on the flight of what Celan calls the metaphorical flurry (*metapherngestober*). Like many great writers of enormous modesty, Campbell is unaware of the profundity of her influence (as a teacher, as well as a writer) and of the magnificence of her own example. She is an inspiration to others, one who reminds us that serious writing, in the end, betokens *survie* ('more than life' and 'survival').

In her final essay we find the following words:

To love, you think, is to let the words of the other, the thought of the other, the image of the other, travel through you, to savour their irreducible singularity, yes, but also to allow their intermeshing with your own words and thoughts and images, to form new attractions, new assemblages, and to release them for further altering relay.

This is surely of a description of writing as a lover's discourse, one which, even with texts soaked, as Mallarmé writes, *with tears from the Styx*, offers the most invested, ravishing and complicated of encounters. These are encounters which stimulate intellectual and affective *jubilation* (another of the writer's favourite words). So while much of the content is solemn (I am reminded of Barthes's aphorism: *the amorous gift is always a solemn one*), there is also here a kind of literary cruising, writing as charged transfer, as the vigilant address of arousing desire. Campbell's oeuvre is essentially of this order. I commend this luminous volume to readers in the fervent hope it will elevate her to wider notice and confirm her reputation as a major Australian writer.

1 Myhtaken

A for Ariadne

ARIADNE, daughter of Minos, was abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus during their voyage to Athens after Theseus had, with her assistance, overcome the Minotaur in Crete

ROBERT E. BELL, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

I finger the shell. It's like an ear the snake visits with prophecies, only revered in retrospect. I finger it again, calling it ammonite, recoiling into being. Am Ariadne now beached in the sway between am / am not. In the breach between Pasiphae and Phaedra? The ammonite lisp to me to attend to the wake of the tidal pulse. What poise I have on this lip of history. My endless migrations have brought me here to the Antipodes of Naxos, when they would have me fixed in a star. What a career. You see me rocking slightly but this is my poise. This is my particular emergence. I still drip from the grottos, from the tunnelling caverns. I have travelled too far, too slowly, in the wings of their theatre, listening for a break, queuing with the other understudies. The plays have been mainly about bankers, soldiers, explorers and sexual athletes. The only entries I've made so far have been into their dictionaries. I found one under A for Abandonment. Some entry into being. Before I am named, the waves suck at my toes. My itch enjoys the grit of shells.

Theseus? I gave him a break all right, supplied him with his birthstring. He can visit my father now he plays judge down there in Hades. Theseus does without the psycho-pomp; he has diplomatic immunity. Charon-ferried, he clenches the bankcard between his teeth. As usual, he has the passport, garlanded with visa stamps, the torch, pencil slim, in his pocket. The unseen they call obscene, everything off-stage, he says he's mapped it all. He demonstrates it clearly: the torch, its ever-ready batteries pole-to-pole, peeling back the dark. Still in dreams I feel the tiny disc of light inspect my flesh. See, it's okay, there's nothing there, nothing at all, he calls. And the monster? What of it? A minor tor in the hopscotch he played on the threshold of

manhood, never letting the cracks get to him. That's why they despise puns, they upset their *curricula vitae*.

I'm not going to be mythtaken, fixed in constellation. Their tidying up jobs afterwards. I'll underpun their purpose, sound the lisp as a way of saying, whisper monstrosities, but I'll come that later.

Minos built a great reputation for just Lawmaking. Like Theseus his son-in-law. And what of his annual conscription of Athenean youth? Oh, that was just to school them in underground tactics. He sent them back enlightened all right, a fact that Athens didn't always have the grace to acknowledge. Father and son-in-law are immune to me troubling their neatspeak, wobbling their scales. Theseus folded his map and shouted from the deck: This is what you wanted. This is a new start I'm giving you girl. May your vision be well-compassed, he laughed. I saw his teeth blaze through the foam.

Of course he helped Minos clear his name: minus the minotaur that haunted his reputation. The one his wife Pasiphae visited upon him, mother to energies beyond him. It's true she could at one stage invent new contours for her sensuality. If she was a sculptor, she was an actor too, taking on the painfilled udder, the moist muzzle and the silky lashes she blinked through to him. He stared in steady horror.

I gave Theseus his birthstring so he could shut them up about the mystery. What he found and if he slayed, he didn't have to tell. He let the rumours elaborate his story. There was a kind of murder. What he overcame was an idea of a boy, left behind this kind of initiation. Only a boy fingering the tunnelling bas-relief he sculptured through his adolescence. A boy who heard nothing of Just Heroes, who swam in the undercurrents, his flesh water-withered. On his reappearance, Theseus let the crowd applaud. He simply held up his sword, the fake blood clotting. Did they even speak? There was a terrible certainty in his eyes, as if nothing would elude his torch now. In the boat afterwards, I saw him against the black sail. I saw the sinews knotting in his neck. I

watched him pull and flex his fingers systematically, joint after joint. I knew there could be no meeting for our bodies, unless like Pasiphae. I longed for my mother's fingers unthreading my braids. I let the salt wind shred them instead. I cried no. I cried no to the bludgeoning of his loins that night, anchored in the cove at Naxos, that's when he said it. I suppose it runs in the family. Well if bullying is what you want! I'm not joking, he said. He wasn't. As if giving me the yarn wasn't a come-on. Or have you been in another story all along? It was you, you hussy, who came to me and drugged the guards.

I remembered a sculpture my mother did of her face. Eyeless. She was blowing the pan flute. She was blown and bulging, pucker-stitching like a pickled person. But this was then, in granite. I found the fissures with my fingers, I was sightless in reply. My fingers searched the mouth but it was fused with the music played, the pipes grew out of it. I found the swelling in her throat. Before Minos, way before. I set this huge memory on the beach. Theseus' boat was just a minor flaw on the horizon. I bathed in the shadow to the left of the nose. To the right, the way was parched. Then the sands rippled a confusion, violet swayed with lemon. Music liquefied the idea of stone. The head was something they never found when they ransacked her studio, after the Minotaur.

To sing your sire in

To sell a polish no different from all the others, of course you have to tamper with language a bit—it's what those linguists say, what Valda Schleiernmacher is saying now. She must have taken the Schleiernmacher *Veilmaker* as a joke on the art of selling—you've got to use that verbal veil—the onomatopoeia, the chiasma, the porte-manteau, the paronomasia—whatever seems to buoy the essence of the product in the sweet bowels of its name, like as she's saying now, *I like Ike*. Every time an American in the sway of the slogan said *I like* the General-President's name was also spoken—he was the verbal agent of that affinity. *I like the President like hamburger like nuclear family like nuclear fall-out like Cadillac like Elvis the white gyration like nuke like bald-headed small-nosed newts like Ike like the baby boom of bald and blue-eyed future blonds to be bald old men like him bald like the bigger bomb like Cold War like to stockpile my deep-freeze . . .* Every time they sent out a sleek missile of their liking, the spiky little syllable of Eisenhower's nickname travelled along.

Une cire. A polish. Why not the English name to encode the snob; get that kind of consumer in, *le cocktail, le bâtiment de grand standing, le grog, les Quakers Oats*—they say *Kawhkairzote* here and porridge is magical, exotic—why not *polish, peuhleesh. Peau lisse*, rather—smooth skin. The hand caressing the skin as smooth, as impeccable as celluloid—CUT to gossamer surfaces everywhere, as the exquisitely manicured fingers trail their caress, *peau lisse*, smooth skin over everything, could take out a copyright or patent or whatever they call it on the adjective *lisse** spreading its aura like glad* wrap over all the shunted planes of light, *peau lisse*, a veil of opalescent luminosity singing love in on your very own vinyl floors—CUT to the living room now, and we will show you how we will make all your surfaces chime, how you can be Penelope and Siren all at once; watch the one who *knows* weaving the gossamer fabric, her translucent fingernails trailing the silky warp and weft of it—just like the trajectory of a fairy wand to enrapture forever the homing Ulysses—you too can sing your sire in—serene you are, even though it's

been a decade—no, no decay!—the teeth of this Penelope say it through their Hollywood orthodontic perfection; siren you are and no need for him to be gagged and mast-tied—this is the foyer, the pulsating focus, and as he sails euphorically towards it—CUT to the source of this beguilement—CUT to the secret, the centripetal pulsing of this light around one simple cylinder bearing the label *SIRÈNE* and below, in more modest, cursive script: *la Reine des Cires*, queen of polishes and queen of sires and now the video gives you the chance to sing your own sire in, in one long enchanting celestial hum, the transfigured harmonics of the polishing machine fill your soundtrack and *Heureux qui comme Ulysse retrouve chez lui la Peau Lisse de Sirène la Reine des Cires . . . Happy is he who like Ulysses comes home at last to find Penelope is Siren after all . . .*

I will give it a go, you tell Valda Schleiermacher.

Icarus

it's the pull on the wax I love
undoing the connection
the beating mechanism of his work
ah Helios, what precision acupuncture is this
finding these pleasure points of my undoing?

so that in reaching up becoming something
beyond mere flight from there to here
I'm so

suspended above my fault

think flight plan Daedalus said
compass altitude cruise control
& I've seen them all
Phaedra Ariadne Pasiphae
dazzled by a radiance
they cannot name

it's not sunblaze that I'm pitching for
if he only knew
something beyond the assembly
feathers wax bones aerial

being his bird I can only will
the moment in the binoculars
of the girl outside the story
where I let his wings detach

& molten
i
pour
through her sightlines

what a sunset

Walpurgisdunkel

You cross the immense parquet—diamonds within squares—deep in it and above are chandeliers—diamonds within squares—you walk *piano, piano*. You open the grand piano. Your fingers prowl and pick, and, note by note, a Lied comes to you, of *Sehnsucht* for a German tongue. You compose yourself a German pair of lungs, a leather larynx; you are glad of the spacious cavity of your mouth, that curve of teeth. Now pitch your darkening vowels to the chandeliers. You know you are singing the cruise ship in. You must sing that it's a cruise ship as you would say, *it's a breeze*. All familiar things are bound to ship-wreck on this cruise. Your voice is cruising for the witch's word. When she comes to you, and beckons with her knife, this is what your Lied expected. *Lend me your ear*, she says. You must barter your ear against the cruising familiarity of things. You sing *ja* to severance. The witch says, watching the gush, *Can't believe you fell for that. Bet you didn't even try the dancers on the parquet.*

Diamonds within squares!

You watch figureless now as your blood circulates *Walpurgisdunkel* on the sea.

the word *here*

in memoriam Adele Roma Campbell, née Gordon
for Margaret

the irreducible gravel —
the word *ashes*
didn't prepare us for that

you wouldn't have asked for *scattering*
if you had known
we'd be given the grit the bone

in a grey plastic briquette
that had to be opened in violence
we begged at the cemetery office for a knife

it slipped on the gaffer tape
& cracked the plastic, that gaping, spewed
bone powder gravel & grit

into the marble crunch of the gravetop
we raked with broken nails
the *scattered* wouldn't disappear

glittering on the headstone
Alex Gordon & Mabel Gordon née Hutchinson
no breathing space to mark

your name your fierce
intelligence still flaring
with monographs on Stead

& White open at your side
when they shut you down
with morphine

there still is no name no holding point
no tip of Ariadne's yarn, no
frayed line to clutch & follow

we left the cicadas to ring out the Karrakatta
glare & took the grey container
wordless out of there

oh rest assured you'd say
back then in comfort or in resignation
but i say now if only *here* could be the place

where *here* might mean something
to you like *rest assured* like
sleep & quiet *breathing*

2 Spectacular Motherhood

Time Inside

In the sun-slatted room, listen:
the little cat licks, purrs

stops absent-mindedly.
Eyes narrowed, she suspends you

in amber warmth, lets day fold over you
until in any mother's belly dark

you're less alert to sharp vowels
of children in their bright space

far from yours. Now deep inside the water bowl
receiving only mirrored skies

you hold at bay all that's compass slavery:
sextant, vector, set course.

Somewhere else, heaping up
are punctual calls unheeded

terminal clauses tangling.
Here, only tidal intentions:

sea's surge & trough or wave slap.
Glad within this time sack

that is your life
turned back so future edge, edge past

touch to make the loop now
time out, you are

amniotically buoyed
& rhythmmed by the not-you

beating in your belly
humming in the traffic's wake.

Spectacular Motherhood

For Zoë

MONSTERS IN THE PLOT

Perhaps you'll let me be your guide this time? Your usherette? Do you think I could I borrow your torch? Yes, I'm afraid I'm caught in this place. It's true; I haven't moved far. I'm still hanging around this old labyrinth, tied to my mother's body. The mother's body will always be the Place, you know. We can't imagine her as an agent of action, as a subject of a public discourse. It's up to her to disguise herself if she wants to play this game. If she wants to stay as she is, let her stay where she is. So seems to be the rule of the story tellers and their questing envoys. The quest is launched by the riddling body of the mother, collapsed at the edge of the world to be explored. Remember Perceval. Before he even knew about the Grail, he left his mother in a heap behind him. If a mother tries to speak out, as herself, people are embarrassed. They say she is making a spectacle of herself. Mothers have to be left behind, it seems. The mother's body can be found again, in the hero's story, as a temporary reprieve, a succouring reminder, a monstrous remainder, a momentary enigma, a new bag of clues, a destination of a kind. This is true, you say, but we can't have her voicing sentences. Mothers, it seems, remind us of what lies in wait at the other end of the plot, of the persuasive analogy between the cocoon and the catacombs. All plots end in death, as the narrator of DeLillo's *White Noise* says. We don't want to be reminded of our narrative terminus. Sentences must lead to the sublimation of our desire for mother. If she keeps reappearing, we feel stuck like a Beckettian character in the very small space between the womb and the tomb.

I can't talk. To try to talk in this space is to ask to be translated, literally. I'm beguiled by place and intimate connection. I'm stuck in my site but I have to admit that my baby has left me. A million singing hooks tug at me, pull me along the highways to her. As in amorous expectation, my body curves achingly around the space she has vacated. My muscles anticipate her

known weight in my arms, the complete trust of her nuzzling relaxation, the hesitant parade of her tiny fingertips over my breast, my face. To begin to write about motherhood, I have to dislocate myself, from her, from my self. Her father has taken her away, for my sake, to his office, telling her and me, as he left, *Well, we're going on an adventure now, just you and I.* An adventure. When we travel together, my baby and I, the site itself is nomadic. It's not *an adventure*. Mothers are traditionally enabling for narrative they are not the narrative.

As if to mock my primitive relapse into thinking my maternal self as site, yesterday's cobalt enamel sky has given way to a gothic dynamic, upsetting the very categories of earth, vegetation, atmosphere. It is pure, transgressive energy, if such a thing can be pure. My daughter and her father are travelling through horizontally bulleting rain. On the freeways, high beams pick out only the cats' eyes between the lanes and the lashings of frenzied eucalypts. Three times now I've gone back to the beginning of this piece to substitute one wild start for another and each time I think I'm moving, I see the screen image diminish to a white shriek and die before reaching memory. Is motherhood just this endless beginning? Because of the storm there has been a power surge or shut down. Whatever the rational explanation, I understand that motherhood is haunted by this kind of amnesia: some phrases are left hovering forever without predication because other connections intervene. Of course, there's a saying regarding women's work. I have now resorted to my barbarous black pen.

The pen writes, despite my grander intention, that he has the portable babykit, the bottled breasts, the stack of nappies, the spare jump suits and pilchers. Will he know which press studs to pair? He has taken her and I must justify her absence, linking sentence to sentence to sentence to meet the deadline. I know I have digressed again. Perhaps that's what I need to talk about. A little digression makes the plot go wild. Is it in tracing the kinks of the mother's body that arguments go astray? Each loop

is a time pocket, a pause in which identity is suspended and this is a kind of death risk, if one takes one's pleasure for too long. The mother's body is the matrificial figure for metaphor itself. Metaphor defeats narrative as cursive time. Metaphor declares the similarity of the different. It unites them in one figure. It's basically monstrous—like a mother's body. Take a category like *masculinity*: as soon as that becomes a theme in narrative, a tool for thought, a motif for art, it has to be tested and reassured by what it thinks it isn't. It has to look in the mirror for endorsement, not just by its opposite but by what troubles the very standard of the opposition, by the kind of loopy thinking that contests any duality. The monstrous is the disturbance in all mirror relations. Fear of the Other within the mother as anyone's first other is tamed by the sweeter face of metaphor, but rudely confronted in the monster. The monster is the perennial troubler of categories. It is the recognition of their leakage. It is the dramatic face of the abject. The monster returns to display what categories serve to keep secret. The monster secretes and serves the surface of reason. Its spectacular return lasts just long enough for thought to re-establish its serenity. The monstrous is the eruption of the mother's body in the father's plot. The monstrous is felt in a strange doubling back of time. With glimpses of the monster, the classical narrative veers into spiralling baroque. If these monstrous returns are frequent, we're in the gothic, the maternal mode *par excellence*. From the folds of the mother's body erupts the difference within: both the possibility of bringing forth and of a sexuality not reducible to the maternal or reproductive function. There is terror. Spectators or readers are reduced to cries, shrieks and babble. It is delicious. It is at once what should not and what does not belong to the mother. The monstrous derives from the inside-outness of women's bodies: their capacity for cyclonic pleasure as well as feline absorption with their babies. The monstrous is a scandal because it amounts to catching the cultural order in flagrant delinquency at those moments when it tinkers with itself. It is

the mix within the categorical fix. It is the invagination or the glove effect of all categories. It's the otherness one has to recognise within one's own self. It is also the endurance of connection through separation. But you must not drown in the maternal swamp: beware: just when you think you've got firm footing on the set path, the quick sands might suck you back in. Do not look too long or lovingly at the monster for it manifests at what expense the pacific mask of reason is composed.

This excess, the destabilising energy of the different within the same, must be sacrificed, provoked and annulled again and again in any plot so that categories find their exchange value in the market place of stories. Monsters must be confronted and slaughtered in the ritual pauses of narrative or else, in carnivalesque moments, allowed to dance so that the site of the mother can be cleansed once again. Hygiene is the key term. There's a lot of abject sludge to be hosed in the wake of this kind of spectacle—like afterbirth. The mother can return monstrously when we least expect it. She can take on the guise of a horse's head on a gate post at the edge of the prince's terrain, she asserts herself as a troubler of boundaries, she haunts liminal moments, saying: *If your mother knew, it would break her heart*. It can surface in the postmodern obsession with litter as lists gone amok. Emptying the garbage compactor in his search for his wife's cure for death, DeLilo's narrator finds a tampon inside a banana skin. The monstrous is displayed here in its platitudinous abjection; the fetishistic gaze ransacking the mother's body can reassure itself for a brief moment: *it's okay, there's nothing there, on either side of sexual difference*,

Hysteria is a problem with place, Freud said. Hysteria is rather a protest about placement: *I'm not where you think I am*. Monstrous behaviours from the hysterical body must be incited, pressed to confess, converted, translated (that is, literally, displaced) so that the story of psychoanalysis can be relayed from one gentleman to the next. At La Salpêtrière Clinic, Charcot put his hysterics on display, inviting along colleagues and apprentices, like Freud.

He had them photographed in the transports he induced: the woman's body as evidence for his demonstrations. The mute speech of the hysteric or the rebel migrant womb was a spectacle to be converted into Fathers' Own Stories.

MOTHER, YOU'RE POLLUTED

Spectacle? Since I'm stuck in a place of images, I am caught repeating the gestures of old cultural habit, offering myself as an usherette or a guide. At best I'm a curator without a contract, asking you to feel your way and not to take photographs, please. My qualifications would not be recognised in any case. I am only my mother's daughter and my daughter's mother; I am young and very old. Look, I'll take that torch if feeling your way gives you the creeps. This sight has visited me often and like any dreaded event, its return is almost soothing when it happens. Each pillar in this winding colonnade is made of broken crockery, as are, in fact, all buildings, statues and monuments here. From the exploded cupboards of all the dream kitchens? Perhaps. You like the texture? It reminds you of Gaudi, really? The woman over there? Yes, she tried to follow their instructions. They gave her a show bag as she left the maternity hospital. It came with the compliments of Johnson & Johnson. *Things for Baby; things for You*, they told her. The bag was filled with instructional brochures and dolly-sized samples of medications and lotions, palliative, preventative and cosmetic, to try out. *Mothers and babies have a few things in common, they told her. They leak. Their bodies are uncertain about boundaries. They explode at times; they gape; they ooze; they drip; they suffer rashes; they might be diseased in hidden places. We just want You and Baby to relax in this Beautiful Natural Experience, they said, and we'll take care of the rest. Good, good! Bubby's coming along well but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be vigilant! And my dear, you have yourself to look after: we've got your lochia, your whole puerperium to worry about, haven't we? Those*

breasts, they might go on swelling forever; you'll be needing hammocks for them if you don't procure yourself a proper bra. You do want to breast feed? Yes? Congratulations! Here are some nursing pads. Yes, just try them out; you'll find they're indispensable for those times when you can't get Bubby quite when Bubby thinks it's supper time, eh, and you have that tell-tale little leak to spoil your nice new silk blouse. Yes, who doesn't want to reward herself with some nice new clothes? The bleeding will continue of course, until week six. Yes, that's the magical time. Here are some mini-pads for that. What didn't we think of? Be wary of the dioxin leaking from the bleaches our rivals use. Disposable nappies for Bub. Oh yes, ours do look whiter than white but we can assure you that our minimal doses of bleach pose no risk at all. Did you use sprays, by the way, on your house while you were carrying her? Termites? A little heptachlor perhaps? Yes, beware of insecticidal traces. In your milk. But don't feel discouraged; it's still the best. Oh goat's milk? That can starve your baby. Not the right vitamins. You plan to work? Mmm, touchy! If your milk gives out, we have a range of alternatives, Nan, the cheapest, yes, along with Lactogen. Yes, they have, it's true, aluminium traces to varying degrees. Of course, I can understand that you don't want to give Bubby Alzheimer 's Disease! Go for S26 then. That's the dearest but with the teeniest risk. You'll find inside your showbag advice for Life Insurance and celebratory presents for the whole family. It's nice to get Grannie and Granddad involved, isn't it?

Although the woman stands at the centre of the fountain bowl, she doesn't command space. Her torso cradles the baby, who looks weak, disengaged. Limp, perhaps even dead. The mother's eyes are blank. Their whites are not that, but clouded, grey, like the flesh of over-boiled hen's eggs. Her belly has the bulge of malnutrition. The breasts, from which the oxidised nozzles protrude, are withered, flat as hot water bottles. The ground we walk upon oozes a black liquid: it is simply negative milk. This is the place of our desolation. You've read the articles? They take this scene again and again as emblematic. They celebrate motherhood in these pietas only by default. To sum up famine in Ethiopia, they show you this. To sum up the poison-

ing of the Aral Sea area, they show you this. Mother's body sums up the wasteland. *Woman, you are not restorative now.* Photo-journalists outdo one another in the new imagery of Mother as Anti-Nature. You want the Pure and Natural? Your body multiplies the sites for selling. The quiet beginnings of genetic contamination might be moving through your blood, your saliva, your vaginal fluids, through the milk from your breasts. Your body multiplies the telltale sites. Each day the eloquent images of the poisoned Madonna appear in the press. Advertising fosters anxiety; counter-information does the same. In my place, the propitiatory fountain was established according to this ethic. She is blind from watching the source itself go green, stagnate, coagulate. Is she too a baby killer?

Upstairs a woman hears a stray phrase: *Small children do not splash or cry out . . .* It comes as a bit of verbal litter, on the breeze, from someone else's TV. It's one of those warnings, one of those endless warnings to mothers. She is holding the telephone cord like the last umbilicus, trying to reach a woman she might have been, trying to make some kind of mothering connection. She was looking for something to set her off, to set fantasy selves in motion, to distract her from a grief of a nameless kind. Her very connectedness to others is to blame for all kinds of infanticide. She knows that this is how the advertisement is meant to work. With the little phrase, a promotion for security fences perhaps, the kind you see around swimming pools, the grief installs itself, huge, like an anemone in the mouth of the cave, it will not budge. It simply occupies her. *Small children do not splash or cry out*, it says. The waters close; the reflections re-establish their dominion. There's even a pacifying geometry to be found in the vortex of bubbles before the end and she tries to dispatch a cliché to mask the absence of life. She invokes *churned blue water*, for instance. She refuses to see the little body in the depths of this otherwise tranquil icon of consumerism, as cool as a David Hockney swimming pool print.

She turns towards the lit rectangle of the window, her long neck showing the threading, twisting the skin to a vortex. She can make the rectangle anything: God, time tunnel, swimming pool. She writes for the small child in its depths, the child whose features are blurred, not from confusion, or a failure of memory but from all refracted possibilities, a nimbus of projections, the *what if* of life rather than fiction. She must write for the children before, beyond herself. Yet the impact of a safety slogan has her numb with grief for the child she expects. She does not write but turns her head towards the dumb show, the flurry of bubbles at the bottom of the pool. The wavering of features will never settle beneath. *Small children do not splash or cry out* in the swimming pools of memory either. Dumb, she watches again the slow descent. Can she ever resuscitate the water babies?

To try to write herself—*herselves*, is in itself a monstrous project. It entails tinkering with the available forms of subjectivity in what remains, despite all our superficial gains, a patriarchal world. She is engaged in reanimating, as Barbara Johnson¹ wrote of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, bits and pieces caught in eavesdropping and illicit glimpses. As this woman tries to imagine the call of the child, before her speech patterns are fixed, before the image makers have set her features once and for all, the waters simply close over.

Fear evacuates the field of sight, the pathways of speech. If she thinks about her own fault taking form, she knows she is jinxing her pregnancy. She tells herself that she is tired, that her nervous system has gone to glass. She feels like the jug which she has just broken, the crazed faultlines working through as tiny brittle voices. She has visions of glass babies, cracking in their cracked moulds. She can hear the miniature disaster weaving its way. Listen. She listens intently, as if putting a post pack to her ear. She will decipher the secret before opening. It's

¹ Johnson, Barbara. 'My Monster / My Self.' *Diacritics* 12.2 (1982): 2–10.

broken, resolutely dead. This is the noise of the broken thing she is bearing. It will carry the mark of her every deviance from hygiene, from wisdom, from moderation.

SPECIES IN THE BESTIARY

What if, through her own deviation from the father's plot, this being beating inside her were not forming according to specification? What if it is not of the mother's species? Motherhood is the space, not simply of the metaphor, but of the oxymoron: it involves the potential connection with all things as they are categorically specified. Reproduction must be the return of the same, one more of the same species. Yet in many ways this pregnant woman most identifies with the heavy cat searching in the wood-shed, in the wardrobe, for a place to have her litter, circling around the imminent event, willing it to take residence in a kind of massive time, outside anyone's linear story. She is even touched to find the capsicum, through some strange aberration of genetic engineering, pregnant with little capsicums.

The bestiary takes root, is grafted into the imaginative flesh of pregnancy: she dreams of giving birth to horses, for instance:

I am a mare, my belly heaves and this is my horizon. First I have to make the effort to separate from myself, have to take my line to the other country. Between us are many boundaries, marshes where hooves find no resistance, fences whose metal knots will catch my flesh, and the rolling sky, Flemish heavy, a slow dark surf from the horizon, where she needs to breathe, to here. I follow my pulsating lead, am all lung and nostril and each breath brings me nearer, must let her be, must cut her off, must sever it. Follow the cord through a closed country now, along dark shadowed lanes, walled in on either side. Heave, hooving, sight-clotted. There are road blocks and police with two-way radios. I try to explain my connection with what's beyond but they say, Visa. You need visa for this country Lady.