GENDER PLAY IN THE NARRATIVE REALM: REIMAGINING GENDER IN *HIS UNCERTAIN SKIN*

ZOE FRASER
BA (Hons)

School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences
Arts, Education and Law Group
Griffith University

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2017
ABSTRACT

This submission explores new ways in which writing can be received and experienced in attempting to destabilise gender binaries and traditional ways of ‘doing’ gender, in opening up the possibility of becoming other than what is limiting in prescribed gender modes, and in creative fashioning of the self.

The project, a novella and accompanying exegesis, explores the concept of gender as an evolving art practice within the imaginative space of a narrative. It seeks to disrupt and reinvent traditional binaries and love stories, and reimagine how someone creates or authors themselves and the people around them, and how a character in fiction might undergo an unconventional kind of transformation, a continual becoming, one without a defined end point.

The exegetical component interrogates my writing process, and documents the ways in which the novella changed shape and direction, in tandem with my reading of literary works and exploring theory related to the project.

The creative component, His Uncertain Skin, shows these ideas in practice, as the narrative depicts a teenage boy who experiences gender dysphoria, is intensely dissatisfied with his prescribed gender, yet is unable to commit to an either/or existence, in transitioning to living as a girl.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude to the following for their invaluable contributions to the creation of this work:

Professor Nigel Krauth
Dr Anthony Lawrence
Dr Sally Breen
Dr Stuart Cooke
Dr Sue Lovell
Frank Moorhouse
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)

ZOE FRASER
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................. 3
Statement of Originality ......................................................................................... 4

EXEGESIS

Introduction .......................................................................................................... 7
1. The Seed ............................................................................................................ 8
2. Fictions .............................................................................................................11
3. Gender Theory .................................................................................................. 23
4. The Writing .......................................................................................................29
5. Post-Writing Theory and Reflection .................................................................. 69
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 88

NOVELLA

*His Uncertain Skin* .................................................................................................. 90

Bibliography ......................................................................................................... 194
EXEGESIS

GENDER PLAY IN THE NARRATIVE REALM: REIMAGINING GENDER IN

_HIS UNCERTAIN SKIN_
INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been intrigued by gender. Long before considering it in an academic context, I’ve always privately been curious about what it is, what it does, how it might be limiting, and in ways that it might be so entrenched its influence goes undetected.

Though I don’t identify as transgender, I have at times felt discomfort at my gender, what power it has, what it evokes beyond my control, communicating to others things about me that are assumed inherent about my femininity. That I might always be seen, first, as a girl, or a woman, regardless of how I feel about that.

Coupled with an interest in art, in creativity, I used to wonder about the concept of the self as art, the body as the site for creative practice. In approaching this thesis, in considering the direction I might take, I decided to explore these two ideas in tandem.

Using a narrative as a transitive space for becoming, disposing of reductive gender norms and binaries, could I attempt to say something new or different about how we gender ourselves, through a character who is uncomfortable with the gender assigned to them that supposedly corresponds to their biological sex? Wondering, also, what challenges this might hold in terms of language I might use, words already weighted with specific definitions and baggage, even seemingly simple ones like girl, boy, woman, man.

Even though at the beginning I wasn’t sure exactly how I’d go about this, and what the end product might look like, I wanted to interrogate, and reinvigorate, concepts of gender through the fictionalised space of a narrative. Surely there could be great possibilities of creativity and reinvention in imagining new ways of being through a fictional realm.

In this exegesis, I will document the reading and thinking I undertook, the challenges, changes, and decisions made, in writing my creative work, *His Uncertain Skin*. 
1. THE SEED

In my first year of university, studying in a Bachelor of Arts degree, I found myself gravitating towards Literary Studies subjects. I chose my major by default because I’d always loved reading, loved books, their worlds, their words, their characters, the way they allowed me to be alone and silent and still in time and yet I could emerge from them changed, maybe even transformed, everything seeming a little different once the book was put down, the edges of reality not so definite, shimmering, unfixed. I wanted to be among people who maybe felt the same. People who could see the flicker of dark rents in the silk of reality, who might want to put their fingers inside and pull and tear further to see what lay behind.

There, in my first class on books. Girl impostor. Shy, full of doubt, impostor, what am I doing here, I don’t know enough. Face turning red and heart beating loud enough for the room to hear when I was called upon to speak and introduce myself. This isn’t the place for me, everyone will think I’m so weird.

It was raining that day. When the class finished, I stood outside under the awning of the building, and waited for a break in the downpour to run for it.

A boy came and stood near me. I recognised him from the class. My height. Blonde hair like mine. Our skins white pale, the kind that glows bright in certain lights. People who don’t see much of the sun. It was warm pre-Autumn but he wore a heavy blue jumper with a funnel neck, very loose blue jeans. Hair growing long around his face and neck. White lace-up shoes. So covered, concealed. I thought he must be stewing inside his protective layers.

I could tell he was intelligent, impressively so, yet he too had spoken with uncertainty in class, his sentences ending in upward inflections like questions. I watched him there, as he watched the rain, boy in his heavy clothes, and I thought, what do you hide under there, boy, what are your secrets?
It took him a while to open up to me. It took me a while to open up to him. But over time we gradually revealed ourselves to one another. Boy was a bit of a loner, Boy lived in his head most of the time, where he burned energy questioning, questioning, who he was, where he fit, whether he was worth anything at all, as on the outside he moved and changed, switched jobs, religions, groups, hairstyles, hobbies. His hair now bleached white blonde, his fingers now callused from learning guitar, voice hoarse and wavering, strained, girlish, from attempting to sing along, his outlook detached as he dabbled in Buddhism. But through all this we kept talking, stealing away together through secret doors in the floor, to an imaginative world more improved than the one we’d left, where we’d disregard our physical selves, shelve our bodies, clothes, social defences. Even genders gone, it seemed, and I grew to value this platonic friendship, where we’d just talked, with ease, and gotten to know each other so well, I’d thought. Until he disappeared on me.

He didn’t turn up for a meeting we’d scheduled, and when I tried to get in touch he wouldn’t pick up his phone. This was a time just before the advent of Facebook, or at least its omnipresence in daily life. This was a small window of time still available when if someone wanted to escape, to elude, to vanish, they reasonably could.

So I accepted this loss, figuring he had his reasons to go. This boy who had so randomly appeared in my life and became my friend, exiting it the same way, without reason or warning.

Months later, I woke to the sound of heavy rain. A black early morning sky. Lying in bed contemplating the weather, I heard a message come through on my phone. He said:

_Sorry I disappeared on you. I’ve had to be alone for a while. But I should let the cat out of the bag here first, because the next time you see me I’ll be a girl. I’ve spent the last few months transitioning. I know this will probably come as a surprise to you, so I understand if you have any questions, or might not want to be my friend anymore._
He told me about knowing he was a girl her entire boy life. About trying on his her sister’s clothing when he she was home alone, how even though these garments didn’t belong to him her, were off limits to him her, he she felt real and natural and authentic putting them on, felt no shame or guilt being a little boy in a dress. How he she craved intimacy, but didn’t know who he she was attracted to, how complicated he she found it identifying as one thing, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and chose to go with the latter until he she overcame the fear of taking his her clothes off in front of someone and facing horror, ridicule.

Her hair had grown long. She was taking hormones to adjust her voice, to grow breasts, to halt body hair growth. She wore makeup. Wore jeans and t-shirts still, but in ‘feminine’ cuts and styles. Cuts and styles.

This change in my friend’s life, this unprecedented event in my own, continued to stay with me, a kind of imaginative kernel that my mind worked on. When I began to consider writing a creative work about these thoughts, it is important to note that I never had the intention of directly writing my friend’s story, or borrowing completely her experiences. It was the fact that someone I had spent so much time with, had talked with so extensively and so intimately, was all that time burdened with something that many others simply take for granted, or take no issue with – their gender. In the beginning, I vaguely plotted writing some kind of ‘radical memoir’, or imagined biography, loosely borrowing – as research – stories from my friend, but creating a character who was transgender, or uncomfortable at least with their assigned gender. Eventually though, I was no longer interested in, and the work could not be described as, any kind of memoir, ‘radical’ or not. I was always driven by and most interested in how a reimagining of gender might operate in the constructed world of a fiction, a creative work.
2. FICTIONS

I had already met Orlando. I began to think of her more now, as I laid out the imaginative groundwork for my novel. The eponymous transsexual heroine of Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel (written as an imagined biography of friend and lover Vita Sackville-West) formerly a man, wakes one day as a woman. Orlando hasn’t undergone years of quiet agitation, never utters the words ‘I was born in the wrong body’, nor is her transition from the male to the female sex aided by surgery, medication, or the thought process and the crafting of a physical appearance that ‘passes’ as a woman. Woolf writes that, despite Orlando becoming a woman, ‘[she] remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex … did nothing whatever to alter their identity’ (Woolf 1995, p67).

I noted the varied pronouns in the novel when we are first introduced to the newly-woman Orlando, which Woolf addresses by saying ‘…in future we must, for convention’s sake, say “her” for “his”, and “she” for “he”’ (p67). Woolf also adds:

The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact … let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. (Woolf p68)

It seemed to me that Woolf was determined not to deal with this transition by means of plausibility or believability outside the realm of the novel. Orlando’s transition was possible because she lived in an imaginative realm, her becoming a woman was part of the character’s becoming and served the narrative Woolf wanted to construct.

Orlando does wonder, though, which sex enjoys ‘…the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s? And are they not perhaps the same?’ (Woolf p76), but decides then that, no, being a woman ‘is the most delicious’. Her ‘old’ self, when Orlando was sexed as a man, gains insights into how she used to view women, ‘[insisting] that [they] be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled’ and understands, as a newly sexed woman, that this is not actually the ‘natural’ state of women (p76-77),
though she also ‘seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each’ (p77). This change has given her a kind of power. She now sees her former lovers anew, through the male Orlando’s intimacy with them, and can empathise and understand their social position and the ways that society dictated that they be.

Woolf held a personal belief, or an idealised vision, of a kind of androgyny existing in all people. Stating in Orlando that the sexes ‘intermix’ and that ‘[i]n every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place’, citing that the only exterior marker of femaleness or maleness is the clothes that people wear, ‘while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above’ (p92-93). This statement makes inroads towards a description of a transgender nature inherent to all humans, if it is read as a dialogue about what we now call gender, rather than sex. It is an idea that stayed with me, and is echoed in the end product of my novella – how does one actually state their gender, regardless of their sexed body? Is a key aspect of passing or presenting as another gender simply to do with the clothes that you select to wear?

Woolf echoes these thoughts in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), published a year after *Orlando*. There she states that ‘it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly’, that a writer should not be entrenched in ideas or limitations of their sex. One should, perhaps like Orlando, have empathy and awareness of ‘the other’, not see oneself as separate or all that different to a differently sexed person.

It bothered me, though, that these ideas all imply a binary structure. Even though Woolf was advocating a vacillation, the basic idea still implied two set sexes or genders, two ways of being, and further implied a basic set of codes, similarities or ‘rules’ that each sex must possess or conform to.

Imaginatively, this question niggled me – what *really* makes a woman a woman, and a man a man, in terms of gender?

In Jan Morris’ biography, *Conundrum* (1974), she writes that from a very young age, she had the conviction that she was not really the boy whose body she had
been born into, though as she admits, ‘the certainty of my conviction only raised more questions. How could I be so sure of my predicament? If I thought I felt like a woman, how could I know what a woman felt? What did I mean, when I said I was feminine?’ (Morris 1974, p 45).

Certainly, while Orlando and Conundrum are both posited as biographical accounts, Woolf’s is clearly set in a fictive, imaginative realm, whereas Morris has written a memoir recounting her life, beginning at childhood, attempting to interrogate her personal gender, her need to express this as a woman, not as a man as she was born, but acknowledging, even only by the title of the work, what a strange predicament she found herself in, what a true conundrum it all seemed.

With this in mind, after reading these two varying biographical texts, I wondered if what I was attempting to write about creatively could be adequately expressed in a kind of creative memoir, a text inspired by my friend’s experience, but manipulated, pushed further into the imaginative realm, and ultimately a fiction, yet posed as ‘real’, as a story that really happened.

I thought back to a seminal text on biography, a work that, through the lens of my continued fascination with enigmatic poet Sylvia Plath, addressed the problems and peculiarities of biography writing, The Silent Woman (1994). Janet Malcolm described Plath as a woman strangely divided, ‘the history of her life … a signature story of the fearful double-faced fifties’ (Malcolm 1995, p16), publicly appearing as a ‘vacuous girl of the fifties’ with perfectly coiffured blonde hair and expertly applied lipstick, yet ‘emblematic [of the] schizoid character of the period’. Beneath the ‘perfected’ exterior lay something else, a self that appears fiercely and undeniably in her work: a strong, driven personality, a great burning intellect and literary talent, a bent towards self-destruction.

Malcolm quotes Ted Hughes when he wrote of Plath’s ‘strange conflict between what was expected of her and what was finally exacted’ (Malcolm p63), and further clarifies by stating that the expectation of Plath ‘was the obedient A student’s genteel achievements of the 1950s’ yet ‘what was exacted was the dire poetry of Ariel’ (p63).
The more I read Malcolm’s depiction of Plath, the more strongly I received echoes of my own thinking, a parallel between my friend who, up until her transition, was leading ‘a double life’ or a divided one. I thought of her confessing to me the burdens of ‘passing’ as a boy in society, to the new complicated process of passing as a girl, wanting and hoping that the world would acknowledge her, accept her, as a girl, despite what her physicality or biology dictated.

‘We do not “own” the facts of our lives’, Malcolm says. ‘This ownership passes out of our hands at birth, at the moment we are first observed’ (Malcolm p8). Living in a social world, where people are inherently nosy, the idea of privacy is more an idealised state rather than a reality. To read these thoughts from Malcolm certainly gave me a kind of permission, or authority, as a creative writer to borrow aspects of my friend’s experience and fashion them into my own story. Yet, admitting this sat uneasily with me. While I took my friend’s transition as merely inspirational, there was a part of me that felt guilty, or insensitive, for being imaginatively fascinated by what I acknowledge to be something entirely beyond the realm of my experience. Being someone who has questioned what my gender implies, who has agonised and railed against stereotypes and beliefs that make gender on the whole something cumbersome and unwanted, I’d never actually rejected my gender. I had decided that being a girl was something for which I could create my own definition and parameters, but I couldn’t expect to control how others perceived or judged me because of this.

This being said, as I was determined to write a creative piece, a fully imagined work, I believed that if the end product was successful, this was testament to my imaginative skill, and less to do with arrogance, or ignorance. I was always intent on writing a story conceived out of my own imagination, without the limits or boundaries of ‘reality’. Though I was aware it might be a challenge.

But a writer, of course, still has to draw from somewhere. Even though their ideas can be sculpted and welded imaginatively, and thus pushed further and further into an
imagined realm – processed through a weird dream factory, polished and beautified from some tiny moment in ‘reality’ – they are still in the world. They still look.

To look. To ransack. To pillage. To borrow. To muse. To imagine. To stare.

“A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself” (Berger 2010, p49).

At women.

“She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life” (Berger 2010, p49).

Though my friend undeniably already felt she was a girl, knew she was a girl, despite her male sexed body, she also had to consider how best to express this femininity, to outwardly match, to express exteriorly, her femaleness, her true gender.

“Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (Berger 2010, p50).

To write herself.

“On the one hand the individualism of the artist, the thinker, the patron, the owner: on the other hand, the person who is the object of their activities – the woman – treated as a thing or an abstraction” (Berger 2010, p52).

Where did you buy that dress? she would ask me. What kind of lipstick is that?
“In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity” (Berger 2010, p52).

Like I fashion my own femininity, in being the kind of woman that wears dresses and lipstick, like I look to other women, she too looked at me, at other women, to craft herself.

What would happen though, I wondered, to the boy-self she left behind? When she became her true girl-self. Or if she had always been a girl, perhaps the boy self never even existed? Or one self did not die or was lost, and these were merely questions of semiotics, or semantics.

These were perplexing thoughts, but they were the genesis of my creative work as it germinated.

To create an image, like one creates a piece of fiction. But to first borrow from reality, despite the imaginative fashioning that may come after. A kind of fantasising, a kind of falling-in-love. What if there was a boy who fell in love with a girl, but instead of wanting to be with her, he wanted to be her?

And, what of this girl? If she found out? Would she be a passive, receptive love object? Or would she have agency, fight back against his ‘love’, his thievery. Fight back, against being the feminine object, gazed at, taken ownership of.

What did I already know, of this act of watching women? This idealisation, this romanticising, this bald-faced stealing from women. In small gulps, wild snatches, and tiny glimpses, that we imagine make a whole. I knew this to be a theme of some of my favourite poems and novels, some unabashedly voyeuristic, some yearning, some offering oblique critique at this practice of seeing women, and judging them, from these glimpses.
Michael Ondaatje’s fragment narrative ‘7 or 8 Things I know About Her (A Stolen Biography)’ (1989) documents ‘stolen’ aspects of a woman’s life to form a poetic biography of *her*, this nameless woman who has lost the father who kept nine guns in the house and owned a doomed parrot destined to break its neck flying into a bookcase. We meet amoral kissing couples, whose faces are lit by an electric billboard; a gas station mechanic with a strange clairvoyance diagnosing a heart condition in *her* infancy. We learn she talks to bugs, rejecting them sweetly; detects a ‘dubious quality’ in herself, because dogs distrust her and the town bully handcuffs her to trees repeatedly; we learn her fantasies, of a man in a clean white suit leaping into her path, serenading her. The electric billboard catches fire, it’s chaos, and then at the end, at a marathon to benefit the symphony, the narrator steps toward her in his white suit, with a song in his heart. All from the narrator’s perspective, of course, through his own gaze, and imaginings (Ondaatje 1989, p171). The narrator in this narrative boldly lays out his stolen memories and events from this woman’s life, as per the title, to make a case for the details he has noticed and remembered of her, the minutiae that other people might be uninterested in, or overlook, to perhaps prove the authenticity of his affections for her.

In Vicki Viidikas’ ‘They Always Come’ (1973), presumably written from Viidikas’ perspective, she wryly describes the dismantling of a dead woman’s life; this said life open to be picked over and critiqued, now that she’s deceased. What might a lifetime of experiences and objects say about a woman, after ‘the childish laughter and dog-eared books’ are exchanged for ‘lipsticks, hair rinses and pills’, when in reverse, all the drinks are poured back; the one-night stands scrutinised; the ‘mirror smothered in lips’, the ‘vacant room’ with the lingering odour of ‘stale cigar ash’ and the ‘unpaid bill for a Turkish masseur’, the glove, the typewriter, are assessed:

They’ll see  
charleston dresses of the mind  
with their fringes running like blood,  
a list of men’s names  
from childhood to eternity,  
they’ll dig the very fluff from the floorboards,  
examine the stains on the manuscripts
Which drug did she take?
Which pain did she prefer?
What does the lady offer
behind the words, behind the words?
Their criteria will be:
so long as she’s dead we may
sabotage and rape (Viidikas 1973, p2)

An ‘amoral’ woman relinquishes her right for privacy, her right to just be. Like Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ (1965) documenting her suicide attempts:

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease. (Plath 1965, p16)

The ‘peanut-crunching crowd’, the voyeurs, jostling in to bear witness to a woman’s self-destruction.

Then, those five haunting sisters, the Lisbons, conjured by Jeffrey Eugenides through the chorus voice of a group of once young men, now older, haunted themselves by stories of ‘crumpled panties … stuffed animals hugged to death … a crucifix draped with a brassiere … gauzy chambers of canopied beds … the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space’ (Eugenides 1993, p9). These boys, in The Virgin Suicides (1993), who longed to know these girls, and what little they did they held up to the light, turned it round and round, hoping to glimpse something they didn’t notice before – a hole in the fabric of tightly sown mystery that they could tear apart.

Watching girls…

Phillip Dean, the untouchable young deity in James Salter’s A Sport and a Pastime (2006), is the enigmatic unnamed narrator lost in deep dreaming fantasies of Dean’s love affair with Anne-Marie, the young, naïve French shop girl. How we long to know her… ‘Oh, Anne-Marie, your existence is so pure. You have your poor childhood, postcards from boys in St. Leger, your stepfather, your despair… You are
like a sad story, like leaves in the street…’ (Salter 2006, p86) …but she’s refracted through our narrator, and then again through Dean’s image. She is from another time, another language. As the reader, we watch her, three times removed; her erotic pleasure, her slow despair. Like the Lisbon sisters, she is the focus of our gaze, our judgment, and yet their forms are slippery, malleable, they escape through the shadows beyond the brighter lights. Unknown to us.

With these memorable images I began to reflect back on my reading history, assembling in my mind a cast of characters from my favourite novels, identifying what drew me to them, their commonalities. Beyond the voyeuristic narratives that observe, and attempt to ‘pin down’ certain women, it was clear I was attracted to predominately awkward characters of high loner status, alienated outsiders.

One of my very first literary loves was J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) – this 1949 teenager flunking out of schools, wandering the streets of New York City in his red hunting cap, so far removed from everyone he encounters, feeling like he will disappear when he reaches the ends of sidewalks so that ‘[he’d] just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see [him] again’, begging to his dead brother, ‘Allie, don’t let me disappear’ (Salinger 1951, p204). Wondering where the ducks go in the wintertime. Wanting to save and preserve children’s innocence, as a kind of purpose, a vocation. There. That too, is a theme I turn back on over and over in my reading and writing. The idea of innocence, childlikeness, the yearning to nurture it, the horror at it being lost, corrupted. How one managed to keep a hold of it, or something like it, some kind of purity, some lack of cynicism, as they navigated an impending adulthood and its world.

Frankie Addams, in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), who becomes F. Jasmine, twelve and five-sixths years old, fears growing to nine feet tall, a Freak. She ‘wanted to be a boy and go to the war’ (McCullers 1946, p39) to improve the world ‘so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted’ (p116), revealing how restricted she felt in her girlhood, the darkness and difficulties that gender binaries, their expectations and limited allowances for femininity implied:
You have a name and one thing after another happens to you, and you behave in various ways and do things, so that soon the name begins to have a meaning. Things have accumulated around the name. If it is bad and you have a bad reputation, then you just can’t jump out of your name and escape like that. (p134)

I also had a reading history with gender defiant characters, like Orlando, but also authors who explored beyond neat binaries, and questioned sexual identity.

In Hemingway’s The Garden of Eden (1986), Catherine Bourne, honeymooning with her husband, cuts her hair like his, attempts to convince him to dye his hair the colour of hers, in the hopes that they can be ‘twins’, exploring a concept of androgyny. “Do you think it would be fun if I went back to being a boy again? It wouldn’t be any trouble,” Catherine says to her husband (Hemingway 1986, p64), “I loved it and I don’t miss it but I’d like to be again in bed at night if it isn’t bad for you. Can I be again?” (p65), as she incorporates her boy-ness, her androgyny, into erotic play.

The incestual siblings in The Cement Garden (1978), who conceal the death of their mother, and begin to parent themselves, while exploring and questioning attraction and gender roles.

[Tom] came into my room and said, “What’s it like being a girl?” and I said, “It’s nice, why?” And he said he was tired of being a boy and he wanted to be a girl now. And I said, “But you can’t be a girl if you’re a boy,” and he said, “Yes I can. If I want to, I can.”… So then I said, “How can you be a girl when everyone knows you’re a boy?” and he said, “I’ll wear a dress and make my hair like yours and go in the girl’s entrance.” (McEwan 1978, p 43)

Just like that. That’s all it takes, to change gender. Change your clothes, your hair. Go in another entrance. How little seemed to hinge on gender solidity, certainly in a narrative context. When Jack, the narrator of the story, scoffs at his brother’s desire to be a girl, claiming he’d ‘look stupid’, his older sister Julie responds with a dialogue spoken by Charlotte Gainsbourg in the film adaptation, and later used as a spoken word sample in a Madonna song:

Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it’s okay to be a boy, for girls it’s like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a
girl is degrading. Why else would you think it’s humiliating for Tom to wear a frock? (p44)

Julie goes on to argue with her brother, that if she wore his trousers to school the next day, and he her skirt, he would certainly come off worse. The exchange in the novel ends here, but I was left thinking of the power of garments. What, unworn, may be a benign garment, a piece of fabric, communicates ideas about ourselves to the world when put on our bodies. And I agree with what McEwan is saying here – that it is ultimately shaming, degrading, for a boy to dress in girl’s clothing, in a way that it is not for girls to wear the traditional male attire of trousers, shirts, shorts. I thought of the word androgyny, how and why it would apply to either a boy or a girl. I knew this would be important to write about in my novel, the key being to not handle it in a hackneyed way, but to push whatever thoughts I had to a more imaginative realm.

I admired Jeanette Winterson for writing an entire novel – Written on the Body (1994) – with an ambiguously gendered narrator. While the nameless narrator embarks upon affairs with women, and seeks to understand love, Winterson shies away from depicting a solid male and female binary love story. This transgressive tale subverts the traditional love story, in that the reader’s mind struggles to conjure a clear image of who is telling the story – whether the narrator’s image and voice are masculine or feminine. This ambiguity makes for an irregular yet fascinating reading experience: the narrator occupies a murky space in the reader’s mind, especially since this narrator is taking the reader through a sexual and romantic narrative landscape, a space which is usually rigidly gendered.

From reading Winterson’s novel, the first idea – that I wanted to write a kind of transgressive or unusual love story of my own – was further taking shape. A vague outline of a character had begun to inhabit my thinking. He was a boy, but somehow, hidden behind him, yet larger almost, like a lengthened shadow, was the unmistakable silhouette of a girl.

I thought of the existence of gender fluidity or duality present in mythology. In Plato’s Symposium, the character Aristophanes presents an explanation of the feeling of wholeness when falling in love. He states that an androgynous sex once existed, powerful people with doubled bodies as if sewn together, their faces turned in
separate directions. Descending from the moon, they wished to ascend to heaven, and to thwart them in this task, Zeus cut them in two (Plato 1951, p60). The myth purports that a heterosexual couple in love were once, quite literally, together, and they have found unity, wholeness, in finding each other again. Milan Kundera references this Platonic myth in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) when the character Tomas contemplates whether his ‘other half’ exists in reality or in dreams (Kundera 1984, p232-233).

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2002), a mythological epic of transformation, relates stories of androgyny and gender ambiguity. Iphis, whose female sex was concealed at birth, was thus raised as a boy. Iphis then fell in love with a girl, and in order to marry, was transformed into a boy (Ovid 2002, p289). And Hermaphroditos, who blended with a besotted nymph – he had rejected the nymph’s attempt at seduction, so she ambushed him while bathing, wrapped herself around his body, and declared to the gods that they never be parted. Her plea was granted and they merged, became ‘a creature of both sexes’, bound together (Ovid 2002, p131). And also there was Tiresias who, after separating two coupling snakes, was transformed into a woman for seven years (Ovid 2002, p104).

Tiresias appears in plays and poems, an enduring figure who represents a defiance in fixed gender, like Woolf’s *Orlando*. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), he is ‘blind, throbbing between two lives,/ Old man with wrinkled female breasts’ (Eliot 1941, p35); in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* (1999), Duffy writes from the perspective of an imagined Mrs Tiresias:

All I know is this:
he went out for his walk a man
and came home female…

The eyes were the same.
But in the shocking V of the shirt were breasts.
When he uttered my name in his woman’s voice I passed out…

Then he started his period…

After the split I would glimpse him…
on TV…
telling the women out there
how, as a woman himself, he knew how we felt. (Duffy 1999, p14-17)

This modern retelling of Tiresias added a new twist – not only had he become a woman – he knew, perhaps, how to woman better than other women.

These themes from literature provided a voyeuristic gaze on women as outsiders who don’t quite fit in, who exist somewhat on the periphery of life; they showed characters and authors manipulating gender in their stories, and the fluidity and duality of gender and sex in mythology; they all accumulated at the germination of my creative work. Together, they helped form the direction that I wanted to take with my novella, thematically, but also roughly in how I would shape my characters, the kind of narrative voice I would use, and the structure of the work.

3. GENDER THEORY

Beginning my research in gender theory, I sought a language for, or a definition of, what I’d be trying to explore with my creative work. My friend identified as, and used the word, transgender, or trans, which I understood to mean someone whose gender identity does not correspond with their biological sex. But the opposite of this was described as a cisgendered person, and I wondered what cisgendered itself actually meant. For a cisgendered person like myself, who felt comfortable with the ‘female’ gender assigned to me, corresponding with my biological sex, did this mean that ‘female’ and ‘male’, girl and boy, were simply two separate, clear binary groups, representing singular homogenous ideas of how to be girl or boy? How do we know, as Jan Morris wondered, we are boys or girls, and how do we know how to act accordingly?

Why are labels and definitions so important when it comes to categorising or describing someone’s gender, sex, sexuality, way of being?
Hélène Cixous writes of ‘each of us [being] trapped within an ideological theatre even speaking of “woman” or “man”’ (Cixous 1996, p83), those two loaded words that carry baggage, the weight of gender stereotypes and expectations. Cixous proposes a redefined version of bisexuality, that is a ‘location within oneself of the presence of both sexes’ (Penrod 1996, p33) similar, it seems, to Virginia Woolf’s ideal of an androgyny existing in all humans, a ‘reunification of the sexes in the self’, as also proposed by Carolyn Heilbrun. One of the earliest theoreticians of androgyny in literature, Heilbrun defined androgyny as

a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate. (Heilbrun 1973, px)

Heilbrun’s definition offers some flexibility from the traditional definition of androgyny, of having both feminine and masculine characteristics, or being ambiguously gendered. But this idea worried me, as it seemed to perpetuate a binary in the one instance – that there are clear, homogenous male and female roles, traits and behaviours – and in the other that someone still needs to identify as one or the other, lest it confuse an onlooker.

Michael S. Kimmel states that ‘proponents of androgyny at least recognise that gender differences are socially constructed’, but believes ultimately that androgyny as an ideal, while perhaps utopian, is not something we should strive for in society, as it would ‘eliminate differences between people, mistaking equality for sameness’ (Kimmel 2005, p340). It would make us diluted, dulled, flattened out.

Is there nothing positive about having genders, whether or not we choose to conform fully to them? Can we create our own gendered realities, I wondered, regardless of how others viewed us?

Why, after all, are love, nurturance, and tenderness defined as feminine? Why do I have to be expressing the affect of the other sex in order to have access to what I regard as human emotions? Because I am a man, everything I do expresses my masculinity. (Kimmel, p341)
Judith Butler’s theory that gender is performative, rather than a set of natural behaviours of our allotted sex, follows on from this idea in my thinking; ‘the gendered performances in which we engage are performances in accordance with a script’ (Alsop, Fitzsimons, Lennon & Minsky 2002, p99). Thus our behaviours are prewritten though highly contextual, according to the time and cultural space we inhabit. Butler proposes that gender ‘is in no way a stable identity’, instead, it is an ‘identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts’ (Butler 2010, p519). Butler goes on to say that gender is ‘a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of the belief” (Butler, p520). This led me to think of gender as illusory, malleable, a script or set of beliefs that are followed and inscribed on the body by how we move, act, dress, almost a kind of suspended disbelief as when we enter a theatre, or a novel. If “one is not born, but rather [becomes], a woman” (de Beauvoir, p301), as Simone de Beauvoir said in The Second Sex (1952), do we all have the ability to be transgender, deconstruct our gender representation, switch acts half way through the play? Butler’s work also gave me the authority to approach this subject matter in my writing, despite not being transgender myself. I could ‘switch acts’ as I approached my work, I could write, perhaps, in the voice of a boy who doesn’t wish to be a boy and might believe he is actually a girl. At this stage, though, these were only loose ideas about where I wanted the narrative to go, yet reading gender theory, and in particular, Butler’s work, opened up new imaginative possibilities for me.

The idea of gender being performative reminded me too of Erving Goffman’s The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), his comparison of social encounters to a dramaturgy: ‘When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it’ (Goffman 1959, p37). From this quote, ‘front’ could be replaced with ‘gender’, in that coming to gender, we can find a set of prescribed ideas of how to be and behave that are entrenched in the masculine and the feminine. If gender is a script continually re-enacted, rather than rewritten, I wondered whether, in the narrative space I was to create, I could redefine gender, what it looked like, and what it might mean. And by this, might I redefine the parameters of what someone might choose to present as, if they did not feel comfortable with the ‘script’ allotted to them?
In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler goes on to assert that gender is ‘unnatural’, something we ‘do’ rather than something we ‘are’. Gender is therefore *process*, an idea that links to Woolf’s creation of multiplicity in *Orlando* and to the motif of gender as fluid and transforming. Gender is a state of flux, it is moving. In Butler’s view too, changes to embodiment which are sought by those seeking sex/bodily reassignment serves to make evident the constructedness of sexed identity (Butler 1990, p141). Butler and other queer theorists are regarded as having the destabilisation of sexual binaries as their goal (Alsop et al 2002, p205); further to this, it is not the aim of every trans man and woman to ‘pass’. Some ‘desire their transsexual history be evident’. Sandy Stone, author of ‘The Empire Strikes Back, A Posttranssexual Manifesto’ (1996), proposes that a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender can be found in the transsexual’s erased history, which as a counter-discourse can speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond predefined constructed oppositional nodes, the only position from which previous discourse has emerged (Stone 1996, p351). She proposes taking the transsexual as text, to open up the possibility of mapping the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and to thereby disrupt it. And to then take advantage of dissonances created by such a juxtaposition, to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries (p352). From this space – the idea of a new text – my ideas progress.

Jay Prosser in *Second Skins, The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) posits the transsexual as ‘authorial subject’. He proposes that we can begin our own ‘conceptual transitions by reading transsexual narratives to rupture the identity between the binaries, opening up a transitional space between them’ (Prosser 1998, p16). The transsexual is, he claims, the author of their self because ‘what constitutes transsexual identity is the adoption of a particular kind of narrative about their life’ (Prosser 2002, p207). The autobiographies of transsexuals are usually distinguished by their narratives of transition. ‘The lives which are revealed in these texts are represented as having a teleological shape with a trajectory’ (Prosser 2002, p207). And in the words of Prosser: ‘Transsexuality in fact appears as a narrative; a plot … beginning … and ending … with the transsexual achieving some marker of becoming … some degree of closure’ (Prosser 1998, p90). I interpret this as giving a subject, a
character, the freedom to self create, to reimagine their gender identity, dictating a personal narrative. Just as there are archetypes within the transsexual’s narrative, the overall theme, to pursue the literary trope, is one of transformation. A transsexual may author their body, their identity; they may, according to Prosser, recover what was not and make a perfect past, in a distinct act of transformation. Prosser also believes that transsexuals in their personal narratives and authorship are working towards a place of *mythical* status, since the imagining and the act of becoming a man or woman, following Butler’s theory of gender as a construct, is imbued with an imaginary dimension, subjective to each person’s self authorship. Reading these ideas in the context of narration and authorship, complements my idea of reimagining gender within a text, of gender as a static concept being dismantled, to acknowledge that there is a ‘larger range of locations than male and female’ (Alsop et al, p219).

With the binary categories of sex and gender destabilised, ‘complex and multiple reconfigurations of interdependent genders, sexualities and cultural locations’ can emerge (Alsop et al, p219). If the self can be deconstructed at the root of something that is considered so integral to our identities, that is, our gender and our sex, ideas of what are fixed, immutable, can be challenged. The self can be authored. If notions of self are fluid, unstable, variable, shifting, there is potential for transformation. If gender itself is a performance, can it too be a fiction, a work of art, constantly evolving and refining, without an end point?

My initial research question contained the word ‘transgender’ alongside the planned subsequent exploration of a ‘transgender narrative’ in my creative work. In this context, reading Sheila Jeffreys’ *Gender Hurts* (2014) gave me pause. Jeffreys states in her introduction that for some, transgenderism has appeal, and is a positive societal force, because it is ‘transgressive and part of a revolutionary process of social change … [and] it destabilises the “gender binary”’ (Jeffreys 2014, p1). Similar to the problematic term *androgyneous*, though, the term *transgender* still deals with two, or a set, of genders, and what they might constitute. Jeffreys argues that: ‘All the forms in which the term [transgender] is used depend upon the idea of an essential gender that can be played with, or “transed”, but not [dispensed] with’ (p8), which still gives ‘oxygen’ to the concept of gender. While Jeffreys’ thoughts may be contentious, I approached these ideas from the perspective of a writer. It was clear to me that
traditional labels were going to be imaginatively limiting when it came to writing my creative work, and inadequate in conveying where my characters may choose to go.

Advancing into another realm, Donna Harraway’s ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1991) also connects to my thinking. Describing the mythical cyborg as ‘a creature in a postgender world’ (Harraway 1991, p51) resisting what has gone before, Harraway evokes the cyborg as a new entity, free of the constraints of biology, unlimited by traditional binaries. In this, Harraway denies the existence of a ‘natural self’. The cyborg theory, ‘about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities’ (Harraway 1991, p154) focuses my thoughts on the necessity of gender, and in particular, most relevantly, whether it can be dispensed with or manipulated in an imaginative context.

In taking the context of the cyborg as something artificial, rather than thinking about real people with real lives, emotions, and a need to express their true gender identity, or indeed identity, the transgressed boundaries, the fusions, the possibilities link, for me, to an imagined space, a space where I could play with my own ideas and parameters of gender, through my characters’ experiences.

Just as the cyborg is free from biological constraints and traditional binaries, so too, I thought, was the imagined space of a narrative. I didn’t have to interpret and reflect gender strictly as it operated in the world off the page, nor was I restricted by the word ‘transgender’ in drawing my main character. Harraway’s manifesto furthered my thinking in gender theory, and offered exciting new possibilities with the way I would write my creative work.

Consulting these gender theorists, and grappling with terminology, language, and labels, helped me begin to refine both my thoughts towards my creative work, and the exegetical component. That perhaps I didn’t have to strictly adhere to one idea or label that existed, that maybe I could create my own, was in keeping with the imagined narrative I was to begin writing.
4. THE WRITING

I began the writing process by attempting to ‘get in character’, to view the world from the perspective of the person I, roughly, envisioned the character in my creative work to be, and to create of myself a kind of channel, to filter experiences or sensations that my character would be attuned to.

I knew from the beginning I’d be writing from the perspective of a boy. Mostly because my original idea had sprung from my University friend’s story, but it wasn’t that person who began to take shape in my mind. I had started to put together a picture in my mind of a young male, quite thin and fragile in appearance, with an almost feminine beauty. I knew he was artistic, sensual, that he was a quiet observer of the world, who saw things that others did not, who felt things deeply, in the way that he felt young boys shouldn’t. I didn’t feel any qualms about writing from the perspective of a male. For one, as this was to be a work of imagination, I strongly felt my imagination could perceive what this character was to be, on a human level, rather than in a gendered way. Yet the fact that I knew this character either ‘was’, or felt he was, a girl, or at least, not a boy, gave me an allowance, or a confidence, to do so, lest anyone should challenge my authority to be writing from a gender different from my own.

Another character was emerging in my thoughts too, this one a girl, and though my boy character was vague in shape and appearance, like a faint pencil drawing tinted by the faintest watercolour shades, she seemed even more remote, difficult to pin down, despite my knowing she would be the dominant energy in the work. This didn’t worry me, as even before writing I knew the point of the narrative would be that the boy felt he was undefined, not a properly formed person, and, it seemed clear to me, that the girl was the force pushing through him. Even though he was to be the main character, he was still a kind of conduit for someone, or something, else.

I began my writing by documenting fragments, loose thoughts, ideas, things I saw, or heard, and committed myself every day to keep these thoughts, whether in a
journal, or whatever was at hand, napkins, sticky notes, receipts, tickets. I ended up with a trove of these random pieces of paper, and began to type them up.

**Prologue**

In two rooms they wait, alone together. And though it is of the other they dream, they both yearn to conquer. They are each infatuated with what they wish to bring to life. A combined ritual of being born and raising the dead. Soon, she will create him. Give him her heart. He will lose himself, in becoming her. True love’s kiss. He will take her offered heart to make it his own.

The tools of transformation spread like an armoury in front of the bathroom mirror. Pigmented powders, creams, liquids, perfumed.

He’s asked her one day – what’s in your handbag? Then, how do you do your makeup? How do you do your eyeshadow etc? she says she’ll show him.

Hair, teeth, skin, nails; both the same.

**Summer**

… he thought he’d go to space. He watched sci-fi movies for weeks.

When Astin finished high school, he foresaw the summer as his time to do great things. He didn’t yearn to embark on a voyage of debauchery. He wanted some kind of greatness. He wasn’t himself. He sensed a stage of becoming was in order. Outside, he could gesture towards becoming a man. The word implied something physically large and imposing. Astin was delicate. Delicate hands. This felt right. He had made this body, grown into it, in this space, his childhood and adolescent bedroom. Lived in the same house his whole life. This room, this house, were a memory box for all his most significant memories. A silent witness to his becoming. This was all before I knew him.

He wanted to be an artist because he knew they were the only people who decidedly crafted their own destiny. They could fall in love with a sense, the colour of the pavement in a certain city at a particular time of day, just before nightfall, and, transported imaginatively, go to live there. But the smell of the morning after had to be as equally intoxicating as the evening light on the ground. The elegance with which the scruffy charcoal cats stalked the back alleys at midnight must equally astonish as the particular weight of native flower heads as they moved in the wind. They mustn’t bend their stalks, mock their foundations.

Thus the hue and texture of his dreamings, Astin the footloose wanderer. Railing against his reality. Against combatting forces within. Imagining deeply about what his mind and body would become, and how long it would take for them to win the fight for control. When his own person could be his home.

The relics of boyhood around him. Memories speaking to him from each object, then, like an endless conversation, evoking another and another.

Para about shorts unfurling from body after school, father arguing…

Very early in life he had learnt of time travel, and this had sustained him for a long while. Lying in his room, music turned down low, he would conjure dazzling alternate realities. Lighter things – the daunting possibility of thwarting his parent’s initial meeting, how precarious the reality of his being was, how many twists of fate and commonplace factors depended on it. Then, onto moments in history he wished to have witnessed – but briefly. While he flirted with attending important milestones in the history of humanity, significant times and dates he was learning at school, what his mind returned to was his mother. Her evolution, her coming of age, how he had dwelt and grown inside of her. That astonishing deep connection with a woman. Instinctively he felt that other boys did not do this. Their time was spent mesmerised by girls their own age, girls that were not mothers, who had absolutely no semblance of motherliness about them.

His mind cast back to a fond recurrent daydream. An impulsive thought process. Wondering about women, how, and if, they were so different to men. As he lay on his bed in his typical teen boy bedroom, running tandem to his reverie of his future was that of musings about girls. All the girls he’d known, through school. How they would be experiencing their own becomings, though
adolescence, and in larger life.

He wondered if they would become mothers. If that delighted them, terrified them. He remembered a friend of his sister’s becoming pregnant at sixteen, the first pregnant woman to be in his vicinity. She seemed so at ease, so normal. He studied her, wondering how she could be so calm and talk about such ordinary things when her life was being reshaped before her. He regarded her as radiant. She told his sister, that when you’re pregnant, people feel that they can just touch you all of a sudden. What was inappropriate before is now free reign, personal boundaries are disregarded. And people smile at me all the time, she said. He made sure to make little eye contact, and made no attempt to touch her stomach. But his mind was rich with imaginings. And disappointments. He would never be pregnant, he would never experience creating life inside of him, of giving birth. This saddened him deeply.

Have you thought of how you will be as a mother? He felt compelled to ask her suddenly. Do you have a clear idea, have you contemplated it, planned it, or are you planning for it to just come naturally?

He thought he would spend the entire pregnancy creating a mother image, if he were a girl, a pregnant girl.

Butterfly

He remembers devouring his sister’s discarded magazines, secreting them away into his room from the recycling bin, like tarnished trophies. Exuberant teen girl faces beaming fairy floss smiles at him. Perfect teeth, shining hair, cute outfits. Many articles on the strange ways of the teenage male, their habits, their desires, why they may not ask you, a teenage girl, on a date. He enjoyed the letter sections the most. Young girls from all over the country, alienated, confused. He saw himself, peering quietly through the keyhole to a meeting of a secret society. He, the peeper, perverse, abnormal.

Sister’s magazine – being born in the wrong body (body of an animal) really he was a tiger, polar bear, butterfly or a dark powdery moth, alien abduction, homosexuality, fashion magazines, androgyny, something cool and hip andarty when done in jest, when the makeup could be scrubbed off

Pinned butterflies on his wall

Fleeting interest in some girls at school, their hairstyle, their makeup, their dress, how they moved and talked and what interested them, what it seemed to take to be a girl .. butterflies

Entranced by girlish paraphernalia

Wants to maintain some kind of innocence, and sees that in Estelle. Sexuality frightens him – boys showing each other their penises at school, girls seducing male teachers.

Boy in art class painting androgynous figures, says he likes to cultivate androgyny in himself. Androgynously dressed figures at university. The fashion world. Readings, Ovid, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf.

Sees transcendence through alcohol. Wants a permanent, self-evoked transcendence.

Drawing, drawing for hours in his room, life drawing class.

Smoked a cigarette in his room

‘I can slip in and out of worlds,’ she said.

She’s there and yet she’s not there.

Dreams more potent than reality.

Fame among friends, accepted in private world together. Bigger than we ever thought we’d be.

Checked into hotel on impulse, used the evening to take photographs, the room like a light box, subverting genders in the images through blurred lines and light.

The cinema, dreams, fantasy, youth, summer, love… palace cinemas – sharing dreams.

He wants to throw off his disguise, she acts to disguise.

Estelle compulsively makes up stories to people.

The pretty girls Astin sees, riding their bicycles through the streets. One in hot pink, the other in peacock blue. The kind of girls who you wonder where they bought their clothes from.

The woman in the nightclub who grabbed him by the arm and said in his ear, Life is just a moment.

Dream out loud, she said.
How he presented himself in everyday life – saggy bleached out blue jeans. Faded t-shirts with nondescript motifs and defunct bands. He thought if he showed too much interest in his appearance, if even the slightest whiff of effort was detected, he would be mistaken for a totally fastidious boy. His sexuality would be scrutinised.

He doesn’t drink, austere, stoical, Buddhist existence. He doesn’t drink for fear of who he might become, what may be revealed. When he meets Estelle at the party she offers him wine. Grape blood.

Estelle builds a fire, just to see flames. She says to Astin, you must love this, you’re a man, men love fire. Men love fast cars. Men love blatant sexuality. Idea that all men are turned on by the same thing.

Estelle

As a little boy, you waited to bloom into a young woman. The beauty of women moved you. You felt a deep kin when in contact with women, they made you feel. Despite being told you were a boy, this meant nothing to you. Girls did not represent the other. Why could you not, one evening, find yourself instinctively fashioning a chrysalis on the ceiling of your bedroom. How could your skin not naturally peel back to an iridescent crust, to protect you in a slumber that night’s regular sleep could not. Why not then might you emerge improved, more beautiful, your true self revealed. You had learnt about metamorphosis in school. Perhaps the teacher omitted tales of human metamorphosis, thinking it would terrify impressionable young minds. You drew a parallel between the story of The Ugly Duckling. He one day became a beautiful swan. One day.

You asked your mother, “When will I grow breasts of my own?”

You had once seen a girl, at the beach, groping her mother’s breasts. The girl was finding her way, seeing what she was in for, you understood. Even then you knew this to be taboo behaviour. Your mother laughed, nervously, the first time you asked about your breasts. But when you became insistent, she firmly told you that you were a boy, and that did not happen to little boys. Other things will happen to your body, she had said, and some day, you will be grateful for being born a boy instead of a girl. Nature will be kinder to you. And you felt fury for you knew her to be wrong. She did not understand. You felt you had been born of a stupid mother. Perhaps she was blind, you thought. I will be what I will be, you thought, and nature will not be kind to me.

But you also possessed a sketchy idea of ‘gender’. It reminded you of ‘genre’ what category a book or a movie or a piece of music fit into. To fit was to be human. You knew that, on the surface, you did not match your sister, your mother, or the girls at school. A latent frustration ached within you. Why did I not get to choose?

In grade two, a girl in your class produced a tube of lipstick at lunchtime. Hot pink contraband. The colour of Barbie’s lips, you thought. Her and her friends giggled as they passed it around, smelling it, drawing luminous circles around their thumb and forefingers, making bony talking mouths and imitating the talk of their mother’s. The lipstick was a beacon for you and you answered its call by silently joining the circle of girls. At first they ignored you but when you motioned for the cosmetic, they became silent, studying you. You pursed your lips, a part of you curious as to how this was a natural reflex. You had never applied lipstick before. The sound of your sister stumbling along the tiled hallway at home was in your head. The oily residue of her lipstick kisses imprinted on the bathroom mirror. Her long blonde hairs in your clean laundry. Delicately you applied the lipstick to your mouth. Regretting that your lips weren’t full enough to embrace the bright pigment. Rubbing your lips together, savouring the moisture, running a finger across your front teeth for fear of residue. And then you became aware that nothing would be the same again. At school, among your peers, and inside yourself. Their smiles were snarls. That day you learnt the word. Freak.

Dreams

He’s entwined in the melody of his dreams. He sees women with large noses and crooked teeth and wants to paint them. He loses sleep over the fact that he will never see his own face, in the flesh, right in front of him. Mirrors and photographs obscure the truth. The body obscures the truth – his a costume for whenever he’s not alone. Once, in school, he was asked to tell the class what era he felt he most belonged in. How could he explain, he was thinking of other planets, in unknown galaxies, at any time, other than now and yesterday. He said – 1850, I’d be a dandy in an Oscar Wilde play, background noise. And
heads nodded with approval, his peers thinking they knew him because of their suspicions, which made him cute, exotic. He watches the boys around him, swapping alliances like freak weather changes, if one girl crosses and uncrosses her legs a certain way that seizes his fancy then his attention is ensnared, from the girl who winds her ponytail a certain way around her finger when she talks. He’s been in love with the same girl for as long as he can remember, that is why he dwells in dreams. She meets him there.

His dreams are hot ragged static. They become more vivid the more clamorous his daily thoughts are.

He relishes frog dreams, where he’s the amphibian, lurking in tepid marsh, throat inflating and exhaling. Calling for her. And she comes – tripping along on a lunar mission. Dew soaked sandals. The hem of her dress dipped in the ink of wet night. All her colour and shimmer cloaked in deep powder blue. A slit-like waxing moon branding the crown of her head with a gleaming stripe. This is how he knows it’s her; he fancies it a tiara. His stomachs, dream boy and frog’s, are aflame with anticipation and rancid regret. A preemptive regret (this is all a dream). But for now, it’s glorious, she responds to his call. Her face appears in rippling black on the pond’s surface, her eyes moving over lily pad and bloom to him, his gestures more frantic now, amplified. She’ll find him and pluck him from his despair, his savoir, with love’s true, transformative kiss. (Fraser 2013)

I knew that this was a way of writing in which I felt very comfortable – to capture brief scenes and images, perhaps dialogue, or descriptions of sensations. From the beginning, I was aiming for a poetic voice in my work – regardless of the narrative’s outcome, it was important that the story not be clinical or too ‘factual’. The poetic voice, for me, lent itself to the imaginative aspect of the story I was trying to tell – to lend beauty to a narrative that would probably deal with darkness and despair. Furthermore, I really wanted to push myself beyond these fragments, to attempt to write a longer novel, and really ‘flesh out’ these brief snapshots. At the beginning though, writing this way helped me loosely construct character, various scenes, and start to compile a kind of film montage in my mind, a series of flickering images, determining what this narrative world would look like, and where it might likely go.

Despite having these fragments as a starting point, I didn’t begin writing with an end in mind. I had read enough about writers’ processes to know there were many who wrote like this, who fumbled through the dark, as it were, sometimes confident, often not, that their story would dictate its own terms, and lead them to where it needed to go (see e.g. Shelley 1997 [1816], Didion 1976 and Woolfe 2007). Others, of course, liked to plot out their narrative, and needed to know the ending before they began. Because I never intended to write what I thought was a plot-driven narrative, it
didn’t worry me so much that I didn’t know where my narrative might lead. It was more important to me to create a series of images, events, that slowly showed some development or change in my character. I knew I wanted to begin my work at a kind of crisis point for my ‘boy’ character, when he had reached that crucial stage where he could no longer pretend. That to me would be the most interesting place to begin this narrative. He is reaching the point where it is more painful to remain the same than to consider some kind of change. And through writing my fragments, two major catalysts for this change emerged. Firstly, his father had recently died. Though I worried this would be a cliché, it almost seemed to transcend triteness into a kind of trope, the overbearing father, determined to prescribe, brutally, his ideas of masculinity onto his male progeny. And how that might ‘free up’ my character to better express his gender, or indeed, himself. The second was, that he would meet a girl; fall in love. But this girl, I thought, would be the one he wanted to be. Whether or not she was part of reality though, is something else I wanted to explore in my work.

From the beginning, I was determined to write what I called a ‘transgender’ character, whether or not this definition strictly adhered to my gender theory reading. At that moment anyway, the word corresponded to an idea or feeling I had of who this person was, and what they might become. Someone who was born a boy, but who had always felt or related to being a girl, even erroneously.

I developed a routine of rising every morning and going to the computer, and writing until I felt I could no longer do so. I had the prewritten fragments as my guide, but besides these, every day I just let whatever wanted to come arrive on the page. The only restriction or ‘rule’ I adhered to was that the story be linear, that whatever scene I laid down that day, the next one would naturally proceed from it. Even though I knew I could rearrange these scenes when I came to edit the work, I felt this practice gave me some kind of order or discipline, as I wrote without any particular end goal in mind.

Every day, in my writing the novel, like lived experience, new fictional events unfolded without my control. It almost felt like I was a conduit for them, allowing me
to become other than what I had been. This strange unconscious conjuring seemed like living an alternate life.

First Draft
My first draft told the story of a boy named Astin who lived with his mother and sister. These two characters had story arcs of their own. Astin was not in every chapter, though I had attempted to write from the perspective of an unreliable narrator, as if my main character Astin was viewing the lives of these two women. While the story was told in third person, I wanted to maintain the suggestion that Astin may indeed be the omniscient narrator. My idea was, as the story went on, to have the reader start to dislike Astin. This would occur because – despite feeling like he already was a girl, as the story went on and his confidence grew in his ability to bring his femininity to life – Astin would begin to view himself as some kind of an expert on women.

While the story focused on Astin and his struggles with being a boy and willing the world to see him for who he really was, I wanted to make some kind of subtle commentary on ‘the male gaze’. I wanted to imply that even though Astin was, at some level, at one with the women around him, they were still filtered through his eyes, and in a sense, were objectified by him as he analysed their behaviour, stole from them, and crafted his feminine sensibility.

In the first draft, the character of Estelle enters the story in the first chapter. In this early version, I wanted to create a sense that she might not be real, that she might be either a figment of Astin’s imagination, or a projection onto a real girl that he sees, whom he wants to present as. While the story was told in third person, I had some chapters only from her perspective, doing things by herself, that Astin is capable of imagining her doing.

Astin had just started University, a setting which I felt would allow him more freedom for personal expression, which is where he meets Estelle. They have a slow, strange courtship, while the novel branched off to include the stories of his sister and mother, with their narratives filtered through his self-realisation and quiet becoming.
While I felt a sense of accomplishment at having completed a first draft, there were a number of problems that I could see once I began to read back on the work.

The biggest problem was that the ending resisted a ‘resolution’. I really didn’t want to write about a character who ‘becomes’ a girl, or rather, starts to live life as a girl. It was clear that I hadn’t written strictly about a transgender character. My first draft had my main female character, Estelle, thinking that Astin was in love with her, and her feeling a kind of rejection when he denied her advances, despite his clear fascination with her. This I didn’t like, as it disempowered the one I wanted to be the more dominant, powerful character, despite her not being the clear focus of the narrative. The past tense felt wrong and lacked urgency, the narrative felt bloodless and too vague; my goal of having a dreamlike sensibility or unreliability to the narrative had sucked the life out of the work. And ultimately, despite wanting to push myself to write longer chapters in a longer work, striving to write a traditional kind of novel, the chapters seemed way too long, the work overwrought and heavy.

Upon reading back on the first draft and reflecting further on my intentions, I knew that I wanted to keep my two main characters, and that the ‘boy character’ was still someone who wanted to shuck off his ‘boy’ label. At the same time, it became apparent that ‘gender’ wasn’t the focus of the narrative, or of the whole project, at all. Certainly not the kind of traditional, binary gender, where one is either boy or a girl, or aiming for some semblance of either of these states. I started to think that, despite my early reading in gender theory, and being inspired by a gender related story, perhaps gender wasn’t really at the heart of what I was trying to say with my work.

It was clear that the work had to push further into an imaginative realm, that I’d need to reconsider, again, the language I used. That perhaps, in doing this, in exploring a quasi-gender narrative in an imagined space, I could do away with expected ideas of gender.

It occurred to me that my character was more of a ‘gender artist’; indeed, that should be his occupation in the narrative, an artist. And that one might have a ‘gender style’ or ‘gender fantasy’ that might desire a state of being completely beyond boy, girl, or indeed human.
Rewriting

The first part of my rewriting process, was to go through the initial draft and write a list of every scene, as the story didn’t have chapters – this in order to clarify, to really see in the most basic terms, what every stage of the narrative was doing, and to decide what I needed most, and what I could get rid of, to bring the story to life. My list started:

1. Father – sees girl – first day University
2. Mother – dinner – mimics cat – sister’s scorn
3. Dream – painting
4. Wakes, wishes he’d transformed through the night
5. Movies – Moth
6. Shower/grooming ritual
7. Skate park, steals cat
8. Imagines girls going to dance, steals silk, imagines girl
9. Mother
10. Observing school peers, imagines girl becoming birds… (Fraser 2015)

I documented all 52 scenes as succinctly as I could, and from there I found I could return to the narrative and simply delete anything I felt didn’t need to be there. I was able to be quite ruthless about this; I had let the work sit for some months before returning to it, and had thus become more detached from it, was able to see its flaws and failings more clearly than if I had attempted the process immediately after completing the last part when writing the first draft.

I didn’t actually delete anything unless I was completely mortified by it. Instead I created a document entitled CuttingRoom.doc and in that placed anything I removed from the main narrative, knowing I could return to some of it, and rework it back into the story, if need be.

I then began to consider where the story needed to go to express what it was I was trying to say. What new scenes did I need to write, and what kind of editing did the surviving scenes need? I wrote another list, almost a check list, that I could refer
back to again and again while I rewrote the creative work, to remind myself of key ideas or images or motifs that I wanted to show in the writing. I also inserted imagery or brief ideas of new scenes I wanted to expand upon and include in the reworked narrative.

A POETIC WORK – READ MORE POETRY

The strange bird call at dusk — intro to novel
Subtle motifs of flowers and birds, animals
Sense of setting, weather, light, sensory details
Father as recurring motif, Malick esque, dream-like, don’t explain, FILMIC
Transitory, series of snapshots held in the hand, subtly revealing
Short, sharp, chapters, longer title
Clear from beginning he is an artist
The tension and confusion of who you’re meant to be as a teenager, plus unsure of gender
Show the school year ending, anxiety culminating about unknown future, death of father, his gender dysphoria rearing up in the form of Girl etc
‘is that a boy or a girl?’
Push to imaginary realm, start each chapter differently
Change, unease, symbols
Her hair changes colour
They are both unfixed, unsolid, he takes parts of people he likes, she becomes what other people want
Clear from start she is conjured by Boy
Trying to bring forth the image of himself, despite his body, moving away from binary – what he becomes, animal, is third state
Girl is his doppelganger, glimpses her like one (Death in Venice) symbol of death, important she interacts with no one else
Watches birds mating, horrified, mirror this at party. His virginity.
He’s learnt to shut off this part of himself, but the death of his father and the appearance of this girl has reawakened the need to be true to himself; denied access to living authentically all his life, something in him makes a bid for freedom
He’s painted her, she’s appeared, ending he steps, falls into the painting – Pygmalion reworking (believing it will envelop him, he crashes through the canvas to the floor)
He’d taken to wearing his hair long, obscuring his face
His thoughts mirror and leak through Girl parts
Don’t be a girl like every other girl. Being a girl isn’t just long hair and dresses.
Wears cat mask at party
Closer to the start, mother disposes of father’s suits, he is complicit in the act, bonding
She’s living in a hotel
They all dream of escaping the small town
Transitory, maps
Grain over E parts, like old super8 footage
Gazing out window
Street corners, abandoned houses
Diner late at night drinking coffee, all dressed up, as if she’d been to an audition
Nighthawks, boy, girl, moth, girl from skate park
End – puts on e’s shoes, a carefully painted woman waits at a bus top
Butterfly goes up into the night (Fraser 2015)
In this way, I was able to reshape my writing, make it more beautiful (as I thought) and polished. This part of the process, the editing, was certainly more challenging than the initial writing. Whereas before I had simply approached the page each day trying not to overthink the writing, determined to just put words down, this part of the process involved a lot more conscious awareness of what was actually being written. It included a fear that I was destroying, rather than improving. That even after another edit, the work still wouldn’t match the imagined ‘portrait’ I had in my mind, the feelings and senses I wanted it to evoke.

*Pare back, polish, pare back, polish...*

I wanted to pare back the muck and the grime, the excess, the detritus, to reveal something extraordinary beneath – gem-like.

**Structure – Chapters – Novella**

My original goal in writing the creative work was to push myself beyond my natural tendency for brevity and writing in a fragmentary style. I sought to flesh out the ‘fragments’ or vignettes I had already written, to expand upon them to write a more traditional novel. But it was clear that this push to ‘flesh out’ was one of the biggest failings of the first draft.

Each ‘chapter’ felt meandering and over long. I felt that descriptions, imagery, and metaphor became diluted over the course of each section. Because I was mostly interested in language and character in my work, and not so much interested in plot, it seemed to me laboured and counterproductive, indeed pointless, to be forcing myself to write a longer work when this goal was compromising the writing itself.

In the below examples from the first draft to the second, I’ve shown how a moment in the story – that of the boy being curious about breasts and when his might grow – was adapted in the refined second draft. While the boy is still reflecting back on this memory in the second version, it is in context of the character showering, feeling his chest, and thus having the remembrance. The first draft read as too rambling and convoluted, to introduce what I wanted to be an important memory in the story.
First Draft

As a little boy, how he waited to bloom into a young woman. The beauty of women moved him. He felt a deep kin when in contact with women, they made him feel. Despite being told he was a boy; this meant nothing to him. Girls did not represent the opposite. Why could he not, one evening, find himself instinctively fashioning a chrysalis on the ceiling of his bedroom. How could his skin not naturally peel back to an iridescent crust, to protect him in a sublime hibernation. A slumber that night’s regular sleep could not. Why not then might he emerge improved, more beautiful, his true self revealed.

He had learnt about metamorphosis in school. Perhaps the teacher omitted tales of human metamorphosis, thinking it would terrify impressionable young minds. Astin drew a parallel between the story of The Ugly Duckling. He one day became a beautiful swan. One day.

He asked his mother, When will I grow breasts of my own? He had once seen a girl, at the beach, groping her mother’s breasts. The girl was finding her way, seeing what she was in for, Astin understood. Even then he knew this to be taboo behaviour. His mother laughed, nervously, the first time he asked about his inchoate breasts. But when he became insistent, she firmly told him that he was a boy, and that did not happen to little boys. Other things will happen to your body, she had said, and some day, you will be grateful for being born a boy instead of a girl. Nature will be kinder to you. And Astin felt fury for he knew her to be wrong. She did not understand. He felt he had been born of a stupid mother. Perhaps she was blind, he thought. I will be what I will be, he thought, and nature will not be kind to me.

He also possessed a sketchy idea of ‘gender’. It reminded him of ‘genre’, what category a book or a movie or a piece of music fit into. To fit was to be human. He eventually had to face the fact that, on the surface, he did not match his sister, his mother, or the girls at school. A latent frustration ached within him. Why did I not get to choose? (Fraser 2014)

Second draft

Skin scalded scarlet from the heat of the water, he tilts his head back into the spray, the pour of the jets darkening his hair, reddening it further. He pushes shampoo and conditioner that smell like sweet green summer apples through it. He breathes in steam like cider.

Soaping his armpits, his legs, its vanilla perfume, its texture, bleeding with his imaginings that he is smooth-bodied from the stomach down. He props his legs up one by one, his feet sticking to the glass like an amphibian, as he runs a razor in upward strokes along each calf and thigh, up and up, he shaves himself, devotedly, until he is sleek and nude. Arms raised above his head – it’s like a ballet.

His hands soaping his chest. When will I grow breasts? he’d asked his mother. Waiting to bloom into a young woman. Still.

You’re a Boy, she’d said. I already have a girl. You’re my perfect Boy.
He’d seen the little girl at the beach groping at her mother’s breasts.
But I need them, he’d said.
Little boys don’t grow breasts, she’d said, and the new inflection to her voice frightened him. Other things will happen to your body, and one day, you will be grateful you were born a boy. Nature will be kinder to you.
His first memory of rage toward his mother.
The bathroom mirror, fogged over. He smears a hand across its surface. Hoping to defog a face once like blank paper, now with writing upon it. His small rosebud of a mouth twitches slightly.
He delicately applies a moisturiser made of honey to his face. It might attract a swarm of bees, which will carry him away.

Like a comeback thought of too late, years later in school, the teacher had written M-E-T-A-M-O-R-P-H-O-S-I-S on the blackboard and everything changed.

Why could he not, one evening, find himself fashioning a chrysalis on the ceiling of his bedroom? How could his skin not naturally peel back to an iridescent crust, to protect him in a sublime hibernation? Why not then might he emerge improved, beautiful, his true self revealed?
I will be what I will be, he thinks, and nature will not be kind to me. (Fraser 2017, p135)

The second draft version read to me as more refined, concise, and thus possessing more of an impact, than the meandering, waffling tone of the first draft version, which included too many other elements and memories told in a reflective, past tense, which also diluted the potential power of the scene.

After writing my list of scenes – the attrition process, deleting anything I didn’t feel was necessary to the heart of the story – I began to cut down the chapters that remained.

I wanted each chapter to have more of a vivid intensity, to have a great focus on imagery, and to manipulate the sense of time, by giving the reader shorter, sharper glimpses of the narrative world, to show this boy’s youth as something fleeting, moving by quickly without his feeling like he is living authentically. This also helped me achieve the kind of dream-like unreality I was aiming for in my work, to show a world that could be real, but doesn’t quite seem like it, to help me explore the concept
of the character’s transformation, what seemed to be his gender crisis, in a more imaginative context.

I had two key conceptual ideas while rewriting. I am a great admirer of the films of Terrence Malick, such as *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *The Tree of Life* (2011). In his work Malick is renowned for shirking traditional film structures and plot lines; he instead takes viewers on a sensory journey, in an impressionistic style. His trademarks are whispered dialogue, character’s interior monologues available to the viewer, private thoughts not expressed verbally, and so on, which to me are reflective of true life interactions and encounters. Also, he emphasises the importance of imagery, colours, the quality of light, and sensory details that make the moving pictures a non-static work of art. I wanted to mimic these qualities as closely as I could in my narrative. And this idea – to have a specific filmic quality in mind while rewriting – inspired the idea of having shorter, sharper ‘scenes’ that are still descriptive in the style of a narrative yet are more in the style of watching a film. I thought this process furthe
Inviting the spectator to wonder who they are, what they are thinking. Their mood and subject matter were inspiring for me, adding to the overall narrative flavour of my work, but also encouraging a kind of ekphrastic approach in my writing. While I didn’t directly write about Hopper’s paintings, flesh out or expand upon their particular qualities and subject matter, their moods of longing and sadness, their depictions of lone, unknowable women, bled into my imaginings, and in turn, the mindset I envisioned for my character.

What I wanted to write paralleled, I thought, the way Hopper saw the world – the way he would see women, and paint them.

Boy sinks onto his bed, onto his blue sheets, looks up at his previous efforts, his small crude paintings that crowd his walls. His pin-ups, his heroines. Portraits of women he’s never met, that gaze out of the canvasses, expectant, longing, at points of departure. Daydreaming, leave-taking. Women on the verge. One girl behind the wheel of a car, travelling alone, another gazes out of a window, one stands at the bottom of a staircase, a foot hovering in the air at the final step. He considers them the work of a novice, poorly realised abstractions, the faces in them are blurred, the significance of them not apparent to anyone but him. (Fraser 2017, p99)

Thus my chapters or scenes were refined, made smaller, more jewel-like, inspired by the visual mediums of art and film. As if they were small paintings, brief scenes in a larger cinematic narrative.

Sitting in the diner, late at night, big white light trained on her like a spotlight, directly above. Reflected back off the table. Seat by the window. She’s the only customer. Half eaten slice of cake, black coffee.

Dressed to the nines, as if she’s come from somewhere glamorous, an audition.

(Fraser 2017, p181)

Most of my favourite books have been, or could be described as, novellas. Distilled narratives, concise language, books without discernible padding or bloated rambling storylines branching off from the more potent, more interesting, main character and story. Part of my rewriting process, while permitting myself the possibility that this story would take a shorter, novella form, was to return to shorter books that have stayed with me, their powerful, smaller narratives, impactful and masterful. These are
narratives where language and character shine over plot, whose structures are short and sharp, like the desired effect of a series of photographs held in the hand I envisioned for my work.

Joan Didion says all she needs to say, precisely, beautifully, in the brief, numerous chapters of *Play It as It Lays* (1998). She introduces her three key characters at the beginning, each having their own chapter where they set the scene, how they see it, in a first person narrative. Didion then switches to numerical chapters, some only as long as a page, others just a few sentences, which lend to the perfect pace of the work, the gradually built reckoning and demise of Maria Wyeth, the protagonist. Maria is an actress as my character is, and the chapters felt to me like small flashes of film, the effect I was hoping to emulate in my work. Didion’s prose is lean, without being bloodless, extraordinary without being excessive. The entirety of her novella’s Chapter 40 reads:

“Let’s go to Mexico City tonight,” BZ said.
“Who?”
“You, me, Helene, I don’t know, maybe Larry Kulik, just fly down for a couple of days, Susannah Wood’s there now doing some interiors at Churubusco.”
“I don’t want to do that,” Maria said.
“Yes you do,” BZ said. (Didion 1998, p113)

Similarly, Michael Ondaatje in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984) tells the story of jazz musician Buddy Bolden through a dreamlike collage narrative, like a jazz soundtrack accompanying a text documentary: fragmented pieces of poetry, memoir, interviews, files, imagined conversations. Again, the filmic quality, each short chapter a cinematic scene, spontaneously veering and moving, like music. A portrait of the musician, the artist, built up of slowly accumulating details, the minutiae and the mystery of this man’s life.

There are no numbered chapters, Ondaatje’s book reads like a prose poem which changes perspective, moves back and forth in time, creating a surreal air, a sense of unreliability. ‘Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky’ (Ondaatje 1979, p60) is the only text on the page, the one lyrical line that is revealed to the
reader on page 60, and yet we are transported, we see and smell the world exactly as Ondaatje wants us to.

Taking cues from Didion and Ondaatje, I slowly introduced my lead female character, as simply as I can:

She’s the only one in the theatre.
Airconditioning turned up too high, goosefleshed arms.
The light of the feature plays across her face, seen in profile.
She’s eating popcorn. Occasionally sips lemonade through a straw.
Laughing to herself, as she watches. (Fraser 2017, p102)

I let some chapters contain only a sentence or two:

Sitting in the lunch room at school, alone, observing the chaos around him, all the other students.
Touch me, he thinks. Touch me. (Fraser 2017, p134)

I started to think about why I felt so cautious, or ashamed, to produce a novella length work, instead of a traditional novel. Why was I reluctant and a bit frightened to keep cutting away at my first draft, watching the word count dwindle, yet confident that the quality of the work was improved because of this harsh edit? Yet the poetry of the text was stronger, the plight of my main character more focussed and central to the story.

Ian McEwan, writing in The New Yorker, boldly declared the novella to be the ‘perfect form of prose fiction’ in ‘Some Notes on the Novella’ (2012). He uses the metaphor of the novella being ‘the beautiful daughter’, the progeny of a ‘rambling, bloated, ill-shaven giant’ (McEwan 2012). He hints that any long form narrative will contain some kind of padding or excess that detracts from the heart of the story, something that doesn’t happen with the novella form. McEwan says that to write a novella ‘lays on the writer a duty of unity and the pursuit of perfection’ (McEwan 2012), citing numerous examples of writers who excelled in the novella form, but in particular, championing James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ (1914) (McEwan 2012). He believes that its prose, particularly in the final pages, being so exquisite, rivals any fifteen pages of Ulysses.
Let’s take, as an arbitrary measure, something that is between twenty and forty thousand words, long enough for a reader to inhabit a world or a consciousness and be kept there, short enough to be read in a sitting or two and for the whole structure to be held in mind at first encounter – the architecture of the novella is one of its immediate pleasures. How often one reads a contemporary full-length novel and thinks quietly, mutinously, that it would have worked out better at half or a third the length. I suspect that many novelists clock up sixty thousand words after a year’s work and believe (wearily, perhaps) that they are only half way there. They are slaves to the giant, instead of masters of the form. (McEwan 2012)

McEwan goes on to liken the reading of the novella, the time the reader devotes to it, the quality of entering its narrative sphere, as akin to watching a film, due to its length, its distilled potential power on the reader, the exposure to one main story arc. Though, of course, he remarks upon the novella’s detractors, and the critique that can be leveled at a novella writer – are they somehow inadequate? Is the reader or buyer of a novella being cheated somehow? Can the writer not sustain their imaginative talents to over 40,000 words?

Nick Earls, in his Seizure article ‘Why The Novella?’ (2016), makes light of the seeming prejudice towards novellas, pinning them down, defining what they are, and the apprehension around their publication. Since when, he asks, do book buyers ‘buy books by the kilo’, or are attracted to a particular written work because of its weight, thickness, or length (Earls 2016)? The novella, as a longer piece of work than a short story, yet distinct from the novel, gives the writer opportunities to experiment more with structure and narrative. Earls writes, ‘The writer who can see the novella as a work different from the short story and the novel is in a stronger position to use the intermediate prose form well and write it powerfully and distinctively’ (Earls 2016). Earls also echoes McEwan’s positive description of the novella as a ‘movie-length read’.

Earls’ further description of the form confirmed my goals for the edit of the work, the effect I wanted to achieve with the narrative.

The novella form suits stories with a focus on the protagonist, a point-of-view anchored inside his or her head, and the quiet transformation on offer when light hits a truth from a new angle. For the writer, it’s a chance to commit to that character, and build and build and build, before and during the writing.
And it’s through that commitment and through delivering the specifics in a manner deeper and broader than the short story allows – making room for gestures, for spaces and unvoiced thoughts, for minute details that will light a fuse – that wider truths can be alluded to and become present and extrapolate. The universal comes through respecting the specific at a degree to which the novella is entirely suited. (Earls 2016)

In editing and shortening my work, I wanted my protagonist to take centre stage in the narrative, believing him to be the most interesting character, with the most unique point of view in the piece. This especially so as the subject of my work was, as Earls describes, a ‘quiet transformation’, a particular process that evolves through the story.

Though in editing my first draft the end product was remarkably a smaller work, I did have some hesitancy in labelling or defining it as a novella. Especially in terms of it being the creative product I was submitting for my doctorate, I worried it would appear that I hadn’t put in as much work as might be evidenced by a longer novel form. However, I knew that much of the work came in the editing process, despite my word count not being as inflated as it was to begin with. I felt validated, and had greater confidence, in my shorter work, after reading McEwan and Earls, whether or not the piece carries the label of a novella. Despite my, perhaps arbitrary, ambition to write a longer work, *His Uncertain Skin* was destined to be a novella, and to be vastly improved for it.

**Gender Play – Character, Voice, Language**

When I began thinking about how I was going to write my creative work, the basic idea I had in mind was that my central character would be a boy who had always been uncomfortable with his gender. He would meet a girl, fall in love with her, and in subverting a traditional romance narrative, he would seek to become her, instead of seeking a relationship with her. This girl would make his femininity seem possible. She would represent the crucial point in his life, where he would have to decide whether he could continue to labour under false pretences, and present as a boy, or be true to himself, and show his girlness, his real self, to the world.

As shown in my original fragmentary writing, I experimented in a number of ways how best to portray these characters and their relationship. While I always felt the boy character (unlike his gender presentation) was fixed and solid, that is, he was
real, and truly existed, I wasn’t sure if the girl character should be real too. Or whether she was his true self projected onto a real girl, or a creation of his imagination.

My first draft was written in close third, from the perspective of the boy, in past tense. I attempted to write a kind of call-and-respond narrative, where the girl character would have her own chapters, some written in first person, showing her living her own life and interacting with other people, building a life and a back story for her.

I found however, and others who read the manuscript agreed, that the presence of this girl character was confusing. Was she real, or wasn’t she? In the chapters where I attempted to subtly allude to her being imagined, my readers felt it was difficult to understand what I was trying to do.

My first draft seemed to be middling in a lot of ways, especially as this was when I began to realise that a gender ‘transformation’, or a narrative about a transgender boy, wasn’t what I was writing about. One reader commented that the story was too caught up between reality and an imagined realm. My boy character was conceivably experiencing gender dysphoria, and yet the idea of him liking the idea just as much of becoming an animal, instead of needing to express himself as a girl, was creeping in. The ending also resisted resolution. The narrative didn’t seem to want to go in the direction of a tidy, one might say predictable, ending, which mimicked what would be expected in ‘reality’, i.e. where the boy ends up presenting as, or transitioning, to a girl.

And this was key. The story is about a boy on a precipice: not quite ready to commit to being a girl, being herself, but finally confronting the idea fully and teasing it out of himself, beautifully, painfully, through this period of time as depicted in the story.

I knew I had to reconceive everything, yet only having to be beholden to an imagined space, without the restrictions of being faithful to reality, and in a way, this was very freeing. It’s important to note though, that despite a new direction away
from verisimilitude or adhering to a reality off the page, my imagined narrative would still be based on feeling my way deeply beyond superficial observation. In perceiving how my friend had transitioned, and in reading and observing how others had too, I imagined from this how it felt, by empathising with them. As is the case in writing fiction, I observed others while investigating and testing their experiences against my own emotions and understandings, and further imbuing this with imagined possibilities of being, amplified and distorted through my imagination.

Simply put, I wouldn’t offend anyone or have to worry about not researching veracity in a transgender person’s life if I got rid of the idea that this was a story of verisimilitude. This story was a commentary on gender, but not about gender, certainly not as it is performed and thought about in the world off the page.

Inhaling sharply from her cigarette, she takes one of the shots from her pocket. Takes a stick of glue from her pencil case, and pastes it to the cubicle wall. Exhaling, the smoke clouds around the ghostly body. There for the taking. Just a girl body, it could belong to anyone. (Fraser 2017, p124)

My goal for this project, and as a writer, was to destabilise gender norms, but in a totally imagined realm where I could be unrestricted by the real, the known, and the plausible. From my notes:

*He doesn’t want to belong to maleness, the male gender – Girl is his conjured escape, his gender fantasy/gender style. The crude clamour of boys, how they bond, how they are socialised, how they treat girls – he sees them at school and thinks, I don’t belong to that. But then treats femaleness as some ‘grass is greener’ – so doesn’t really want to be a definite, fixed gender structure, in a traditional sense – he might want to wear a dress and makeup, but not be labelled anything – still implies you need to fit into one or the other. He wants to leave ‘boy, for an ungendered, uncategorised way of being, that may resemble ‘girl’ but also may resemble or have bird or insect characteristics. Today I’m dressed in red – I’m red, not boy. A boy who doesn’t conform to prescribed ideas of masculinity. Thinks he might belong in girl world, fantasises about one girl. She refuses to be captured, she fights back against his thievery of her. Finds it’s not so easy to be a girl. He was objectifying her as a cis gender boy might do, trying to possess a love interest.* (Fraser 2013)

One of the most important changes, then, was to make the girl character more clearly conjured by the boy, yet still give her agency. I didn’t want her to be a passive object of desire in the narrative, despite the fact that the boy doesn’t see her as a typical sexual conquest.
A significant change in terms of character, which was quite accidental, involved their names. In my first draft, I put an excessive amount of thought into what they would be called, though nothing turned up satisfactory. I eventually settled on two names, one a boy’s, Astin, one a girl’s, Estelle, that loosely had the same meaning, though I knew this was a bit too ‘clever’. In rewriting the work, I decided to just name them temporarily Boy and Girl, and I could go back and amend this when I had hit upon more appropriate names.

After a time though, it seemed to me that the temporary names were already perfect. Very matter of fact. But I also saw them as a way to highlight my goal. They were emblematic of what I was exploring in this story: as if to be labelled by your gender spoke volumes about you; as if everything that could be known or understood about a person was already there in those weighted descriptors.

Boy and Girl also served to show, in a somewhat humorous way, how strange the gender binary is, and also, to illustrate the two ‘halves’ that were being shown in this story. Further, what if I’d named Girl Boy, and vice versa. Would it make any difference to their being, their characteristics?

*Girl, girl, girl* and *boy, boy, boy* serve as refrains in the text. Boy has to chant *boy, boy, boy* to remind himself, especially around others, to maintain his fiction, his façade, to keep up the gender performance and what is expected of him as a boy. However, running just beneath it, he is also saying *girl, girl, girl*, reminding himself quietly of who he truly is, who he wants to show himself to be.

Boy, boy boy. Breaking out of and into his body simultaneously…

And he knows it only works when it happens this way, this breaking, this mending, this amazement, she is here so clearly now. This girl, with her girl fist making sounds like swan dives, bird bodies heard from a distance, parting the water.

*Girl, girl, girl.*

*Come here, boy!* The roar of his father.
Stepping back, sitting down on the edge of the bathtub, cold against buttocks, but she’s clearer still, she’s coming into view, just her face now, visible in the mirror.

Girl, girl, girl.
This sweetness. (Fraser 2017, p96)

In the rewrite, I removed any scene in which Girl interacts with another person. In the rewritten story, she has scenes of her own, and only interacts with Boy. At times she merges with him, as if there is a push and pull for dominance. This is another way in which the narrative rejects realism, through Girl’s fluid presence in the story. Is she real, or is she imagined? Is Boy even real? Is he a boy, is he human? Does any of this have to be known or verified in a narrative context?

I began to see Girl as a kind of doppelganger to Boy. Not just an apparition or Boy’s double, but the classic idea of the doppelganger as a portent, a harbinger of ill luck, of one’s death. I thought back to Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1955 [1912]) where, at the beginning of the novella, before his fateful trip, Aschenbach encounters a figure which sets his whole ‘wanderlust’ in motion, without any apparent reason. He glimpses a man as he stops to read lettering on a mortuary chapel which refers to the afterlife. The man is red haired, and seems to be dressed as a tourist.

Possibly Aschenbach had not exerted much discretion in his half-distracted and half-inquisitive study of the foreigner; because suddenly he noticed the other one returning his glances and in such a war-like fashion, so straight into the eye, so obviously determined to carry this to the extremes and to force the other one’s gaze to retreat, that Aschenbach, slightly embarrassed, turned around and began ambling along the fences, with the passing decision not to regard that person again.

He had forgotten him the very next minute. If it was the wayfarer-like air of the foreigner working on his imagination or some other corporeal or mental influence that caused it: a strange distention of his soul unexpectedly made itself known, a sort of roving unrest, a juvenile thirst for the distant, a feeling, so novel and yet so long-forgotten that he, hands on his back and his eyes fixed at the ground, stood transfixed to probe that emotion and its nature and aim. (Mann 1955, p5)

Although Boy first glimpses Girl at a high school party, and the tone in my narrative is considerably different from Mann’s, in my own imagination the meetings of Aschenbach and the red-haired man, and Boy and Girl, are mirrored. Boy is immediately attracted to Girl, she evokes new feelings in him, and it is uncertain,
especially at the beginning, whether or not this is a positive meeting. Girl is
enigmatic, strange, and her presence, though conjured by Boy, seems to promise so
much. But, at least in my mind, she also represents the death of Boy, for they both
compete for life.

I have two chapters at the beginning, that serve to introduce Boy and Girl. The
first ‘BOY’ chapter was a piece I conceived as I began my rewrite. My first draft did
not contain any kind of allusion to Boy’s sexuality, despite his gender discomfort.
One of my readers suggested that, to explore this might be a good way to demonstrate
the toehold Boy still had on his masculinity. Even though he might be repulsed by his
anatomy and seek to deny its presence, to show him masturbating would foreground
perfectly his duality, the tension between staying the same, enacting the rites of the
conventional teenage boy, and trying to break out of his skin. The revision would also
convey a visceral immediacy to the beginning of the narrative.

This scene is not simply about self pleasure or sex. When Boy is in the
bathroom, about to begin this act, ‘[h]e notices the webbing of his fingers glowing,
softly golden, translucent in the light’ (Fraser 2017, p94); he is not simply interested
in touching himself. I wanted to show the reader his sensuality, how even in times like
this, his eye seeks out the beauty in things, like, perhaps, an artist would.

The importance of a kind of poetry in the language of the narrative (as well as
the first introduction to Boy’s possible blending with – or at least, his empathy with –
animals) is shown when he likens his penis to that of a swan’s neck. This imbues the
act for him with beauty, with safety, but also communicates to the reader that this is
not an ordinary narrative set in reality, nor is this an ordinary masturbatory scene.

Boy, he is, he’s all boy, swan’s neck soft like the dark silk, he can handle this, he thinks, just
when it’s like this, a handful of something soft and warm, swan down, sleeping snow white
creature, but his blood sings, this nausea, the beat fills his head, he is opening the palm of his
left hand, he purses his lips, a kiss pushing a long trail of spit down into his palm. He transfers
this moisture tenderly. Penis, he thinks, forcing himself to reckon with it, this word so alien to
him, forcing himself to look up, this boy in the mirror with his penis in his hand. (Fraser 2017,
p94)
And it is loathsome to him, this act. But he continues – and, oddly, his father is conjured in his thoughts. In my first draft, my introduction contained a flashback about Boy’s childhood experiences with his father, which I edited down and incorporated into this scene: seeing his father, as if through the graininess of old film footage; remembering his father crying; showing vulnerability. His father, recently deceased, is someone he imagines as a woodcutter from a fairytale, symbolic of the masculine, the destroyer. Key amongst these images is his father’s rage at being seen to be weak, weeping.

The scene cuts back to the present, with Boy’s ‘girl penis’ in his hand. I attempt to manipulate language and ownership of genitals here, to blur lines between what is expected, and to show how Boy sees him or herself, what he can become, what is made manifest from this act of masturbation. Girl appears.

And he knows it only works when it happens this way, this breaking, this mending, this amazement, she is here so clearly now. This girl, with her girl fist making sounds like swan dives, bird bodies heard from a distance, parting the water. (Fraser 2017, p96)

His father’s roars still echoing in his head, exemplary of his self-loathing; his father’s imposing beliefs of how one should ‘man’, or ‘boy’, these words not nouns but verbs.

Boy’s climax is symbolic, his pleasure is derived from this moment when nothing feels real, when he can come close to being her, bringing her to life. His ejaculation ‘[s]wans, white jets, taking off, up into the sky. One, two, three, four’ (Fraser 2017, p96), he sees them, their soft feathered bodies, his talismans, swarming at the ceiling. These beautiful creatures, renowned for grace, who can turn violent in an instant. Glide serenely through water, then snap their beaks, chase you. Their great webbed feet slapping the ground as they gain on you. This is symbolic of Boy’s inner tumult. He acts so hard to be Boy, barely achieving calm, yet Girl snaps and chases, hissing in his ear, girl, girl, girl.

She steps from the bus, as if from nowhere. (Fraser 2017, p97)

In my rewrite, including my two new introductory chapters, this is now how the reader first sees Girl. In the novella she is an actress; on the surface, by the very virtue
of being one, or choosing such a vocation, this suggests she is skilled at adapting to
different roles, enjoys it, even. So there is a kind of irony here that this is the girl Boy
has chosen to pin his hopes on, or who he has conjured to dream of, emulate, capture,
as she is someone who is trying to learn the craft of convincingly passing as, or even
being, someone else.

But at school, this means she is part of a different breed of student, breathes
the rarefied air behind the drama theatre door. I liked the idea that she was part of the
dream factory that is theatre and cinema, adding to my filmic theme, the glamour and
the enigma of the actor, dreaming of this in an old Hollywood context. Girl is
inaccessible, she lives in a different realm, one where identity is unsolid, unfixed. She
is a shapeshifter. Which mirrors his desire – not necessarily to be Girl, but to explore
his gender artistry, play with his identity, and not be forced and fixed into boyhood
and its expectations and performativity.

This dreamy introductory chapter of Girl, I hoped, would illustrate, without
being too definitive, that she wasn’t quite real. Like a young girl stepping off a bus to
pursue her acting dreams in Hollywood, ‘[n]o other passengers disembark’, ‘smoke
wisping around her’, (Fraser 2017, p97) her physicality is obscured by light, her
silhouette is indefinite. We don’t ever really know what Girl looks like, because Boy
hasn’t decided yet, or doesn’t know himself: ‘her features are out of focus, as if she is
seen from a reflection, bouncing off hot glass in the midday glare’ (Fraser 2017, p97).
But after alighting from the bus, she stays to wait for Boy, because she knows he’ll
come for her.

Girl then begins to seep into the narrative, through Boy’s consciousness.

He feels relief at the sight of a yellow car, appearing at the top of the street. An old model, a
car from another time, an anachronism in this scene. Slowly it moves towards him, he keeps
his eyes on it, and when it passes, there is a girl in the back, sunglasses obscuring her face, her
body turned right towards him through the open window. She says something but the words
are obscured, garbled and pulled away by the moving vehicle. (Fraser 2017, p98)

This is symbolic of their every encounter. Until he’s got a hold on who she [he] is,
barely glimpsed in a car rushing past, she begins to haunt him. Tempting, beckoning,
she comes to him in dreams. We see her at the cinema, honing her craft, just before Boy goes to the movies with Moth and the two girls. Alone in the theatre, again, her face obscured by the light of the screen, she is a person half seen as if barely remembered from a dream; the certainty of her is submerged by waking.

Laughing to herself, as she watches. (Fraser 2017, p102)

Her entire demeanour demonstrates control, confidence, aggression, in contrast to Boy. Although I was loathe to play into gender stereotypes myself in this creative work – part of its genesis being inspired by getting away from them, manipulating and deconstructing them – I took a kind of pleasure in reversing in Boy and Girl what is typically expected of boys and girls. Boy is weak, uncertain, emotional, nervous. Despite Girl’s physical presence being shaky and not as certain in the text as Boy’s, her energy is undeniably stronger, more vital. I didn’t want to give my female character short shrift, living in the shadow of Boy. And she is, after all, the force that deigns to take him over, that he tries to suppress, if he is indeed meant to be Girl. She has to be strong if she is to be given life.

She taunts him:

He opens his eyes. She’s sitting on the end of his bed, watching him.
What are you doing, Boy?
Sleeping, he says.
Sleeping through life, she says.
He wants to get her out of this dress, and into it himself.
She turns her back to him, and it’s then that he sees the split, rippling right down her back, as if from poorly constructed seams.
Nothing holds. Like being Boy, convincing from the front, a ruin at the back.
Wait, don’t leave me, he says, holding onto the pooled hem of her dress as she slides off the bed, out of her night visitation. (Fraser 2017, p127)

In Chapter 40 he summons an image of her to console himself, wondering where she is in the night.

He summons an image of freedom. He can see her driving. Yes, that’s perfect. Where did she get the car from? Perhaps she stole it. (Fraser 2017, p147)
Yes, that looks right, Boy thinks, because it pleases him to imagine her driving through the night, something he cannot do himself. Conjuring a romantic cinematic image that echoes his own desire to flee, escape, like she’s a kind of cinema screen for his dreams. But he’s played right into Girl’s game; Boy’s given her a fast car, and she’s reckless, the car veers back and forth between the lanes, over the lines. He grows anxious in his vision of her.

Accelerator foot pushes right down to the floor and the car moves off into the dark, so fast he cannot keep up, the noise of the engine making him frantic, he must regain control. (Fraser 2017, p147)

Like he’s created a kind of monster, a crazed femme fatale who is grabbing for the wheel even though he’s meant to be driving. Like she’s grabbing for his life.

And even though he’s never seen snow, even though they appear to be in a summertime climate, it’s all he can think of to take over. To stop her in her tracks, blind her. Or, at least, slow her down. Show her he’s running the show. In his vision, like a puppeteer shaking a snow globe, he makes it snow.

…she flicks on her wipers and she just keeps on going, but her lips are turning into a small smile, the smile of a girl who knows exactly what is going on and exactly how to play it. (Fraser 2017, p147)

And he fights back. In Chapter 42, on a kind of reconnaissance mission, he visits her bedroom, where he imagines she goes to sleep each night. He sits by the bed and watches her sleep, ‘leaning in, he’s so close to her, he reaches out his hand to touch her, he believes he can reach her, trying to fix reality. Watching his hand slice right through her’ (Fraser 2017, p149). Showing, again, that she’s real, yet not quite real. Absent and present. Boy’s fantasy, his conjuring.

But he begins to think, in amongst all the dizzying female paraphernalia, of femininity as a kind of conspiracy against him, a clandestine, alluring group he will forever be excluded from. This feeling is reflective of something deeper within Boy, not specifically aimed at women, but he sees their collusion and makes them the
target for his despair. He’s a loner, alienated from his school peers, dabbles in art, dreams of a girl taking him over, and fantasises about becoming an animal. He is a creature doomed to be misunderstood, alone. ‘You think you’re so good at this’, he sneers at her sleeping form (Fraser 2017, p149). Determined to outdo her femininity, he rifflles through her wardrobe, dresses in her lingerie, reddens his mouth with her lipstick, emblems of highly feminine accoutrements. ‘I can do this just as well as you’, he says (Fraser 2017, p150). He knows he can do this, be beautiful, be a work of art of his own creation.

She has the last word, a warning, a summons – ‘You’re going to die one day’ (Fraser 2017, p150), reminding him he is mortal, that his time, to be living an inauthentic life, is limited.

This push and pull between them, gender halves, identities, mimicking the male pursuit, the conquest, though subverting this, is reflected in Girl’s strength, her refusal to submit and be tamed and quiet until Boy might be ready for her. But, like the question in all tumultuous love affairs or courtships – do they really want one another? Does Boy really want to be Girl? Does he want to gender transition, or is that a diversion, does he rather, driven artistically, yearn to create a perfect work of art in a female form?

There are key scenes in the narrative which draw attention to Boy’s gender dysphoria. For example, his morning ritual of feeling his body, assessing the damage, ever hopeful a transformation has occurred overnight:

Rising from the bed, from the sheet cocoon, striding to the mirror, his great test of courage, looking at his naked body. Like a meditation, he thinks, practicing detachment, indifference, to ward off revulsion, terror. (Fraser 2017, p101)

But his body refuses to yield to his night time fantasies. His anatomy declares itself as belonging to the male sex. But he never really wants to do anything about it, he fantasises, toys with the idea and the being of Girl, and yet he lingers in the imagination, ruminates on a magical reincarnation as a child would.
What if he could just locate a secret spot in his skin, a scar, freckle, bruise. Once located, touched, his skin would unfold slowly in bloom. A neat painless splitting from the top of his skull. In two creamy arcs, the skin peeling back, to a discarded shell. A naked girl stepping forth, reborn. (Fraser 2017, p101)

He sees a therapist, but doesn’t really confide in him, just goes through the motions. He feeds the doctor analogies for his problems, instead of articulating what really troubles him, that he doesn’t want to be Boy anymore. He’d already tried disclosures in childhood, and been misunderstood. Perhaps it’s something he ought to have outgrown by now, this fantasy of escaping boyhood. He wants to, now, share with the therapist his great golden dream, his memory of stealing into his sister’s bedroom and wearing one of her dresses, an obsession, a compulsion, which he honed over time until the dress began to stress at the seams.

He wants to keep this memory pure and perfect, because he knew no shame then. He can hear it now, how the dress’s bow would swish across his back with every movement, would rustle softly, as he walked, the velvet caressing his skin, frocked, at play with his sister’s dolls, the ones that all fitted inside each other, he’d open the biggest doll and remove the next, and he saw life opening up for him just like that, a new layer of his womanhood revealing itself over and over. (Fraser 2017, p113)

Despite the fact that, in my rewrite, it seemed the narrative was moving away from being just about a gender crisis and possible transformation, these scenes – the revulsion of the physical assigned-sex body, and trying on the clothing of a sibling whose gender one felt they were – were common narratives in the various stories of transgendered people I’d read. Indeed, my old university friend told me similar stories of how, as a boy, she would steal into her sister’s room whenever she got a chance, to admire her treasures, allotted to her because she was a girl, and yearn for them to be hers.

I thought that Boy would be a character readers would sympathise with, even like, but when I reflected on my writing, after editing, I saw that Boy stole from women quite regularly. Was he entitled to do this, because he knew or felt he was Girl? Or did this, like his growing belief he could ‘girl’ better than girls, add an unsavoury tone to his
character. Of course, it might even be read as humorous, as I was hoping the scene at the cinema would be. It’s a play on the anxiety and mixed signals involved in dating: Moth and one of the girls think Boy is seduced by the girl he has been paired with; they think he is leaning in to kiss her, when really, he wants to smell like her, steal her scent; ‘I must know what your perfume is’ (Fraser 2017, p106). However, as writer, I was going further: I wondered if he was instead stealing beauty, rather than taking from and diminishing the girls he samples from.

Besides, all through the story, whether he has put all of femininity on a pedestal or not, whether he is treating girls well with his idealisations or not, girls let him down continuously.

He lives with his sister’s scorn – ‘What even are you?’ (Fraser 2017, p115) – and his mother, in Boy’s view, abandons him and their close-knit child-parent union by seeking a lover. The girl at the empty swimming pool the boys used as a skate bowl – the girl he watches and waits on to take action when the cat is heard, trapped in the backpack, and who does nothing – places the onus on Boy to take action and save the cat, even though he longs to blend in and go unnoticed. The bully’s girlfriend, who does nothing, giggles, even, when he intimidates Boy later in the narrative, mocks his drawing of the nude life model, threatening violence. It seems he has been trained by the culture that mirrors the world off the page in some ways, not by others in the narrative, to expect maternal instincts, softness, goodness from all women.

It is important to note this disappointment in girls because Boy is just as preoccupied with the fantasy of being a bird, just as keenly aware of birds and insects, and if he really isn’t Girl, then might he just as easily be one of these other creatures? Sexed but genderless. Animals serve, too, as motifs of transformation in this narrative, as ways to reinvent the self, reimagine a doing away with gender.

The idea that becoming an animal, a bird, might be just as fulfilling, might be as plausible as becoming Girl, runs throughout the narrative. If Boy is merely looking for an escape from his boyhood to transcend this masculine state, or even be liberated
from some of its constraints, then he might just as easily be trans-species, or take on an imagined form of clinical lycanthropy, or species dysphoria, where he won’t be limited by human gender performances and expectations. This possibility really only became apparent in the rewrite of my work, where I discovered that I wasn’t writing specifically about a transgender person. I wasn’t interested solely in gender, and sought to interrogate a gender discomfort in a creative way in an imagined realm.

In Chapter 11, Boy imagines Girl, like him, walking home from school. Because she’s just like him, because he has the power to evoke her when necessary, he imagines her in the afternoon light, walking down streets all named for birds. He imagines her calling forth each species in her mind as she comes to each street sign. And in turn, briefly, she becomes each one, just by thinking about it.

After Boy tries it out through channelling Girl and gets a taste for it, he attempts it himself. Boy blends with his pet cat, ‘becomes’ her, this creature so seemingly sure of herself, a kind of mirror for Girl. Metaphorically, Boy sees himself as a butterfly, ‘unsteady in flight, shy to show your colours. Wings wet, tremulous, flexing in the wind. Proboscis hidden from view’ (Fraser 2017, p116). He wonders if Girl is just the same.

Boy finds an article in his sister’s magazine, a missive seeking advice: the writer feels they were born in the wrong body. This is an idea associated with being transgender, but for the purpose of the narrative, I wanted to take it further, in relation to the animal: ‘To be born in the wrong body – did that mean you could really be a tiger, a polar bear, a butterfly, or a dark powdery moth? A girl?’ (Fraser 2017, p120). Could Boy be anxious to escape his human skin as well?

In Chapter 27, during science class at school, Boy experiences an epiphany, as if the moment is offered up just for him, completely by chance. He learns about seahorses, how the male of the species gives birth. This experience offers him a tiny link to not only the possibility of being a part of the animal world, but also to be included into the female domain he feels excluded from. He has watched his mother and sister, fantasised about their seeming collusion, their automatic bond, in that they both menstruate, are capable of creating life inside themselves and giving birth. Of
course, Boy romanticises this, takes just the biological parts of the story that suit his fantasy, the crafting of his imagined gender portrait. But to encounter the seahorses is a key moment for Boy, and in the narrative, a glimpse of possibility.

And what if, in a mundane moment, ritually waiting for the school bus, he just began to transform into a bird? It needn’t be anything covert – just natural, necessary.

What if it happened, right here? Just waiting for the school bus. What if I just began to transform? Tiny perforations opening up in my skin, big enough for white grey feathers to push through, tiny daggers that fan open to broad knives that could cut. And if I opened my arms I’d know exactly what to do, I’d just rise, flap and rise. Hover long enough to see their stares, how impressed they would be. Frightened. Boy bloomed, boy perfected. Species unknown, but wonderful. (Fraser 2017, p136)

In a panicked moment with the school principal, in Chapter 41, ‘[h]e feels the brushing of the feathers just beneath the skin, like they’re just on the verge of bursting through’ (Fraser 2017, p148). This is Boy’s solace, his escape plan. Despite his performance at his school studies failing, his other performance, his dream, is blooming and showing promise. If all else fails, he could perhaps will the feathers to no longer tease him but to push right through his skin and reveal his bird self. And he could simply fly away.

This push and pull; he grapples with his swan becoming in Chapter 45:

Standing in the dark at his window. He’s feathered, sexless. Looking down, feet comically huge and webbed, frightening, beak vicious. Swanlike, graceful. Ridiculous. This is a poor fit. The feathers have pushed through and I can fly away, wings pulsing and tensing, waiting for the brain command, big feet waiting to retract and fold into me, step right up, but I can’t do it. What if someone laughs at me? I’ll miss my mother. What if I regret it? Why can’t I keep, one foot in Boy, one wing on Girl. Will I slip, slide, break, be pulled, a mess of feathers and carnage, wreckage of boy parts, girl parts, bird parts? (Fraser 2017, p154)

This mess of identity, this great discomfort, this longing for change and release, but what even is he? Boy, Girl, bird, butterfly? The scene serves to show that the narrative isn’t merely dealing with a gender issue, or a transgender transformation. Bird and butterfly open up another dichotomy drama for Boy, replacing Girl and Boy,
and yet he isn’t entirely sure if he could neatly become either of these winged species. He’s undecided as a strange, sad Icarus.

In Chapter 48 he becomes swan to flee the advances of Moth, ‘swan wings have bloomed from her back’ (Fraser 2017, p162), as his Girl self, carefully created for the party, disintegrates as he runs. Grey swans cloud his eyes when he’s about cry.

In rethinking and rewriting my creative work, I gave closer consideration to how I was dealing with gender, and also discovered that there were other elements occurring in the work, that Boy’s imaginings of becoming an animal were just as important, and crucial, to him, the character, and also to the narrative itself.

**On Setting**

I made two key decisions with regards to setting. Firstly, as the narrative took new shapes from the first to final draft, I decided to change the location of the story to high school, from University. I had originally written Boy’s story as he begins his first University year, thinking that this would be a place conducive to change, in that people might be more accepting of him. He could meet and mix with new people who didn’t know his past, people who were more open minded, artistic, mature.

I decided upon reflection to pull him back into his final high school year. For one, I felt the stakes would be higher for him there – reaching his final year in a world where he had always felt acutely alien, intensely ostracised and deeply different to his peers. But the curious fact of this being he would have no idea life would be any different beyond high school. I recall feeling this way myself, after troubled school years – the desperation to leave, yet the crushing weight of the fear of the unknown. What if life were just a continuation of high school? Cliques and groups, petty dislikes, bullying, intense emotions, everything heightened with the particular pains of being adolescent.

High school, where one is still considered a child without the autonomy and relative responsibility that comes with attending university, represents a more intense space. At university one takes hold of their own fate and begins to shape it consciously, without the input and dominance of teachers, principals, menacing peers.
But for Boy, his final weeks of high school and their singular pressure system involve meeting/conjuring Girl, refining his art, the practice on the canvas, and the art of his self, along with his father recently dying. Everything conspires to make him change in this time of great possibility, yet there pertains the greatest fear of not knowing what shape life would take when the final bell rang. This is where I decided to place Boy.

How much longer now?

All the years, the years, the time and distance between them, stretching ahead…

Spring is ending. Clouds drift overhead. Small lilac moths flutter in the grass past his eyes. They pass through him, tickling, making him tremble.

The bell rings.

School’s out for summer, freak! a boy screams past him. (Fraser 2017, p173)

Changing the setting of the story from university to high school would ultimately add more pressure to the character’s sense of conflict, and add to the sense of despair and desperation in the story. There was added narrative power in Boy being ‘trapped’ in school and still effectively regarded as a child, without being able to imagine anything beyond that restrictive world, in which he is compelled to conform.

My second decision about setting involved the larger setting of the novella. I placed my characters in a world which I conceived of as an unnamed Australian town in an imagined present time. However, what was extremely important both to the narrative and to my writerly sensibilities, was that this would be a world devoid of technology. Boy had to feel completely isolated, alone in his feelings of inadequacy in questioning his gender and identity. He couldn’t simply log on to the Internet and find perhaps thousands of others just like him, grappling with similar questions.

In rewriting, I decided to scrap any hint of ‘Australiana’. Initial readers of the new draft questioned the lack of feeling regarding setting. The narrative world to them felt too disembodied, unanchored. While this was an effect I was hoping to achieve, the fact that two readers remarked upon it made me reconsider this goal. I decided to compromise by offering small or subtle references to setting, again,
without directly naming a ‘real’ location or actual place. I wanted this world to seem *almost* totally removed from reality, pushed very much to an imagined realm, in order for Boy’s situation to be deemed plausible in context with the world in which he lived. That he might indeed be Girl, or butterfly, or swan. This was the salient point of the narrative I discovered in this setting: that he might, in this world so *almost* removed from reality, entertain the possibility of becoming an animal, instead of shaping his gender. He could feasibly be a gender artist, by superseding gender altogether in his becoming.

With Girl being an actress, I imagined my new landscape to be a kind of 1970’s California: a strange place, where people were haunted by dreams, where some dreams came true, and other dreams seemed possible despite never being realised. As if from the front of their high school they could glimpse the Hollywood sign, shimmering in the distance. As I said, I didn’t want to use any recognisable material from the world off the page in my narrative; these were ideas I held imaginatively, to guide my writing.

It needed to be a conceived, surreal world, which reflects our own, in ways. A world I could create and be master of. Everything unfixed, not quite solid, like Boy, like Girl, like their genders, their beings. And no technology. Boy gets one tiny lifeline, one inkling of possibility, from a salvaged teen magazine, fished from the garbage that his sister has discarded. This voice reaches him, but he cannot answer back. Its call is strong, nonetheless. A temptation, an offering, an invitation.

And this was where it happened. The Letters section. Missives from young girls, alienated, confused. He saw himself peeping quietly through a keyhole, into the meeting of a secret society. And then the words of one letter seemed to lift off the page, hovering, distinguished from the catalogue of teenage pain, one letter, in an instant a sacred text to him, draining him, body, world, emptied of light and warmth in an instant. A hiding spot exposed by a ruthless killer.

*Please help. I feel as though I’ve been born in the wrong body,* it began.

And possibility was revealed. A portal to an alternate universe, discovered behind a hidden door, down a secret passageway, buried in a garbage bin. An anteroom. (Fraser 2017, p120)
The Gender Artist – The Kunsterroman

Ultimately, what I discovered through the rewriting, and the re-rewriting, was that this wasn’t, or wasn’t only, a narrative about a transgender boy. That initial idea didn’t allow me the imaginative scope to explore what I ultimately discovered I was interested in – whether traditional, reductive notions of binary gender could be disposed of, or extrapolated, in a narrative space. Might my character, seeing as he is an artist in the story, be better described as a gender artist, rather than simplistically as transgender? Could I move beyond what was experienced in the world off the page, and explore different kinds of transformation, reinvigoration? Could I use the text as a disembodied space, an imaginative, limitless, liminal space, where the self could be regarded as one’s own personal artwork? Could gender and animal becomings operate as motifs for self artistry and transformation? And with the self as a continually renewing artwork, without a fixed end point?

I had come across the term Kunsterroman (a subgenre of the Bildungsroman): the artist’s novel, a work of fiction that depicts an artist’s growth to maturity (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998), and identified my prior readings of James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1992 [1916]) and Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye (1989) as being examples of the genre, as they both document the growth from adolescence, and the awakening, of two artists. While my narrative would not span the length of time perhaps traditional to the Kunsterroman, and it could be argued that Boy never reaches artistic maturity, I found the term helpful in classifying what may be operating in my work. I also had begun to think of the term gender artist, and together with the genre term, this defined what my work was about, beyond gender.

Boy is an artist, and his imagination runs wild; he sees beyond the immediate into beautiful possibilities. He is sensual, sees potential in the mundane, beautiful in the banal. ‘Boy’ as a term is artistically limiting, a restrictive gender expression – ‘Girl’ is a gateway into experiencing fully all that he wants to, in terms of exploring new ways of being, dress, makeup, an accepting attitude to the full feeling and display of deep emotion and sensitivity. But Boy idealises Girl; being her has its own problems. And throughout the narrative, she fights back against his idealisation of her, his appropriation of her being. She is his gender fantasy. A liberating concept for him, to escape ‘Boy’.
Imagine different circumstances. Two parts making a whole that they’d show off to the world. Lifting her dress over head in his bedroom, climbing into his bed. She ok being Girl, him ok being Boy. Bodies shifting in love beneath their skins. Girl his sanctuary. Dress pooled on the floor, he’d admire how it looks on her body, not once would he wonder what it would look like on him, what the fabric would feel like against his skin. Watching them from above, as if through some spyhole in the ceiling – no, he’d be there in the moment, in his skin, he would see only her. If only they had a normal love. (Fraser 2017, p193)

I thought back to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, musing that, if gender is a construct, an imagined idea, then gender could be reimagined, reappropriated, for the purpose of the narrative. Boy’s gender style could be becoming a swan, a butterfly – of course, this still presents a binary opposition.

But the narrative does not obey the conventions of realism. In this interior monologue, Boy can, if he chooses, fashion himself beyond traditional constraints. He fantasises, he steals images, steals beauty. Just as an artist would, as they shape their master work.

I thought of Pygmalion, based on the Greek mythological character, who appears in Ovid’s Metamorphosis (2002). Pygmalion, the sculptor, falls in love with the statue, Galatea, that he carves. And Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1965), where the eponymous science student creates a creature that is more powerful than his creator presumed, that yearns for love and acceptance, an autonomous life of his own. I saw parallels with these in my own work, as Boy effectively creates or conjures Girl, yet she becomes more real than he had hoped. She is powerful, and despite Boy originally creating her, Girl too creates him.

In the beginning of the narrative, where Boy after school glimpses Girl in the passing car, her stain is left on him – like a subliminal message, speaking to his imagination. He knows he must capture her image, commit it to the canvas.

Boy circles the canvas.

His bedroom, thick with the trapped heat of the day, the muddled oils swimming, gleaming, as if they perspire on a skin.
The pigments he has selected are too dark, nothing emerges, nothing reveals itself... So he layers, he scrapes away. Sometimes so afraid to approach the canvas, for fear he cannot bring to life what goes on inside. (Fraser 2017, p99)

Boy’s struggle is an artistic one. Despite the fact that Girl is born of his imagination, she begins to move through his world and he catches glimpses of her, in his own reality; he longs to bring his gender fantasy to life on the canvas. But whatever he paints is clumsy, a poor representation, a muddied mess of what glimmers in his mind.

As the story progresses, we see Boy continue to work on this dream portrait. We see him making headway with the artwork in Chapter 17:

Certain he’s got the face right. Closing his eyes tight, focussing, he can make her out, pause the moment when the car drove past, glimpse through the sunray in the bus. The sense of her, her mystery. Green eyed. Blondish hair. Beautiful mouth. It’s all there, emerging from the canvas. He’s captured it, fixed her in time. (Fraser 2017, p119)

Engaged in this slippery task, trying to achieve painted verisimilitude of what is his own creation, his own fantasy, he attempts to capture a girl glimpsed only in snatches, face blurred by light, by fast movement.

In Chapter 28, Boy is growing more confident in his task, believing ‘[h]e’s got her… Pinning her down. Pushing the sharp end of the pin into the centre of a butterfly’, believing he is capturing and containing this elusive image, this seductive being:

The painting is coming to life, there is movement, there is life in the colours and lines. The face is still unclear, but that’s ok, he thinks, there is mystery in her pose, sadness. You would ask yourself, who is this girl? he is certain. (Fraser 2017, p133)

But here Girl appears in a strange display of fighting back against Boy – Boy’s imagination working against itself. Girl, like Frankenstein’s creation, wants to live, doesn’t want to be owned or appropriated or possessed.

So what’s this supposed to be?
She’s sitting on the edge of his bed, legs crossed, her back arched as she leans back on her arms, head to the side, regarding him. He turns to look at her. Well, it could be you, if you’d hold still long enough. She laughs, turns her face from him. Your girl needs work. Crushing him, feet walking across a floor of dead dried up bee carcasses. (Fraser 2017, p133)

Girl punches tiny dents in Boy’s confidence, his certainty. As the narrative destabilises gender, as Boy loosens his own gender parameters, Girl is dissolving Boy too, as if she has taken control of him. In Chapter 50 he attempts to depict the man before him in his life drawing class: quietly absorbed in his work, Boy makes marks on the paper, building the foundations of a masculine body. But he fails.

When he surfaces, stands back to assess the work, he cannot believe what he’s done. The body he has drawn is unmistakably feminine. Going back under, shifting the lines, staring hard at the man’s body before him. He is failing. Try as he might, he cannot stop the body on the page becoming a woman’s. Soft edges defy him, curvature, breasts, a roll of flesh obscuring the pelvic region mocking him. She inhabits the page, ready to rise, all woman. (Fraser 2017, p165)

‘Show me, he says. Show me how to be you. Make me up. Paint me into existence’ (Fraser 2017, p169). Boy implores Girl. Not the other way around, not the Girl asking Boy, the artist, the creator, for instructions on how to exist, be ‘real’. She holds all the power, all the artistry.

In the final chapter, Girl paints him, creates him. “Now, she says, let me paint you.” With cosmetics, “[s]he begins to create him”:

Layering perfumed beige oils, crushed rose petals for his cheeks, makes a silhouette of his lips then fills in the blanks, scarlet, she ignites them… Brush bristles on eyelids, a warm finger, the sharp tip of a pencil. As if he were the canvas. His eyelashes being coaxed skyward, growing heavier. She begins on his eyebrows, plucking them from the root, but he makes no sound, no objection to the pain. He understands beauty as pain, always has, imagines the agony of a caterpillar’s skin bursting as it chrysalises. (Fraser 2017, p192)
The unifying theme in the narrative is ultimately the creative art process – the dreaming, the imagining, of the creation – then the process of attempting to bring it to life through acrylic, oil, foundation, blush, lipstick. All paint. Up until the end. Leaving ‘[a] carefully painted woman, sitting in a midnight bus shelter’ (Fraser 2017, p193).

5. POST-WRITING THEORY AND REFLECTION

After completing my novella, after its reediting and reimagining, I began to think about what I had actually accomplished, and what actually might be operating in the text. I began further reading, moving away from a gender-oriented focus, as the work I had produced wasn’t really investigating gender. Or certainly it wasn’t a traditional transgender narrative where, through the course of the narrative, the protagonist is conflicted by their gender, and then goes through steps, or an actual transformation, to realise their true gender identity, their ‘true self’. While the final product of my novella involves Boy’s gender dysphoria, he adopts the motif of animal becomings, namely flight creatures, swans, butterflies, in an attempt to flee, even if momentarily, his unwanted and uncomfortable boyness. Driving these thoughts was also: where does my work fit academically?

On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories – predator, twilight, edible – on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live. Becoming, Deleuze and Guattari called this flight: becoming animal… A becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is never evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward… (Nelson 2015, p66)

So Maggie Nelson describes the becoming-animal concept, in her memoir that reflects on an unconventional love story and parenthood, between her and her non-binary gender conforming partner.

In considering Nelson’s words, I think: might not boy and girl be placed in that need-to-categorise she speaks of? I.e., the categories that my character, Boy, longs, needs, to be free from. Does he not need a place, or a thought process, a
concept, in which to be transitive, to take flight in the way that Deleuze and Guattari describe, without actually becoming the girl, the swan, the butterfly, that he imagines?

Becoming-animal is ‘not a relation between two terms’, and is not a case of ‘a human being impersonating an animal’; rather, it is ‘a direct connection, where the self that contemplates is nothing other than the singularities it perceives’, to ‘perceive the animal [as if] one were perceiving “its” world’, to do away with a kind of fixity (Colebrook 2002, p155).

Becoming-animal, then, may best be described as a ‘movement’, in which ‘a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability’; in which this subject is ‘folded into a nomadic mode of existence’, constantly eluding and escaping definition in any form (Bruns 2007, Abstract). Becoming-animal does not literally describe an animal metamorphosis or transformation. It is a movement toward non-identity, where one ‘is a figure of unity and strength, while the other is in an interminable state of disarticulation or disfigurement’; a condition of freedom (Bruns 2007, Abstract).

Do not imitate a dog, but make your organism enter into composition with something else in such a way that the particles emitted from the aggregate thus composed will be canine as a function of the relation of movement and rest, or of molecular proximity, into which they enter. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p302)

If I were to replace ‘dog’ and ‘canine’ here, with ‘swan’ and ‘avian’, I can apply this theory to the themes within my novella. Within the world of the narrative on the molecular level of the imaginary, Boy, and all he interacts with and enters into composition with, does not merely imitate, swan. Rather, an aggregate is composed. The particles emitted from this act will be avian, swan-like, as a relation of this movement. In doing so, Boy does not participate in an ‘exercise in mimesis’ (Broglio 2011, p117); his becoming opens up ‘a flow of powers and relations’ in which he never actually becomes a swan, ‘rather, the environmental economy of relations is opened up so that he is able to pass through these states and attributes’; thus Boy is a kind of threshold, one which he can surpass in an ‘ongoing becoming’ (Broglio 2011, p117-118).

You become animal only molecularly. You do not become a barking molar dog, but by barking, if it is done with enough feeling, with enough necessity
and composition, you emit a molecular dog… It is within us that the animal bares its teeth … or the flower opens its petals; but this is done by corpuscular emission, by molecular proximity, and not by the imitation of a subject or a proportionality of form. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p303)

And this idea is ultimately what I am seeking to explore with my novella and research. Whether my character is necessarily transgender, whether that is the correct term, for one who feels ill at ease with their gender, yet without ‘becoming’ girl, or shaking off gender, he will always be perceived as performing some kind of gender act. At times in the narrative he takes imaginary flight, and it is cathartic for him to imagine himself as an animal. Though, in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept, he never actually transforms, or becomes a swan or butterfly. But to explore this idea, specifically in the space of a narrative, in the narrative context, it opens up a new way of being, and a potential escape for a reader, a way for a reader who experiences discomfort with their own gender to briefly become an animal, and shake off their physical selves.

[Proust’s] Albertine can always imitate a flower, but it is when she is sleeping and enters into composition with the particles of sleep that her beauty spot and the texture of her skin enters a relation of rest and movement that place her in the zone of a molecular vegetable: the becoming-plant of Albertine. And it is when she is held prisoner that she emits the particles of a bird. And it is when she flees, launches down a line of flight, that she becomes-horse… (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p303)

Deleuze and Guattari don’t believe that life is ‘composed of pre-given forms that simply evolve to become what they are’, because to them there is always ‘more than one line or tendency of becoming’, and as such, they believe it is ‘possible for intersections or encounters to produce unheard of lines of new becoming, or “lines of flight”’ (Colebrook 2002, p133). Our lives are limited when our becomings ‘through pre-given moral codes or norms’ are restricted. Our lives are enhanced by “mutating” or “varying” in as many ways possible, through a maximum of encounters’ (Colebrook 2002, p133). The reality of the becoming-animal doesn’t lie in the imitation of an animal, or to an animal with which one thinks they correspond, but in themself, ‘in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become – a proximity, an indiscernibility that extracts a shared element from the animal’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p307).
These concepts echo for me Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Even though the true definition of her idea is that we are trapped in the performance, that it is not a choice, might not then the becoming-animal, in the world on the page, free a character from the tired stagecraft of boyhood, or the various other gender limitations placed upon him. The becoming-animal concept – as applied specifically to the theme of my narrative, of Boy’s gender, or identity and selfhood – is a kind of art practice. Constantly evolving new lines of flight mutate and vary, this being a positive, powerful thing.

Boy, in *His Uncertain Skin*, therefore doesn’t take on particular characteristics of the creatures he is fascinated by, ‘becoming is not an exercise in mimesis’; a general economy is opened up, ‘a flow of powers and relations’ of assemblages and affiliations, so that Boy, as Broglio suggests, ‘could pass through these states and attributes’ (Broglio 2011, p117-118). Boy, the painter, as an artist, ‘has more of a sense of the fragility of fixed terms than we do in our mundane world’ (Broglio 2011, p119).

For the character in my novella, ‘[his] self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p275). The animal sounds that cause a clamour in his brain, the beating of wings, the snapping of beaks, ‘are moments of intensity – a circling of the sphere of various animals’, and what is truly real ‘is the becoming itself’, not the falsely perceived ‘fixed terms through which that which becomes passes’ (Broglio 2011, p119).

Whereas Girl fails for Boy as an imaginative concept, as a certain way that he could be secure in the world – where the character discovers he is not ‘transgender’, and I, the author, discovered I wasn’t writing a ‘transgender’ narrative – non human creatures do appeal to Boy’s artistic sensibility, not for anything they might represent per se, but for the way they offer ‘entirely different modes of becoming’, their flight capabilities, their ephemeral nature (in the case of butterflies), their aggression (in the case of swans), their non human beauty which appeals to Boy’s sensuality. Becoming-animal opens up ‘potential actions’, not mere symbolic representation; the concept ‘is a desire to expand or become-other through what is more than oneself …
it is another mode of perception of becoming’ which is exactly what my character yearns for (Colebrook 2002, p134-135).

Becoming-animal shows that becoming is not a series of actions directed towards some image that we hope to replicate; it is a transformation at each point of action with no external end. (Colebrook 2002, p135)

Colebrook cites the becoming example given in Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1994) – that of the swimmer, someone learning to swim, which could just as easily be someone learning to compose music, or learn about philosophy. To learn to swim, the instructor’s movements must be viewed as a creative response, and not self-contained action. You must not repeat the instructor’s arm movements, but repeat ‘the sense of the water or feel for the waves that produces [the instructor’s] arm movements’. Your arms would need to ‘feel the water and become in the way a swimmer’s arms become’. Assuming the instructor is male, and you are female, ‘this might mean that a faithful repetition of his swimming might require slightly different arm movements’. You would have to ‘feel what good swimming does, not what it is’. Feeling how ‘the swimmer acts’ rather than just copying the movements (Colebrook 2002, p135-136).

Boy watches the swans that circle on the ceiling, preening, lying in wait for him, in one of the novella’s beginning chapters – seeing the swarm of swans as creative response, repeating the sense of having their wings, as they move through air. Because he has a Boy body, this greatest of encumbrances, he is required to do as faithful a repetition as he can, as he sadly lacks feathers, wings, flight capabilities. This becoming is ‘not bounded by what has already become or is actualised, but [is] … spurred on by perceiving the virtual powers that are expressed in actions’ (Colebrook 2002, p136).

Becoming-animal is not, then, attaining the state of what the animal means; … nor is it becoming what the animal is. It is not behaving like an animal. Becoming-animal is a feel for the animal’s movements, perceptions and becomings; imagine seeing the world as if one were a [swan, or a butterfly]. (Colebrook 2002, p136)

True becoming ‘does not have an end outside itself’, and becoming-animal is not about impersonation or being, but rather ‘changing and varying in inhuman (animal)
ways’, without a ‘pre-given purpose or goal’. Thwarting the tradition of ‘man’ as some kind of ‘end goal of life’, that we act out ‘in order to fulfil our humanity’, Deleuze through becoming ‘insists that we value action and becoming itself, freed from any human norm or end’ (Colebrook 2002, p145).

In bringing these ideas back to literature though, and in how I see my work operating and being received, I relate further to Colebrook’s proposal that ‘literature can be read for what it produces, for its transformations’ (Colebrook 2002, p137). As opposed to attempting to interpret animals in literature as symbolic, and searching for their meaning within the text, the reader can see the animal ‘as a possible opening for new styles of perception’ (p137). Becoming-animal then, would be suggestive of a literary tendency ‘of rending perception open to what is not itself’ (Colebrook 2002, p137); this involves a literature that does not attempt, or wish to be read as, expressing some kind of meaning, but rather the ‘production of sense, allowing new perceptions and new worlds’ (Colebrook 2002, p137). Instead of the creatures in my novella being solely capable of interpretation as metaphor, symbol, allegory – the reader, loosening the borders of their gender identity, may perceive new ways of being, new worlds, through the use of animals, as Boy does with swans and butterflies.

Deleuze and Guattari see Franz Kafka’s Metamorphosis (2006 [1915]) as an example of becoming-animal in its ability to perceive differently, to not see Gregor and his overnight transformation to a man-sized bug as merely symbolic in the traditional literary sense, but for readers’ perceptions to be drawn away from their human forms. They see Kafka’s texts on the whole as ‘[producing] doorways, passages, animal movements and images … with no law or fulfilment lying behind them’; Kafka’s writing produces ‘new intensities’, the bug that Gregor becomes doesn’t necessarily mean anything, rather, it produces ‘new styles of perception’ (Colebrook 2002, p138).

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone. (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p13)
Kafka’s Gregor-bug corresponds ‘solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities’, where the animal is freed from its forms and expressions, there is only now movement (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p13). Gregor, according to Deleuze and Guattari, becomes a bug not to escape his father, but to find an escape where his father doesn’t know to find one; Gregor ‘becomes other’, altering his situation, ‘undoing codes and deterritorialising coordinates in order to open a line of flight’ (Bogue, in ed. Stivale 2011, p136).

*Man* and *animal* are linguistic subjects only within a properly established language. Once a “minor literature” begins dismantling the common-sense ground on which meaning is established, *man* and *animal* become fragile signifiers that may run astray or “deterritorialize”. They become available for [reinterpretation]. (Broglio 2011, p107)

Similar to Boy who, to escape his gender dysphoria, his discomfort with being Boy, escapes by finding a route where no one else would think to look – in becoming-swan, becoming-bird; becoming-animal … this new line of flight:

> “Man” is produced from social roles; and such social investments have to be created in collective spectacle: in everything from … [and to] popular literature. This means that literature is *productive*, not representative … has the power to mobilise desire, to create new pre-personal investments, and enables thought and affects that extend beyond the human. Literature is the power of becoming beyond any already given “image or thought” or any rule of art. (Colebrook 2002, p145)

The passage goes on to describe literature not as a ‘vehicle for veiling and representing unconscious and timeless dramas’ but instead as a place for producing ‘new dramas and intensities’; literature is not simply ‘reducible to the story and explanation of man’, it has the power and ability to move beyond man (Colebrook 2002, p145).

I did not want my novella to replicate a linear narrative, striving for verisimilitude, in telling the story of a Boy from a believable reality, struggling with gender. My aim was for the narrative to open up new possibilities, new lines of flight: to get beyond a human struggle with a resolution or conclusion that could be neatly described at the end of the book. Deleuze states that ‘true becoming does not have an end outside itself’, and becoming-animal suggests ‘changing and varying in inhuman
(animal) ways’ without necessarily an end goal in mind (Colebrook 2002, p145). Boy’s catharsis is his ability to become animal in the way proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. He does not ‘transform’ before the readers’ eyes in the story; he does not successfully ‘become’ or live as Girl.

“Man”, traditionally, has always represented an end or goal of life, such that we act in order to fulfil our humanity. By contrast, Deleuze insists that we value action and becoming itself, freed from any human norm or end… [In literature] we no longer see language as the representation of some underlying human norm, but as the creation and exploration of new styles of perception and becoming. (Colebrook 2002, p145)

At the time of writing this novella, it seemed I was becoming curious about a topic that many other writers were curious about, too. It seemed that this moment was the point where other novels were being published, or written, about a transgender character. This too was a reason for me not to approach the subject in a literal way: I did not want to write a narrative based in reality, or to strictly negotiate how a character who is hiding their true gender identity copes in the world. I didn’t want to write a story complete with happy, or at least resolved, ending. I did not see reality that way.

Two novels published during my candidature, which featured transgender protagonists, were Kim Fu’s For Today I Am A Boy (2014) and Lisa Williamson’s The Art of Being Normal (2015), marketed as Young Adult Fiction. The biographies of the authors indicate that, like me, neither identifies as transgender. Fu came to writing her novel through her psychology studies, in particular researching the outcomes of people who had undergone sex reassignment surgery, and whether they were happy or unhappy with their decision. Williamson states that during a temporary job placement at a Gender Identity Development Service in the United Kingdom, she heard stories from young people that inspired her to write a fictional account of their issues.

Both are realist narratives. Fu’s protagonist Peter has known for a long time he is a girl, though he lives with a father who has an oppressive idea of what masculinity is and how Peter should embody it. In the first grade, when asked what he wants to be when he grows up, he draws himself as ‘a Mommy’ (Fu 2014, p3), conjuring images
of all the mothers he’s seen in magazines, in poses of domestic servitude. He pleads to one of his sisters, ‘I want to be like you… I want to have hair like you. I want to be pretty like you’ (Fu 2014, p11), but he is sharply rebuked by her, reminded that he is, undeniably, irrevocably, a boy.

He watches women at a nightclub, pondering in a poetic passage in the text: ‘What would turn me into them? Could I peel it all off their faces and bodies with a paint trowel and spread it over my surface?’ (Fu 2014, p113). During sex, he closes his eyes to the light, and imagines the woman’s breasts are his own, trying to dissociate from his own anatomy, to merge, to become, hers.

Having come to this novel after writing my own, I was surprised to find similarities between my work and Fu’s: for example, Peter buying a pair of women’s shoes, and lying to the shop assistant, claiming they are for his girlfriend; Peter getting ready for a costume party, with friends adorning him in makeup, a wig, a tiara. He revels in the sensuality of it, the sensory details of how the dress feels against his skin, the satin gloves on his hands, ‘my spidery eyelashes, the weight of the hair and the jewellery. I loved the sound of the gown’s train swishing behind me. It felt like something restored: a tail cut off and regrown’ (Fu 2014, p227).

In the reading of trans stories prior to writing my own work, what distinguished a narrative trope being trite or cliché for me was the fact that these kind of events, or markers, were prevalent in many of the stories I read: hyper-masculine, bullying fathers; a taste for sensory details, beauty; a sensitive disposition. Fathers, perhaps, having had fathers themselves who strictly dictated to them how they should act, what being a man in the world should mean, and look like. What the culture said, the weight and the burden this would be, on someone who already feels alienated, and who feels they don’t fit into society, or into themselves.

Fu ends her novel with an image – four sisters, together, drinking in a pub, not three and a brother – where Peter is one of them, now Audrey.

Williamson’s YA novel The Art of Being Normal is, like my His Uncertain Skin, set in a high school environment, a place of enormous pressure where fitting in,
or as the title suggests ‘being normal’ is paramount, an art that must be mastered and maintained. The narrative switches between David, a boy who longs to be a girl and Leo, an enigmatic boy who, seemingly, possesses ‘a secret’. This longing of David’s, or this latent belief in his true girlhood, was present from childhood. Chapter I describes David being asked in primary school what he wanted to be when he grew up; he wrote that he wanted to be a girl. This is similar to Fu’s protagonist in an almost identical scenario, voicing childhood ambitions of becoming woman or womanly in adulthood – unlike the other students in David’s class who were penning dreams of ‘real’ vocations.

As with descriptions I had read in transgender teen stories on internet message boards, and as Boy does in my novella, Williamson’s David has a ritualistic inspection of his body, comparing his frame to that of his mother, wishing he too were not hard chested, straight up and down in shape. He especially despises his hands and feet, but not more so than his penis, which Williamson frankly depicts:

I move downward to my penis, which I hate with a passion. I hate everything about it: its size, its colour, the way I can always feel it just hanging there, the way it has a complete mind of its own. I discover it has grown an entire two millimetres since last week. I check it twice, but the tape measure doesn’t lie. I frown and write it down. (Williamson 2016, p11)

This measuring of the penis is perhaps a wry, yet authentic, parody of how a cisgendered adolescent boy will measure his own penis, glorying in any seismic changes, unlike a trans teen like David, who might experience revulsion. It is important to note that I didn’t find a consistency in penis-hate in trans teens with male genitals who shared their stories online, but it is certainly an idea that has been adopted as gospel when writing about them, and I chose to use this same idea in my own writing, yet interrogating it poetically. Also, Boy’s penis- or body-hatred corresponds with my ultimate idea of his greater becoming, beyond a change in gender or sex – a leaving of the body which he finds, at a basic level, as an artist, to be aesthetically dissatisfying.

There were further thematic or plot parallels between Williamson’s story and my own. A group of boys at school regard David as a freak, dubbing him ‘Freak Show’. There is a moment in the story where David is looking down at two babies in
a pram, a boy and a girl, noting the girl dressed all in pink, the boy in denim dungarees with a tractor embroidered on the pocket. He thinks: ‘I bet already his parents assume he’s going to be a typical boy; that his favourite colour will be blue … that he’ll play football … like cars and trucks’ (Williamson 2016, p134). Williamson comments through her character about gender stereotypes already ingrained in infancy, how parents probably hope their sons and daughters will be ‘typical’ of their gendered expectations. These are ideas I probed and questioned in my own work. When David’s younger sister starts menstruating, he feels acutely dismayed, alienated from his true femininity, as does Boy with his sister in my work.

Because Williamson’s story is set in present day, real time, David watches videos on YouTube about trans teens, in particular one about an American gravelly-voiced teen with stubble on his chin who wears a chest binder to flatten down his breasts, waiting for the day when he can have surgery to remove them (Williamson 2016, p158). Here David notes how ‘frustrating [it is] to think that beneath the binder he has exactly what I want, and that all the things I hate about my body, he’d swap in a heartbeat’ (Williamson 2016, p158) – again, an idea in keeping with the belief that all trans people dislike their genitals and want to be rid of them, something I didn’t want to overtly confirm in my narrative.

It is revealed later in Williamson’s book that Leo – the enigmatic boy – is actually trans himself, and is now living and passing as a girl. The author has the two characters discuss hormonal treatments – an area, combined with the use of technology, I didn’t want to explore in my own work. My reasons being, as stated earlier, that I wanted to make Boy seem more isolated in his confusion and alienation, but also because I wanted my creative work to focus on an imagined realm, where Boy might experience a true becoming outside the parameters of reality. A space further removed than where he might literally ‘become’ or transition to a girl, or literally fashion his body, through drugs, for example, to pass as a woman.

While my character very clearly experiences gender dysphoria, setting my work in a fictional narrative space with the idea of gender as a kind of artistic practice at its centre – with the possibility of different escapes or becomings accessible to Boy to
free himself from his boyhood – allowed me to avoid too many transgender tropes, or even clichés.

The reading of Fu and Williamson’s novels, both of which garnered critical success, further encouraged me to alter the vision of my narrative to take place in a highly fictionalised space. Although Boy suffers similar pains and anguishes to Fu and Williamson’s characters, his trajectory throughout the text, and his options of becoming, aren’t limited to apparent reality: i.e. to transition to Girl, or to stay the same. This is how I wanted my story to be set apart from similar works being published. I didn’t want my story to have a happy ending, or rather, a conclusion based on Boy’s ‘realistic’ transitioning. And it gave me the opportunity to use Girl as a character in her own right, who rails against Boy’s (innocent and unintentional) objectification of her which is a projection of his own narrow ideas of girls and womanhood, making his idea of Girl just as narrow and limiting as he perceives his Boy gender to be.

More so than these two ‘transgender’ novels, my work perhaps has more in common with Kafka’s Metamorphosis – especially Gregor’s realisation in the story that it seems he can be emotionally comfortable, or physically comfortable, but not both at the same time. Boy at the beginning of my story passes, is acceptable to those around him, as a teenage boy, yet emotionally, he is in despair. He clings to the paintings on the wall of women he has painted, captured, like Gregor clings to his picture of the woman in furs. To find release in his becomings, in his becoming-animal, he may attain emotional comfort, and maybe even physical comfort, though this is not something I was willing to make a claim on in my narrative. My story ends with Boy potentially vanishing into another, into another made up life, that of a painting, yet he risks losing his humanity, all of the material possessions and people he has known. Similar to Gregor in Kafka’s story, His Uncertain Skin ends with Boy falling, though the where, how, and if he lands is more ambiguous.

I discovered the idea of being against definitive conclusions, endings of ‘transformation’, in Amy Prodromou’s paper on ‘textured recovery’, which is her definition of a sub-genre of grief memoirs that deal with a space between what is
typically found in memoirs – absolute recovery or irretrievable loss. The author instead wanted to explore the complexity of grief, the shifting and ambiguous nature of the recovered self.

Prodromou defines loss in her paper as ‘to be deprived of a vital element necessary to the understanding and performance of a self’ and furthermore, in quoting Paul John Eakin, this vital element being a stabilising force, the loss of which ‘threatens to violate or negate the self, undermining popular theories of the autobiographical process as engendering a stable and continuous self’ (Prodromou 2012, p58). Prodromou states that memoirs of textured recovery are unlike ‘conversions narratives’ which, as defined by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘are structured around a radical transformation from a faulty ‘before’ self to an enlightened ‘after self’ (Prodromou 2012, p58). She wants to think about a sub-genre of writing that doesn’t place emphasis on recovery, where the story doesn’t necessarily have to have the happy, resolved ending which many stories of grief and loss gravitate to.

While Williamson and Fu’s novels are not memoirs, and neither is my creative work, Prodromou’s ideas strengthened my own convictions in not writing a narrative about a traditional transformation, or another transgender novel with a semi-happy ending with a sense of resolution. I wanted Boy to have a complexity about him, despite being a character on the page capable of more, and perhaps being incapable of simply moving from one state to the other in a narrative arc, like Smith and Watson’s description of the faulty self moving to the enlightened, or improved, after self. Consistent with the theory of becoming-animal, Boy doesn’t literally transform, or become an animal, in his quest for a happy ending or sense of resolve; he inhabits a space in between, a different kind of becoming, of possibility.

Memoirs of textured recovery ‘in refusing to dictate prescriptive definitions of loss, offer readers more possibility of community in identifying with an experience of loss that is not didactic, but purposely open ended’ (Prodromou 2012, p72). This too was a key concept for me in writing my creative work: that it not be a limited story of transgender narrative with an ‘improvement’ theme, but that it be, just the same,
informative and engaging, and that it open up a possibility that anyone struggling with issues of self might identify with it.

To support this idea of how a reader might respond to my work and its themes, I found Kaufman and Libby’s 2012 psychological study on how narrative is received by readers highly relevant. This work studies the concept of experience-taking, which is defined as ‘the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative’, and not only ‘putting on’ the character’s identity, but furthermore ‘simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviours, goals, and traits as if they were one’s own’ (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). It suggests that an ‘experiential merger’ occurs between reader and the protagonist of the narrative they are immersed in. The researchers also discovered that readers who experienced a high level of experience-taking would then incorporate some of the character’s personality traits into their self-concepts.

It is probably the hope of many writers that their work will be received this way, that their ideal reader will be one who is fully immersed in the narrative world they have constructed, and without the author being formally didactic, have the reader lose themselves and assume, even temporarily, the entity of their character, as though they were that character. Kaufman and Libby go on to define experience-taking as ‘completely transcend[ing] self-other boundaries to become the other’, and for the reader to spontaneously replace themselves with another (Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

This research shows that writing can have a powerful effect beyond being enjoyed or appreciated as a written art form, and has the potential to merge with a reader, influence them, change them. If my work were potentially able to do this, I imagine the twofold effect of Boy, within the narrative world, experiencing Deleuze’s becoming-animal, and then, the reader, re-entering the world after putting the work down, and being able to merge and blend with Boy in this becoming. The reader then too may be able to experience a kind of escape or becoming of their own, freed of their own gender constraints, or human constraints, as it were. My work, viewed through the research undertaken in this study, could be a conduit for a reader’s own becoming. Boy is an artist and wants his being to be a work of art, wants to live in the
world as a kind of gender artist and beyond. Kaufman and Libby’s study, combined with the concept of becoming-animal, suggests that ‘[b]ecoming-animal is a human being’s creative opportunity to think themselves other-than-in-identity’ (Baker 2000, p125) through a piece of writing.

Steve Baker, in his book *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), explores how animal imagery used in art and literature shapes ideas about creativity. He posits that for Deleuze and Guattari, ‘what becoming-animal does is close to what art does’ as certain things happen to the human in becoming-animal: the becoming-animal leaves the human traversed, swept away, and the becoming-animal reality then resides in that which has swept the human up, made them become (Baker 2000, p138).

To be ‘swept up, swept away, suddenly, unexpectedly, with which the human nevertheless goes along, as if willingly’ (Baker 2000, p138) by art, seems to me like the experience-taking merger that Kaufman and Libby identified as a possibility when a reader comes to a piece of narrative fiction.

Art is a means of getting to the animal, getting to asignification, getting beyond meaning, by means of “sweeping”, “blazing”, “becoming”. The various arts “have no other aim” than to “unleash” becomings. Art, it seems, consists in letting fearsome things fly. (Baker 2000, p138)

This idea of the sweeping away, the merge, the becoming, comes full circle when the role of the writer herself is brought into the equation. Baker goes on to quote Hélène Cixous who seems to describe the same feeling, this wild ‘selfconsciousness-erasing force … which unexpectedly launches the writer into writing’ (Baker 2000, p139):

Because it was so strong and furious, I loved and feared this breath. To be lifted up one morning, snatched off the ground, swung in the air. To be taken by surprise. To find in myself the possibility of the unexpected. To fall asleep a mouse and wake up an eagle! What delight! What terror. And I had nothing to do with it… (Cixous 1991, p10-11)

This suggests too that artists, or writers, cannot remain detached from their own work, but are themselves ‘caught up in the lines of flight their work initiates’ (Baker 2000, p139).
To think of ourselves as human animals, to remember, perhaps, our animal
sense, involves us in an escape from cultural constraints. For example, gender, like
becoming-animal, may be freeing and enlightening within the imagined world of the
narrative, and beyond the page: ‘Many of our inherited concepts (our ready
definitions and explanations) serve to isolate our intelligence from the intimacy of our
creaturely encounter with the strangeness of things’ (Abram 2010, p8).

David Abram’s Becoming Animal (2010) posits that we’ve become cut off
from ‘the necessary nourishment of contact and interchange with other shapes of life’,
from animal beings, beings who live beyond the calculated and controlled, ‘antlered
and loop-tailed and amber-eyed beings whose resplendent weirdness loosens our
imaginations’ (Abram 2010, p7). To me he is saying that we become so accustomed
to defining the limits of our being – so tightly controlled and defined are our ideas of
what it is to be human, man, woman (with not very much in between) – we forget the
potentialities and possibilities inherent if we were to loosen our edges, our thinking,
even just a little. It is, according to Abram, a mistake to ‘think of our flesh as a fixed
and finite form’; he says that our bodies are ‘precisely our capacity for
metamorphosis’ (Abram 2010, p229). Our bodies are not ‘self-enclosed sack[s]’, but
rather, ‘realms wherein the diverse textures and colours of the world meet up with
another’, where all things forge ‘alliances, merges, and metamorphoses’ (Abram
2010, p229). The body is a fluid, unfixed place that is a prime site for creativity, or
shapeshifting.

Abram goes on to discuss specifically the effect art can have on us, how
certain films, or books, can encroach into our being, mingling with our ‘reality’,
altering us. To be ‘drawn, psychologically, into the terrain of certain stories –
abducted into another landscape … only belatedly [being released] back into the
palpable present’ (Abram 2010, p231) – seems to echo the Kaufman and Libby study
on experience-taking in reading narrative fiction … that we can forget ourselves when
absorbed in particular stories, and be changed by them.

…When I finished reading a fat, nineteenth-century novel … placing it
carefully back on the bookshelf … [the transition was that] present-day
objects, like the disposal unit loudly masticating scraps beneath the drain in
the kitchen sink, and a bus wheezing by on the street, all struck me as
ludicrous anachronisms, unreal apparitions beamed in from another planet. (Abram 2010, p231)

The power of that written world was such that Abram’s everyday ‘reality’ became the seemingly imagined, even ridiculous, one. Its plausibility seemed thinner and less convincing than the nineteenth-century landscape and plot he had left behind, ‘[t]he pattern of printed words in that novel had rearranged my neurons: time itself was out of joint’ (Abram 2010, p231).

To read a compelling piece of fiction, especially one exploring the constraints, limits, and possibilities of gender, may allow a reader to forget or reimagine their own limited way of being ‘boy’ or ‘girl’. Of course, there is no guarantee that my novella, or any piece of literature, will always have this effect on a reader. But the idea that it is a possibility, that at the very least it offers some kind of proven way to play with and reimagine gender, our limits, our becomings, is a powerful and exciting idea in my research and writing.

In keeping with this idea, I found the concept of Somaesthetics also to be relevant, and complementary to the idea of narrative expanding our concepts of being off the page. Somaesthetics, ‘[concerning] the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation … and creative self-fashioning’ (Shusterman 2012, p27), recognises body, mind and culture as deeply co-dependent, each having a deep effect on the other. I see this as important, since whatever effect reading certain themes in literature has on the mind, must suggest that this effect flows through to the body – how we move, present ourselves, be in life. Reading about a character who lives very differently, and believes things very far from our own beliefs, has the ability to have a transformative effect – on mind and body, and how culture is seen as a whole, each feeding off the other. This reading could potentially change how our bodies are experienced, perhaps differently to how culture dictates to us, ‘whether as a holy vessel or a burden of sinful flesh; a pampered personal possession for private pleasure or a vehicle of labour to serve the social good’ (Shusterman 2012, p27). To enact a newly inspired creative self-fashioning of the body and mind, as my narrative does in introducing the concept of a ‘gender style’ through Boy’s ‘gender artistry’, could suggest different ways of being transferred through reading.
Further to this thinking and these concepts, I find that Derrida’s theory of différance is applicable, both within the narrative realm in Boy’s shifting, non-binary gender revolution, and also within the reader reading and interpreting the work and having the work reinvent them.

Derrida thought that sexual identities ‘are characterized by différance and undecidability’, as the ‘spacing/timing of différance undoes the difference of binary or identity’ (Tyler 2003, p156). Derrida coined this term to suggest both the idea of differing … and deferring… Différance deconstructs the structuralist opposition between synchrony (structure and meaning as static) and diachrony (structure and meaning as changing through time) … [ensuring] the signifier “plays” in a potentially endless “game” of substitution or displacement, [each signifier] bearing the trace of the others without … fixing a final signified: a meaning, truth, name, or identity. (Tyler 2003, p156)

I take this to mean – similar in a way to Schrodinger’s cat – that something can be something and nothing at the same time, to potentially be both, to be absent, yet present. Since this theory allows us to be unfixed, moving, evolving, becoming, différance ‘shatters the cult of identity and the dominance of Self over Other’: it means ‘to displace, shift, or elude’ and ‘is the future in progress (the fight against frozen meanings’ (Cossette & Guillemette 2006).

I wanted to write a narrative that challenged, destabilised or displaced traditional ideas of gender – what it looked like, what its limits were – to create a character which I hoped would embody these defining principles of différance. I wanted to shatter Boy’s boy identity, to displace gender norms, and to suggest a vision of the future in progress, against certainty and fixed meanings. Combined with the aforementioned concepts, this too could have an impact and effect on the reader, beyond what happens to my character in the text. There can be multiple kinds of transformation, not just a movement from one state to another.
In returning to narrative, to the novel that was a key text for this research – Woolf’s *Orlando* – I consider how the ideas I have proposed might function from the point of view of a reader coming away from Woolf’s narrative.

Melanie Taylor says that in ‘*Orlando* fantasy makes possible a privileging of a particular concept of identity over traditional polar models of sex and gender’ and that ‘Orlando exists in a literary realm where anything can happen’, whereas ‘in everyday life, gender must be embodied in certain ways if it is to signify’ and cannot ‘simply be changed as though it were a mere costume’ (Taylor 2000, p214-215). While this is undoubtedly true, judging by my own research, it seems there can be another space. Even though it could be said that in my narrative anything is possible because it is a realm of fantasy, an imagined space, I still did not aim for verisimilitude to ‘reality’. The reader can then potentially engage in a becoming, an unfixing, through the act of reading, or even after putting the work down.

Taylor goes on to say that ‘whilst there is a degree of essentialism suggested in the process by which Orlando “becomes a woman”’, despite or because of this, ‘at the same time a space is opened up for that construction of femininity to be examined’ as was also my aim for my creative work – that it should, at its basic level, open up a space to examine the construction or flimsiness of gender, ‘the efficacy of a binary model of sex and gender construction … exposing the basic frailties of its structure’ as a ‘creative [act] of resistance’ (Taylor 2000, p215). And, like Woolf, I sought to do so in a ‘playful and imaginative inversion’ of gender rules (Taylor 2000, p215).

In *Orlando*, Woolf’s personal thoughts seem present in the text, ‘a sense in which Woolf’s personal frustrations at the limitations and constraints imposed by gender are exercised and at least temporarily exorcised through this process’ (Taylor 2000, p215). Taylor quotes from Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography*: ‘But what is “oneself”? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is?’ (Woolf 1958, p46). These questions lingered over me; they prompted the writing of my novella and this body of research; and they plague Boy throughout *His Uncertain Skin*. Or if oneself is what one writes, as Taylor playfully enquires, what might I have become during the writing of my novella, taking into account the aforementioned proposed ideas?
I have found that oneself can be, can exist, beyond definitions, beyond gender, unfixed, becoming, the site of their own blending with the world, their self as art, their own creative fashioning and constant becoming, like art that is abandoned to movement and change, not finished.

CONCLUSION

Despite my creative interests beginning in what I thought was a curiosity about writing a ‘transgender’ narrative, a story influenced by my friend’s own transition, and at the beginning of the research, immersing myself in gender theory, through the writing of the novella, I was taken in directions I couldn’t have predicted or foreseen.

In consequence, I found it useful to focus on theory that returned to the function of the story, not the content – since ultimately, after much revision, a narrative revealed itself which had a gender dysphoria theme, yet this wasn’t the major point of the story. The narrative directed itself towards viewing gender as a kind of style or artistry, which could be creatively explored by moving beyond binaries, to become, or experiment with, something unheard of – looking to animals and their ways of being as potential sites of becoming; reading the narrative as a transitive space of becoming, and having it produce, or transform, the reader in similar ways…

…and that this might be an ongoing, evolving process. Just like my character, Boy, doesn’t have a neat ending in His Uncertain Skin, doesn’t definitively become anything, so too might the reader, through a lifetime of reading books, constantly morph and change a little, inhabit some alternate space, and find new ways of being that aren’t limiting or narrowly defined…
NOVELLA

HIS UNCERTAIN SKIN

I rose—because He sank—
I thought it would be opposite—
But when his power dropped—
My Soul grew straight.

-- Emily Dickinson
It’s as if one, clear, high note is ringing right through the night, through these streets that smell of spring’s slow decay, petals of flowers yellowing, cooked by the warming days, through these streets where cars and dogs sleep, slowly relinquishing their heat from the day. This one note, guiding him through the dark, and he’s thinking how the night makes anything seem possible, that feeling, it just comes on right as night begins to fall, as he’s in the youth of the nighttime ahead, and he allows himself a smile as he watches his sexless shadow fracture and lengthen and bloom, then merge with it all.

And it’s like he already knows exactly how it will all unfold, tonight, the tomorrows, but maybe this strange certainty is born of being young, deeply afraid, and wanting to follow this one clear note on and on, like a humble, mindless vocation that will offer some deep reward for the spirit, not the flesh. Just a being, not a boy, following a call. Just a being, not a Boy, climbing the back stairs of a house, entering through an open door which leads to many strange rooms, where the bodies of his school peers mass and surge, their skins pale pure white in the blue lights, pure, as they grow intoxicated and fumble towards desire, without giving any thought to the tomorrows. Boys in pastel coloured tuxedos stained with the light, girls in rustling chiffon dresses, hems flaring out as they spin and twirl, like an orgy of spring flowers, reveling in their last night of life.

The clear note rings through this house, it’s the backbone, the beat of the music that plays, familiar as a childhood nursery rhyme, lyrics yearning for love mingling with cigarette smoke, the smell of spilt beer, girls’ vanilla perfume. How innocent his hands had looked, with their birdlike wrists, soft, newer than the rest of him, as he observed them earlier, sitting on his bed, straining to quell their shaking as he conjured happy thoughts. Girls. Girls would be here, he’d known, the focus of any party, the top of the celebratory hierarchy. They swan along, through and around, and into his heart, and he’s never sure if it’s love or envy. He’s a student of them, that’s why he comes to these things. Stays sober, not drenching his veils, letting them unfurl.

Soft hands slip a plastic mask over his face, the elastic messing up the hair he so carefully constructed, but he doesn’t mind too much, doesn’t even mind that he doesn’t know what he’s become.
All of these young bodies, he thinks, a spectator in his new skin, watching the party as if through smoke, teenagers dancing in a suburban living room, these bodies who won’t remember me in the years to come, or if they do, they’ll know just about as much as what they see now, a guy in a cheap mask.

Hey! I’m here, everybody! I’ve arrived! he shouts, though no one hears, they don’t even see his lips move.

This sentence just comes into his head and it repeats over and over like an otherworldly refrain, *I’m breaking into bloom, I’m breaking into bloom, I’m breaking into bloom, I’m the blooming boy.*

Oonce oonce oonce goes the clear note, making all surfaces and skins vibrate with it, there are no lines between things, where you end and I begin, nothing is clear or defined, we all blend, and there is a girl staring at him now, across the room. She’s swaying, a voice says *she is seducing you,* he considers approaching her, but he’s just a boy shape on her radar, and he doesn’t know the appropriate response, to even entertain for a second the sequence of events gleaned from the movies, boy and girl disappear into a bedroom, remove their clothes, press their lips together, lights-sparks-magic, he knows nothing would happen, she might take it personally, they might weep together, which sounds more appealing to him.

No, he can only maintain a very loose interpretation of *a teenage boy at a party,* though to all appearances he must behave as one, others depend on it, he must be strong, some kind of protector,* man of the house,* but he can’t help swaying a little to the music, its rhythm undoing him, he’s sure he looks girlish, his small wrists twirling by his sides in the dark.

He makes a move towards the kitchen, when a cat runs past him and through the door, he sees its escape, jump from a window.

And then she’s there. Girls.

Swiftly, walking tall and proud, as if in the wake of the cat, and he follows her, this girl, she’s in the world, each gesture flows smoothly to the next, he comes through the door in time to see her pick up a wine glass from the sink, rinse it, move to the fridge and reach up, calf muscles exposing themselves, as her hand retrieves a bottle of wine.

Hair across her face. She is swan necked, she shines. Dress so deep red in colour that most would mistake it for black.
He hears whispering behind him, *that’s her, the one that’s breaking the drama teacher’s heart.*

And it’s as if he’s dreaming in reverse, like he’s woken to an unreality, one already half lived inside and just keeping time, waiting to run in sync with reality.

It seems as though whole songs, whole albums are played through to their end before he reaches her.

She’s on the balcony, elbows rest on the railing, leaning into the night.

I know you from somewhere, he says.

She turns. Observes him without expression. Then laughs, turning away.

No, I mean it. You were on the bus. You had a bee in your hair.

Oh, she says. Well, things are always getting caught in it.

He senses that, when she took her glass outside to the balcony, that was when the party really began for her. Girl in her deep red dress, a nod to lust, a poem whose author no one at the party had read, or cared to.

The air swims around him. The one clear high note remains. It seems to have grown more shrill, more insistent, the music has begun to hurt his ears.

So you do drama?

Yeah, she says. I can slip in and out of worlds…

But coming here, she goes on, sighing, is well out of character for me.

He gropes for something else to say, something to engage her, impress her.

So you pretend? he laughs, I know what that’s like.

When she doesn’t respond, he tries, I’d love to paint you sometime. Oh no. Terrible. Desperate. He feels he’s losing her.

She’s rapping the knuckles of one hand softly on the railing, in time to the beat of the music. Turns again, looks right at him, and it’s his face, his face on her body in the deep deep red dress, looking right at him, and it feels like dying.

I can be any girl you want me to be.
Boy, boy, boy.

He’s stepped up, he’s committed himself.
Bare feet on cold bathroom tiles, not helping his cause.
He’s home alone, the light is just right, early morning sun filtering softly through the open window to his right, slicing him in two, half in light, half in shadow. He came to the mirror as though to something sleeping, as if by waking it violently, some dreadful image of himself would be reflected back at him.

His eyes meet the line of white tiles just beneath the mirror’s frame. He extends his hand, his right, the dominant hand, the hand that commands pens, door handles, paint brushes, the hand that strays to the nape of his neck as if gently holding down his head, as he passes through life, past people.

Boy, boy, boy.

He notices the webbing of his fingers glowing, softly golden, translucent in the light.

The right hand, that has volunteered itself so willingly, he admires it, its audacity, the way it defies his will, the ease with which it now recruits the left, the way in which both thumbs hook themselves beneath the elastic of his shorts and then, arms rising to the occasion, push the shorts down, until the elastic contracts when there is no more of him left to slide past and they fall softly to the floor.

Boy. Something shifting at the mirror’s edge. The long neck of a bird, as if revealed through long grass parted, a swan at the edge of a vast body of water, cautious, yet ready to rise, to glide. And the sun is getting higher in the sky and he’s coming into full view now, the shadows shifting past him, he’s coming into view through the rent in the dark silk he has been stitching between control and submission.

Boy, he is, he’s all boy, swan’s neck soft like the dark silk, he can handle this, he thinks, just when it’s like this, a handful of something soft and warm, swan down, sleeping snow white creature, but his blood sings, this nausea, the beat fills his head, he is opening the palm of his left hand, he purses his lips, a kiss pushing a long trail of spit down into his palm. He transfers this moisture tenderly. Penis, he thinks, forcing himself to reckon with it, this word so alien to him, forcing himself to look up, this boy in the mirror with his penis in his hand.
He cries out, his face is wet, but he continues, retching to produce more saliva, spitting it hot and harsh into his palm now, his movements fast, violent, and there is that vile agonising pleasure, that languor, that helplessness, as he’s transformed in his hand, bird neck hot hard alive, independent of him, its skin gathering and contracting.

Boy. Shame. He is loathsome. Indulging in his sickness. Trembling.

His father. He’s sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. Armpits of his white shirt circled with sweat. Dusk light, everything charcoal grey. There is a grain over this footage in his memory, like old film that has partly decayed. Spasms of light leaking in.

Are you crying, Dad?

He sees himself too, a self he no longer recognises. This small boy.

Dad?

It’s coming closer now, so much force gathering, the electricity on his skin, the friction of hundreds of swans rubbing against him, he is buried in a mass of them, desperate creatures, the beat of all their wings, loud and fast and frantic, huge webbed feet clawing, beaks clashing, drawing blood.

Boy, boy boy. Breaking out of and into his body simultaneously.

But it’s all so wrong. He’s so close, eyes closed, breath suspended, so close, penis, cock, dick, prick, the whole lexicon, the language, thundering through his head, boy, boy, boy, his father, his shame, the look of his father’s face as it lifted from his hands, Dad?, the eyes cutting through the ashy black, the fear hitting that little boy so instantly, with such intensity, the wet of his armpits, the wet of his face, the odour of his body mingling with his rage, the little boy bolting out of the room, through the living room, up the stairs, struggling to breathe, the scrape of the chair hurtling back against the floor in the kitchen, his footsteps behind him on the stairs.

Oh. Girl, girl, girl, think of one, you’ve committed so many to memory, naked pictures, oh spark, desire, at naked girl flesh, picture you, with this girl, her hand, delicate, yet firm, back and forth along the neck of the swan, girl hand, girl fingers, girl wrist. But it blurs and merges, this conjuring, he looks down and it’s his, this girl hand, girl hand stimulating his girl penis, girl waking up, coming to life in the mirror’s reflection.

Girl, girl, girl.
And he knows it only works when it happens this way, this breaking, this mending, this amazement, she is here so clearly now. This girl, with her girl fist making sounds like swan dives, bird bodies heard from a distance, parting the water.

Girl, girl, girl.

_Come here, boy!_ The roar of his father.

Stepping back, sitting down on the edge of the bathtub, cold against buttocks, but she’s clearer still, she’s coming into view, just her face now, visible in the mirror.

Girl, girl, girl.

This sweetness.

In this one, pure moment, anything can be achieved, he feels her beauty, her clarity. She cries out.

Swans, white jets, taking off, up into the sky. One, two, three, four.

Legs trembling.

Looking up at the ceiling, a swarm of them, feverish, not quite white but grey, calm, ready to roost, occasionally twitching as they move towards sleep, their movements mimicking the shadow of a tree branch as it moves with the wind.

Heartbeat slowing.

Breathing in deeply. She smiles, boy, girl, boy, girl, the tumult fades, the little boy is gone, the father is dead, she is safe here, now, she does not consider what else there is to do, with the rest of this day in his life.
She steps from the bus, as if from nowhere.

The bus is old, unreliable, she was lucky to arrive. No other passengers disembark. The doors close, and the bus pulls out, hazing her in its white exhaust fumes.

With the smoke wisping around her, the sun so high and bright, her features are out of focus, as if she is seen from a reflection, bouncing off hot glass in the midday glare.

Girl, standing on the kerb in this strange new place.

She takes out a small hand mirror from her handbag, looks over the top of her dark glasses into its reflection. Keeping her hand still she rotates her head, light revealing, then obscuring.

Slowly she places the mirror back in her handbag, and advances to the small wooden bus shelter, its roof beginning to cave in beneath the burden of a wild tangled purple bougainvillea bush, its scentless presence extending all around the structure, threatening to take it over entirely.

She sits on the narrow wooden bench within, and waits. He said he’d meet her here.
Boy focuses on the sound. A strange bird call loops above him, following him through the late afternoon. Low and mournful, one quick beat followed by a longer drawn-out call. He looks up as he walks, trying to locate the bird, the sound seems to emanate from no fixed location.

Spooked, he hurries now, hurries home, past the rows and rows of palm trees that are rustling softly in the wind, through this suburb, fractured, populated by decaying, dilapidated houses, which give no signs of life yet are certainly occupied, and grand, remodelled homes, grey, formidable structures, with walls tall enough to impose upon, deter intruders, yet not enough to block the occasional sounds of playful shrieks and splashing water from swimming pools. Houses with gates that are electronic, that hum and slowly slide open, to permit the entry and exit of sleek shining machines, abutting houses with open front yards, wild untended rose bushes, climbing jasmine, beauty clamouring for space and attention in derelict, rotting spaces.

He feels relief at the sight of a yellow car, appearing at the top of the street. An old model, a car from another time, an anachronism in this scene. Slowly it moves towards him, he keeps his eyes on it, and when it passes, there is a girl in the back, sunglasses obscuring her face, her body turned right towards him through the open window. She says something but the words are obscured, garbled and pulled away by the moving vehicle.

Such a brief glimpse of her. Earlier at school, passing the open door of the drama theatre. Two figures, a whispered voice.

You’re going to be such a star, honey.

And he’d looked in at the last moment. A girl, her back to him, head lowered. The teacher’s hand on the back of her neck, fingers through her hair.
Boy circles the canvas.

His bedroom, thick with the trapped heat of the day, the muddled oils swimming, gleaming, as if they perspire on a skin.

The pigments he has selected are too dark, nothing emerges, nothing reveals itself. He selected them mostly for their names, rolling the words around in his mouth like something deliciously edible, forming scenes in his mind. Cobalt. A colt bolting through a field. Azure. A sheer silk scarf, the colour of the sky in spring, draped over his face. Periwinkle. Waking in the field among small lavender flowers to the sound of the bolting colt, the scarf slipping from his face, a swarm of bees dipping and hovering around him. So he layers, he scrapes away. Sometimes so afraid to approach the canvas, for fear he cannot bring to life what goes on inside.

Mumbling to himself, what he hopes is some kind of incantation, he is trying to collect, to pin down, everything he has observed, liked, taken, from the girls at school, to make some glorious whole. A portrait, of girl’s charmingly crooked nose, girl’s walk, that he stole, girl’s front tooth gap, that he has run his tongue over, thrilling at the sharp edges that cut then fall away, girl’s posture, poise, the way girl throws her hair back, causing time to stand still for a moment, girl’s discerning gaze, girl’s softly resonant voice, girl’s sly smile, never directed at him, the way girl wears red, the way girl’s feet must feel in those shoes, the wonder of girl’s armpit hair glimpsed through the open mouth of a loose sleeve. Oh, it all makes his head reel, his clamouring muses, he hears their laughter, their collective scorn, he will never be one of them. All these girls so on display all the time. Teasing.

Boy sinks onto his bed, onto his blue sheets, looks up at his previous efforts, his small crude paintings that crowd his walls. His pin-ups, his heroines. Portraits of women he’s never met, that gaze out of the canvasses, expectant, longing, at points of departure. Daydreaming, leave-taking. Women on the verge. One girl behind the wheel of a car, travelling alone, another gazes out of a window, one stands at the bottom of a staircase, a foot hovering in the air at the final step. He considers them the work of a novice, poorly realised abstractions, the faces in them are blurred, the significance of them not apparent to anyone but him.

The heat, the smell of the oils, his dream-heavy brain.

The face of the girl in the car, rushing past, imploring, fixed in his mind.
He dreams of a night city. A habitat for the nocturnal, creatures of the dark. Roaches like it here, rats. He’s turning off a deserted street, ascending a staircase, as in dreams, he knows the way.

Silent suited men usher him into a great soundless ballroom, even the gowns of the women don’t rustle with their movements, these women, ornamental, chimeric, they give off so much light. They stand, partnered with dark suited men, men like the reflection of one man, an image repeated, as if seen in shattered glass.

They all stare at him.
He knows he is naked.
He’s passing through the crowd, he hears the drone of bees, his mouth thick with honey.

In another room now, a yellow moon leers through the window, a voyeur.
The silhouette of a girl before it, her face shadowed.
What do you see? she asks.

He sees the painting on the wall. A cacophony of green, violent, heavy swirls depict chaos. A tree in the foreground, fruit hanging from its branches, the shape of a black serpent, its body twisting through the leaves. A nude figure beneath, neither he nor she. Everything on the verge of coming apart, like a woman bursting forth from uncomfortable garments.

Beyond the edge of the canvas, his perspective pans out, beyond the tumult of the forest scene, to a blue lake, perfectly still. His face appearing on its surface. The horror. Him grown old, a life wasted, a ravaged face, not man, not woman, unhuman.

What do you see? she taunts him, that faceless girl in the gloom.
Save me, he says.
Always a bit changed after dreams, they leave a stain on him.

When he wakes, he’s mostly still in them, with just a toehold on reality. He lies in bed for a long time, boy wrapped in cool blue sheets, watches small prisms of light pry through the curtains, travel across the walls, gaining strength.

Today might be the day, Boy. But he’s though that for so long, on so many mornings, for as long as he can remember.

But what if… These dreams, adding layers to him, scraping some away, perhaps building up to something big, a grand transformation.

Approaching his body, his hands feeling his face. The scratchy surface of his jaw, chin, upper lip. The silent unseen workings of his body, that he does nothing consciously to control, working to have hair sprout from his follicles.

He should surrender here. He continues.

Arms. Not large, but convincingly masculine, he’s certain. Chest. Hard, smooth, small nipples, concave stomach, and as his hands travel lower, it’s all hopeless now, delusion, folly. An enchantment hasn’t been placed on him, bestowing him with polymorphous capabilities, no benevolent witch or wizard was encountered, no white fairies, no goblin, sensitive to quiet desperation.

Oh, to be fluid in his skin.

Rising from the bed, from the sheet cocoon, striding to the mirror, his greatest test of courage, looking at his naked body. Like a meditation, he thinks, practicing detachment, indifference, to ward off revulsion, terror.

And there they are. Devastation. Anatomy boldly revealed, declaring itself, while his mind, his spirit, shrink further and further back. What is concealed, what’s really inside, is tidy, elegantly suggestive, something crafted with care, by someone with an eye for beauty. A flower, two luscious petals, a rich pollen. He could put his hands between his legs and smell its fragrance.

What if he could just locate a secret spot in his skin, a scar, freckle, bruise. Once located, touched, his skin would unfold slowly in bloom. A neat painless splitting from the top of his skull. In two creamy arcs, the skin peeling back, to a discarded shell. A naked girl stepping forth, reborn.
She’s the only one in the theatre.
   Airconditioning turned up too high, goosefleshed arms.
   The light of the feature plays across her face, seen in profile.
   She’s eating popcorn. Occasionally sips lemonade through a straw.
   Laughing to herself, as she watches.
Have you lost more weight, Boy?

His mother is gently playing with his hair.

I’m sure you have. You’ve become the great disappearing boy.

Softly she says this, murmuring in his ear, trying to make light of it, softening something troubling her.

Soft, the soft thud of the sound many suits make, as they hit the bottom of a garbage bag, in one collective heap.

He can’t look at his mother now without thinking of it. How she asked him to come into the bedroom, hold open the mouth of the bag. The door of the wardrobe open at his father’s side. The way she’d grabbed them, in one go, a gigantic embrace, lifted them up, the hangers unhooking from the railing, and with one swift pirouette, the release.

Only the day after he went.

The two of them saying nothing, as she tied the bag, suffocating those suits with an uncharacteristic fierceness. Dragging the bag down the stairs, the two of them hoisting it into the boot of the car, as if complicit in a crime, disposing of a body.

And this hair of yours, it’s getting so long.

It’s true. He likes to push it forward now, partly obscuring his face.

His body, so similar to the shape of his mother’s. Thin and whiteness. Red hair. Full lipped and cupid’s bow. Aquiline nose. Pouting pretty birds, with flaming crests.

Are you happy he’s gone?

His mother’s hand stops its caress. She is looking out the window, far away. Her bottom lip moving slightly.

Where do the butterflies go at night? he used to ask her as a child. He would badger her with this question, the need to know would burn in him.

You’re the man of the house now, she finally says.
He used to think of his father as a woodcutter.

When he went off to work, he'd be going deep into the woods. Frightening deer, scattering rabbits as he trudged through the trees, axe blade glinting in the filtered light, a lone owl observing him from on high.

Hacking wounds to make wood, felling grandeur. He’d always go for the tallest trees, cursing them silently with each swing of his axe, eyes black with rage. Savouring the tremor that would run through his body, the sing of adrenalin in his blood, long after the tree came down.

Roaming these forests, all day, ferocious, determined, alive in the viscera of axe in hand, aching muscles, raw, calloused palms, chest red and wet and heaving.

His father’s own skin turning to wood.

This invincible man. Then the dizziness came, the nausea, shortness of breath. His sinister presence filling the whole house, weakening. He shrank so quickly. The rotten sap that had felled his father before him was in his veins, could not be cut out.

His last reigning season, the spring.

Boy’s first taste of joy, relief. A rioting tangle of shame and relief inside him, when he knew his father was going to die. To live without his dark pollen polluting the air.

His father, weeping in the kitchen. His huge calloused hands bearing down on him.

Boy’s first taste of freedom. But not his first secret.
He picks at the small stubborn flecks of paint that stick to his hands.

He is grateful for them, they always occupy him when he is out among people.

Pick pick pick. Boy boy boy.

He waits outside the cinema, the orange neon lights of the signage beaming down on him, he notes how this light turns his skin a warm, pale apricot shade. He turns his hands over slowly in front of his face, looks at his arms, pleased with the effect. He turns to seek his reflection in the glass doors, but the face he sees is darkened, grey and blurred.

Hey! he hears.

It’s Moth. Turning around he sees him, flanked by the two girls. They regard him cautiously.

We were watching you from across the street, one of the girls says.

Yeah, what were you doing, weirdo?

Moth hits him playfully on the shoulder. He’s all nervous energy, shifting from one foot to the other, can’t keep still. The presence of girls does this to him.

The light makes Moth, the girls, look sallow, leached of colour. Both wear tight fitting blue jeans, white cotton tops. Straight hair, one blonde, one brunette, coming just past the shoulders, moving softly in the night breeze. He wonders if they straighten it. Wonders if they are each really bare faced, or if they have expertly applied makeup to appear this way. But one of them – the smell comes to him now – she is set apart, she is fragrant, a scent of apples, gardenias, old leather. A hint of vanilla. Wood smoke. He begins to unravel. That smell!

So are we going to go in, or what? one girl says.

Queuing for tickets, popcorn, lemonade, chocolate coated honeycomb, it’s all he can think of, all that registers.

That scent.

But boy, boy, boy.

But, oh!

He must find out the maker of this scent. Then he’ll track it down, on a covert mission, he’ll go in to the shop where it is stocked, make some excuse, if he has to, about why he is purchasing a woman’s fragrance. He’ll be frantic then to get home, to celebrate his victory, his conquest, he’ll lie on his bed with the door closed and spray
the perfume into the air, eyes closed, feeling the delicate vapour dampen his skin, just for a moment, before it sinks in. Picture yourself, Boy, in this splendour, voluptuous, vertigo, swan neck swaying, beautiful, revelling in your womanhood…

Girl, girl, girl.

On the surface, he strives to maintain focus.

How long have you two been friends? a girl’s voice.

Oh, forever. Don’t mind him, he’s always like this, he hears Moth say.

Boy lets out a nervous giggle.

Gee, you’re like a girl, one of the girls says, echoing Boy’s giggle.

It’s the one, the perfumed girl. He sits next to her in the darkened theatre. Heavy red curtains slowly drifting apart, a sense of hushed expectation descends upon the cinemagoers, Moth squirming in his seat, the vibration travelling through their chairs. The rustle of the opening curtains, heralding a potential for transformation, by the time they meet again at the end of the feature. The smell of popcorn, of dark cold spaces, but her perfume cutting through it all.

Boy senses the perfumed girl staring at him in the dark.

The feature begins, but he knows he cannot contain himself until the end. Time slows. He sees Moth turn to watch him, as he leans in towards the girl. The static of expectation live around them all, four hearts speeding up, what will Boy do? The other girl, smiling knowingly. She keeps her eyes on the screen, allowing them intimacy.

The perfumed girl slowly turns her face towards his.

Two ships on alternate courses.

Boy’s lips reach her ear, words barely grazing the skin.

I must know what your perfume is.
What was last night all about? You’re getting weirder by the day.

The bus rolls slowly through the streets, meandering sleepily on its way to school. Boy lets his body roll with its movements as it takes corners, feels everything become fluid, lets himself unspool into that slow forward momentum like hot white silk. A swan flexing its long neck.

What’s up, Boy? Is it your Dad?

He can’t help but laugh. The most obvious possible cause of any odd behaviour. The teachers at school more gentle with him now. Especially the sport teacher. She doesn’t force him to participate anymore. That dread, that trembling fear, of disrobing in the boy’s locker room.

*You run like a girl!*

*Fag’s checking you out, he’s never seen anything so big!*

It was true. He saw his first penis in that room, he refused to count his own *man part*. Naked boys everywhere, flaunting themselves. How this terrified him. He would never remove his underwear. When they taunted him, he’d try to imagine the girls. Their change room, the beauty of their hues and folds, colour and light of their flight lines, like a hothouse of butterflies. If he ran like one – which he adored hearing – why couldn’t he be among them?

The boys in the locker room did not see the girls’ light and colours. *Girls* to them one amorphous object, replicated in sizes small enough for them to digest.

I’m fine, he says.

He knows Moth won’t abandon him. They are bound together. Two of the only virgins left at school.

The bus turns the last corner before school. A beam of sunlight bursts through the windows, reflected brightly from the glass. And he sees her. Hair honey blonde aflame from the sun. She’s sitting up front. And it’s like all the clamour of the moment, all the chatter of the people around him, the sound of the engine, the switching gears, is silenced.

Turn around, he thinks, turn around.

All he sees is her hair, her yellow dress, but he knows it’s her.

And through the light he notices, a bee crawling through her hair.
The bus stops. Everyone stands up at once, the volume is turned sharply up, students, squinting in the bright shaft of light, fumbling for their bags, still transitioning from asleep to awake, groaning about another day of youth spent being at school.

He panics, he tries to glimpse her through the crowd, but she’s already gone from the bus, he sees her through the window. She movies quickly, like light, through the throng of students at the front of the school, parting the crowd effortlessly with her force.

A lone bee takes to the sky. She is gone.

Moth comes into focus. Boy aware that all this time, he’s been talking about the movie last night.

Those special effects, man, how good were they? It was so real. More real than real, you know what I mean?

More real than real. He remembers a scene from the movie. Set in a dark forest. How still it had been at the start. But there was that strange perfume. The distant drone of bees. A glimpse of a yellow dress through the trees.
The woman shrugs off her robe and positions herself at the centre of the room, spreading her body across the white sheet on the floor. Lying on her side, her head raised and supported by her arm, she curls her top leg, bringing her knee forward to rest in front of her.

It is a coy pose, he thinks. How a girl might position herself in bed, waiting for a lover to come home, into the bedroom, surprising him with her seduction.

She has a large nose. Crooked teeth. A scar low on her groin. Dirty feet. She is glorious, he thinks.

Some of the faces around her blush. A few students can’t help but giggle. She averts her eyes from them, as they gaze at her from behind their easels, begin to commit her to paper. The scratching of charcoal against the sheets starting up around him, butterfly legs scrambling, waking from hibernation, stampeding en masse for nectar.

He takes longer than most to begin, as he observes the model carefully. He wonders if everyone’s body is really their own costume, one that cannot be simply taken off, discarded, before others or alone. The body always obscuring the truth of someone. This woman, like the other women and men who disrobe for the class, have bodies he is never exposed to, are never held up as ideals. Each week, a new flesh terrain to explore, each new way he learns of what one can be.

He begins. First the outline of the shape she takes, then the parts that catch the light, the parts that are shadowed. His fingers blackening. His fierce determination to create the perfect work of art, nothing to do with the perfection of the flesh he sees before him. Something from within. He makes her.

What are you working on lately? the art teacher asks him later.

He thinks of his painting. He’d added the bee in last night.

I’d say it’s, kind of a self portrait, he says.
He looks for her in the afternoon, peers into each girl-face streaming down the front school steps.

Pacing beneath a giant jacaranda tree, newly flourished, and already carpeting the ground beneath with its dismissed blooms. He churns them beneath his feet, bruising them deep blue, as they merge with the pavement.

When he notices the carnage he’s induced, he’s stricken, and finds himself almost moved to tears, for pulverising the delicate flowers.

Boy boy boy, he brings himself back, a boy wouldn’t cry over this. But it may be the fact that she’s eluded him, he’s watched his bus pull away, and he’s starting to wonder if it was some trick of the light this morning, if it had been another girl, her face morphing to his desires in the fickle sunbeam.

He begins the walk home, lilac petals stuck to the soles of his shoes coming unstuck like flotsam in his wake.

She’ll be walking home too, he knows.

Girl luminous, walking home in the golden afternoon. Down streets all named after birds.


Seeing each species in her mind as the signposts reveal themselves.

Briefly, she becomes each one.
So the dreams are coming back again.

Oh?

At this the doctor perks up. He loves to decipher Boy’s dreams.

And what are they about this time? Are they exactly the same as before?

Boy looks at the doctor’s desk, the family photograph he has on display there, angled towards the patient chair. It’s him, his wife, and their four daughters. The doctor and his wife could be siblings, and their daughters are four younger imprints, of their long dark curling hair, slightly crooked teeth.

They’re about… maps. I’m trying to draw one, because I’m going away somewhere. I need the directions on paper, to hold them, so they’re not just stuck in my head. I might forget them there. So my hand begins to draw, but instead of places, roads, or cities or whatever, these two figures appear from the tip of the pencil. And I know that one is me – well, they’re both me. But once I get the outlines done, I don’t know how to begin drawing either of them, you know, fleshing them out. Like I don’t know what the me’s look like.

He looks at the doctor’s family photograph as he says all this, he feels anger rising, anger that’s smothering what’s really jealousy, at how easy these girls make it look, how easy they have it, they just came into the world, that’s all they had to do, there were two paths forking before them and they chose the right one, someone said the word, Girl!, and their fates were pronounced, sealed, inarguable, fact. Boy, boy, boy, was all he got. And these girls, how they’re laughing in this photo, they’re so loved, because that’s what parents do, and loved even more because they’re girls, and that’s what girls need, more love than boys. Love and protection.

You wrap that kid in cotton wool, his father to his cowering mother.

Boy! and he was sent, stumbling along, down the wrong path in the dark.

Well, we all begin as girls in the womb, until a kind of switch is flicked, and then you begin your growth as a baby boy.

This same doctor had told him as a kid, when he began school, his appetite abandoned him, his body began to ache, he felt so many strange things inside him.

Ah, growing pains! the doctor had pronounced.

Yes! Boy exclaimed, nodding furiously, Yes, I’m growing into a girl!
Later, hearing the doctor reciting some strange jagged poetry in hushed tones to his parents, *hypochondria – psychosomatic – mimicry – older sister – not all that unusual – very sensitive child – he and I should keep talking together –*

So the conversation continued.

And he doesn’t say, the pains never went away.

And he doesn’t say, how he thinks of these pains as a girl trapped inside, desperate to emerge.

He wants to say, instead of fabricating some poor analogy – So, doctor, what makes a boy a boy and a girl a girl? Just their name and the way they dress?

He wants to say, So explain this to me then. Why is my most precious, my most golden memory, of being a child, sitting cross-legged on the floor of a bedroom, walls painted robin’s egg blue, to all appearances deeply immersed in staging battles across the carpet with toy soldiers, making the all right noises, gunfire, explosions, exclamations of pain from inflicted war wounds, soothing my father with my *normalcy*, his *little man*, and all the while yearning for the moment my family would leave, grateful my sister had so many after-school passions, keeping up the charade, the noises, the manoeuvres, until I was certain they were really gone, queasy excitement building in my stomach, and when I was absolutely certain they wouldn’t be returning anytime soon, the figurines would be discarded, forgotten, a wasteland of casualties on the bedroom floor. I’d be propelled then, from the ground, down the hall, into my sister’s room, and oh, such glee, such abandon, I’d fling open those cupboard doors and all would be right in the world when my little hand closed in on my favourite dress. A dark navy blue velvet, if you must know. For special occasions, but really, it was more suited to me because it so closely matched the colour of my eyes, and after I stretched up and yanked it off the hanger, I’d hold it against my body, amazed at my beauty, my eyes brought forth from my face, the rich supple feel of the fabric. It had puff sleeves, a cinched waist, and tied at the back in a huge satin bow, which took a bit of practice to tie myself. But that was a huge personal triumph for me, creating that perfect bow, seeing it flowering out from the small of my back. I had seen the dress on my sister for the first time the previous Christmas, and all day I longed for it, more entranced by the dress than in any gifts I got. And it was the dress that summoned me to her room for the first time, it felt so natural, when I first slipped that dress over my head – I was home.
He would leave out the part about the dress growing tighter on his body over time, his proportions failing to fill it out in the right places, the fabric puckering and straining across his shoulders, the armholes squeezing his biceps. He wants to keep this memory pure and perfect, because he knew no shame then. He can hear it now, how the dress’s bow would swish across his back with every movement, would rustle softly, as he walked, the velvet caressing his skin, frocked, at play with his sister’s dolls, the ones that all fitted inside each other, he’d open the biggest doll and remove the next, and he saw life opening up for him just like that, a new layer of his womanhood revealing itself over and over.
Waiting for the bus home, he watches two swallows, as they alight on the fence near him.

One inching closer to the other, it begins to crane its neck, its eyes widening, back and forth its head moves as it closes in on the other bird. Soon, it flies onto the other’s back, and he watches its rapid movements, the bird beneath swaying, struggling to maintain balance, he is transfixed by their coupling.

It’s over so soon. The horror of it. He is sure he will vomit.
He hears his sister, moving around in her bedroom upstairs. Singing softly to herself, sounding like a different language.

Boy body splayed on a couch downstairs, forgetting to keep his knees together, forgetting grace, his ladylikeness. Watching the world changing colour outside the window, everything taking on dusk hues, as he tries to match each sound his sister makes with what she might be doing.

A bunch of pink long-stemmed roses hang upside down on her wall, a relic from a short-lived relationship, the room smells of them, rose petals slightly rotting.

She prizes her hairbrush, an expensive one their father had bought her, boar-bristled, with a burgundy wooden handle. He imagines her, brushing out her long brown hair, hair growing more lustrous with each stroke.

He pushes his hair forward, twirls a strand of it around his finger, wishing it were as shiny as hers.

He is making vague plans of stealing into her room, imagining those boar bristles stealing through his hair, invigorating his scalp, when his sister’s cool grey cat arches into the room. Boy, watching her, she feigns obviousness to his presence. She halts, turns, begins to fiercely lick her neck. She intimidates him. Seeming to know exactly who she is. Exactly where to catch the sunlight at any given time of day. He is certain she sees through to the heart of what he is, that she has nothing but disdain for an inauthentic life.

Soon she deigns to fold her small body into his lap, seeking his heat. She purrs, her eyes narrowed into mean slits, flexes one paw, then the other, claws come out, retract, and he begins to mimic this rhythm, he trembles as he attempts to purr, narrows his eyes, pulsing his hands, splaying his fingers, in time with her claws as they catch on the threads of his trousers, which he scarcely feels he’s so lost in the dream, his shoulders rolling back, spine undulating, his tail erect.

So easy to be her, simply seeking warmth, this sleek animal, a swallow’s tail feathers protruding from her mouth –

Back to the room, there is a movement at the doorway. His sister stands there. He feels the cold splinter of her sneer before it touches him.

What even are you?

With a sound of disgust she turns from him.
He watches his peers enter the classroom. Their clamour. Their girl and boy flocks, varying in their colours, though all belonging to the same species.

He watches the boys. How they swap allegiances like freak weather changes, according to the way one girl might cross or uncross her legs, or how another girl might wind her ponytail around her finger in a particular way when she speaks, snaring his attentions. And he knows he’s just like them, in a way, these fickle golden boys. Daily he’s entranced with a new way of girlhood, being Girl, like field work, he mentally takes note of his discoveries.

Do you really find it so easy, being Girl? he wonders. Are you really like me, unsteady in flight, shy to show your colours. Wings wet, tremulous, flexing in the wind. Proboscis hidden from view.

What secrets do they have.

He hears them, the sound of their feathers, swans pressing against the glass of the window, crowding in on him.

He sees her again, that afternoon, but he doesn’t dare approach her. She’s leaning against the wall at the back of the school, her head in her hands, sobbing.

But oh how he longs to go to her.
Jumping with every smack of the wheels, followed by the grinding roll until they’re up, suspended again, until they curl back and crash, these chaotic waves, it’s almost graceful what these heavy shapes achieve, these boys in loose blue jeans and black hooded sweatshirts.

Weightless. How quiet it gets when their boards lift off, disconnected from the earth.

The boys huddle around the lip of the emptied swimming pool, its interior lurid blue, marked over and over with black skidmarks, a map growing threadbare. The waves from the nearby ocean seem to mimic the skaters, keeping time.

Boy tried once, climbed onto Moth’s board. He wobbled, unstable, his centre not slackened like the other boys. He feared hurting himself.

A joint is passed among the boys, they talk of technique, compare injuries, and he’s only permitted access to this world, tolerated, because of Moth. Convincing himself he should try and make himself stick, fit, commit to boyworld, among these mad kings, shooting past him down below, like a girl’s face seen in a passing car.

Boy meets girl. He wants to tell Moth, tell someone, make her real.

The joint is passed to him and he offers it to the only girl in the group, next to him. He watches her, as she relights it, holding the flame to the end of the joint and inhaling deeply, hungry for the small remainder of the weed. Her fingers yellowed, yet working delicately. He remembers learning the word *tomboy*, learning there was no equivalent for boys.

He becomes aware of a new noise, through the grind and smack of the wheels, through the haze of chemical smell, the laughter of the boys around him. Trying to block out all the information coming in, to locate this sound, something muffled, unsettling. Animal. Feline.

Can anyone hear that? he breaks his silence.

There is brief quiet as the boys turn to look at him.

Hear what? a freckled face boy, the most frightening of the group asks him.

Boy boy boy, why didn’t you keep your mouth shut, why why why, things are just beginning to close in, when the group, laughing, begin to softly kick a black backpack on the ground.

Hey, puss puss puss, he hears you!
There’s a cat in there?

The cat’s miaows intensify as he listens to them debate the imprisoned cat’s fate, whether they should throw it in the bowl, see how it moves, or drown it in the ocean. Everything is coming apart in him, and he looks at Moth, his nervous laughter, shaking his head, but unwilling to take action, he looks at the girl, expecting her to say something, but she gazes out beyond them all, her eyes hazed over, her body swaying slightly, as the weight bears down on Boy, the knowledge that he must speak, take action, he who so longs to blend blend blend in, be invisible.

I don’t want cat guts all over my new board.

Yeah, let’s see if it can swim.

This boy body, in peak condition, strong legged, mind not hazed with chemicals, this cotton wool kid, this princess, this fool, he’s stepped up, he’s committed himself, he snatches the bag and goes, dogged by their cruel laughter.

Near home, he unzips the bag. The cat bolts. His hands shake. He tries not to cry. A sense of something wasted in the whole thing. The cat may meet another unpleasant end. So many lives in need of saving.
Certain he’s got the face right. Closing his eyes tight, focussing, he can make her out, pause the moment when the car drove past, glimpse through the sunray in the bus. The sense of her, her mystery. Green eyed. Blondish hair. Beautiful mouth. It’s all there, emerging from the canvas. He’s captured it, fixed her in time.

His sister is playing records in her bedroom and stray lyrics are coming to him, warped and flattened out. He slides down his bedroom wall to a seating position, closes his eyes. It’s this same song, popular at the moment, that seems to follow him, haunt him, though he couldn’t say where he’d heard it. A love song, about a girl. Who ran and hid for a long time. As he sits and really pays attention to the lyrics, keenly interpreting them from across a hallway and through two closed bedroom doors, it’s like a cold hand on the back of his neck. The singer, whose world is turned upside down, must find a way to be with her, before he goes insane.

Someone else who knows what it’s like to be this way.

Thirteen. Sighting his sister’s cast-off camisoles in the kitchen bin, the silvery shoulder strap of one peeking out. Begging to be saved. Opening the lid, lifting it out, reverently, like a magician lifting a long silk scarf from a depthless hat. His wonder, at how casually she could dispose of these delicate items.

An exuberant teen girl face beaming at him from the trash, beneath the exhumed camisoles. A discarded magazine, which he secreted into his bedroom, a tarnished trophy. Full of pictures, girls with perfect teeth, shining hair, pink crop top and shorts sets and blush lace fairy princess gowns. Articles discussing the strange habits of the teenage male, their habits, desires, why they may or may not ask you, teenage girl, on a date. How to coordinate successful slumber parties, bake the tastiest cookies, Boy overcome, eyes swiftly devouring each sentence, each high gloss photograph.

And this was where it happened. The Letters section. Missives from young girls, alienated, confused. He saw himself peeping quietly through a keyhole, into the meeting of a secret society. And then the words of one letter seemed to lift off the page, hovering, distinguished from the catalogue of teenage pain, one letter, in an instant a sacred text to him, draining him, body, world, emptied of light and warmth in an instant. A hiding spot exposed by a ruthless killer.
Please help. I feel as though I’ve been born in the wrong body, it began.

And possibility was revealed. A portal to an alternate universe, discovered behind a hidden door, down a secret passageway, buried in a garbage bin. An anteroom.

Thinking back now, though – perhaps the letter had been a joke? For a time he’d hung all his hopes on it.

To be born in the wrong body – did that mean you could really be a tiger, a polar bear, a butterfly, or a dark powdery moth. A girl.
He practices his speech in front of the mirror.

*I. Me. Boy. Seventeen. I have a sister, a mother. My father is dead. I like to paint. I have blue eyes. My favourite colour is red. I’m Boy. I like girls.*

On the first day of the school year, they went around the room, giving short introductory speeches about themselves. He faltered after his name.

They were supposed to say at the end what they would be doing after graduation. Like a refrain, girl after boy after girl after boy, they said:

*To get out of this town.*

And he’d thought that maybe he wasn’t so different to them all.
Girl silhouette at the window. Softly illuminated, coloured red, then back to black, as the hotel neon sign flashes above her.

Is that – is that his hands, snaking around her waist, pulling her close from behind? A larger man shadow seems to morph with hers.

But she seems to not respond to his touch. She comes alive with the night, for the night. Inhaling it, she’ll stand at windows, look at the stars. Whispering lines of plays she’d seen as a child, words that changed her.

She will listen for the cars, far away, on some distant highway.

And Boy might say, Someday, if I’m rich, I’ll live in hotels forever. To never have to stay the same for too long.
Submerged faces bloom up at him in the trays, doused with chemicals they reveal themselves, like bodies floating to the surface after a winter’s ice thaws on a lake’s surface.

He roams the hallways of school, carefully holding the camera between his hands like something delicate, looking to capture perfect moments of youth.

We want smiles, the yearbook team leader had said, happy faces, we all want to remember high school as the best time of our lives.

Boy, hoping the leader didn’t catch his wincing expression.

He hunts for memorable moments, made beautiful by his lens, a gorgeous memory on print that they won’t remember having.

How safe it is, behind a camera. On the other side, they all seem to wear youth with such ease.

He never finds the girl, to photograph her. She constantly eludes him.

Returning the camera to the yearbook room, with its steady percussive rattle of fingers on keyboards, heady chemical smell of fresh ink on paper, he sees a sliced cake on a table. He can taste its sweetness just by looking at it. It’s yellow sponge, with layers of jam and cream, white icing, with tiny lilac flowers. He adores sweets, sugar on his tongue, like nectar for him. He selects a slice.

Thought you could get away with not having your picture taken, huh?

Boy slowly turns. The yearbook leader is there, the polaroid camera to his eye, finger on the button, Boy caught in the cross-hairs.

I really – I’d rather you didn’t. Please. I’m eating.

The flash, the starburst in his eyes. The trace of an iced lilac flower on his lower lip.

The leader holds it above Boy’s head, waves the negative tauntingly as it develops. He sees his eyes, wide with fear, cake crumbs in his mouth, dirty fingers. He imagines hunting down every copy of the published yearbook, breaking into homes, ransacking rooms, his serene face seen through smoke, above a bonfire of burning books.
Lunchtimes she passes in a bathroom stall.

Smoking cigarettes. To feel reckless, cool. The nicotine doesn’t suppress the anxiety, of how she is harming herself. She wants to live, really.

Blowing smoke rings at the graffiti on the walls. SOS messages, outcast vandals, political crusaders, promoters of self love – you are beautiful, just as you are. All the dissenters beneath. Like the cubicle is a story, a screenplay, a melodrama. All these girls, real selves bursting through their skins. Anarchists, daydreamers. Waiting for high school to end so they can be born again.

She thinks of last night. Observing herself in the bathroom mirror. The rosebud of a pink aureole sliced in half by the edge of a midnight blue satin dressing gown. Embroidered in white swans. Her white velvet abdomen. The garish hotel room light bringing out the copper tones in her hair, appearing strawberry in the reflected image.

Photographing herself, angling the camera away and down, below her neck. Her nudity stunning, the photographs all appearing overexposed, as if she is too bright to be captured. Lilac white skin. Boyish body. Is this really her?

A body an artist might love.

Small breasted, her left larger, as if blooming from the force of her heart pumping beneath. Hip bones sharp against a delicate ring of softness around her belly. Groin descending into a sloping V shape.

Inhaling sharply from her cigarette, she takes one of the shots from her pocket. Takes a stick of glue from her pencil case, and pastes it to the cubicle wall. Exhaling, the smoke clouds around the ghostly body. There for the taking. Just a girl body, it could belong to anyone.
He begins to dream of girls preparing for the graduation ball.

Its fervour thick and felt by all, most keenly by the girls.

He hears shrieks of, *did he ask you?* over the opening and slamming of locker doors, he hears, *I’m getting my dress made,* and he attempts to watch the girl describe the cut as she moves her hands over her body, painting a picture of where the dress will caress her, where it will flare out. Like a reckless bird, approaching an obstacle and veering dramatically, when it seems almost too late.

This sense of longing inside him, this ache of exclusion. And then he hears *it will be made of silk,* and his mind is stuck on that last sibilant sound, he hears it over and over, *silk silk silk,* and he knows what he must do.

He sees the three girls head in the direction of the shopping mall after school and he follows them.

Oh, I’m down to maybe 100 calories a day, he hears one say.
I know, you have to look amazing for him.

Boy watches the way the afternoon light makes the girls’ hair glitter, three manes sparkling and swaying, their calves flashing as they walk, beneath their skirts, their murmurings, laughter, this sensation, his heart beat quickening by the moment’s beauty, by his boldness.

In the fabric store, he watches them slowly run their hands down bolts of fabric, like lovers caressing long thighs. He hears them gasp at their tactile arousal. Under the fluorescent overhead lights everything is illuminated, tightly wound rolls of fabric leaning everywhere, haphazardly, like the pillars of a ransacked city, riotous colours and patterns, torturing and tempting. He watches one girl look to see that there are no sales assistants watching, and tenderly, she closes her eyes, pressing her cheek against a sea green satin. And then she was away, asleep on an anchored boat on some distant ocean.

He understands then that the girls’ partners, the dance, the night itself, were mere props, accessories to their fairytale, the fashioning of their golden vision.

Overcome, he places his backpack on the floor, secures the scissors from his pencil case, and cuts a small swatch of fuchsia silk from the nearest bolt of fabric.

A thief, he walks from the shop, through the mall, rubbing the swatch between his fingers, he doesn’t even hear the boy he passes who turns to his friends and says,
Is that a dude or a chick?, and their laughter, he has begun to float, far away from his boy body, and he can see her, pirouetting in her silk dress, the pink merging and blurring with the light before his eyes.
Pink velvet curtains are pushed apart and Girl steps out of the changing room, to assess herself from a distance in the mirror.

One arm holds onto the curtain, the other curls onto her hip as she arches her back, like an actress trying for sexy. She laughs at herself.

Soft light all around her, as if she has no edges.

He knows he’ll never forget her in this dress.

The silk against her body. Her body encased in it, cocoon like, as if the material has been spun around her. Light seeping through the fabric at the space between her legs.

I’m waiting for you, she says.

This is what his soul looks like, her in that dress.

He opens his eyes. She’s sitting on the end of his bed, watching him.

What are you doing, Boy?
Sleeping, he says.
Sleeping through life, she says.
He wants to get her out of this dress, and into it himself.
She turns her back to him, and it’s then that he sees the split, rippling right down her back, as if from poorly constructed seams.
Nothing holds. Like being Boy, convincing from the front, a ruin at the back.
Wait, don’t leave me, he says, holding onto the pooled hem of her dress as she slides off the bed, out of her night visitation.
At school he finds himself in front of the drama theatre, staring at its heavy black doors. Summoning the courage to enter.
The television is on and his mother and sister are lying on the couch before it, his sister’s head in their mother’s lap, and she is softly stroking her daughter’s forehead as they gaze dreamily at the screen.

Boy sits on the other couch, pretending to do homework, but he watches them together. These two women, this dynasty of femininity, his sister talking openly of her menstrual pains in front of him because she acts as if he is not there at all. As if taunting him for what he longs to be included in. This intimacy, that seems only accessible to mothers and their daughters.

I came from her too, he thinks. I grew inside of her.

If my own body could be my home, then I could do that too.

Me, a mother, he mouths to himself.

Giving birth in a nest of swan feathers.

Do you think you’ll ever be a mother? he calls across to his sister.

His mother looks at him cautiously, while his sister continues to gaze numbly at the television screen.

But he needs to know.

You can both create life inside of you, that’s so beautiful.

His sister makes a sound of disgust and jumps up from the couch.

You are such a typical boy! No idea about anything.

*What makes a boy a boy, Boy? Just a name and how they dress?*
What are you doing, Boy?

His father’s darkness filling the doorway to his bedroom.

He sat on the edge of his bed, flexing each foot. He was imagining his feet slipping into a pair of red satin high-heeled shoes. The slow slide, bare skin slipping in as if over swan feathers, the soft puff of suction as the shoes cupped his heel. Savouring the tightness of his toes. Admiring their cleavage peeking out. He had gotten to the part of imagining himself standing up, the odd vertigo of added height on an uneven surface, teetering, seduced by gravity, willing his fall.

It was as if he had tripped and hit the floor when he heard his father.

He’d wanted to glide in his dream shoes. Hips pushed forward, rolling expertly, as each spike hit the earth. His calf muscles announcing themselves, the new ache in his arches.

If it were real he could pull one off and bring the heel down upon his cowering father.

His father, rupturing his dream state, hearing his axe hack through the new growth shooting out from the floors and walls in the hallway outside his bedroom, obscuring the door, protecting him, his nest.

Standing there in his woodcutter’s clothes, axe blade shining in his dark hand.
What are you doing, Boy?
Nothing, Dad. Daydreaming.
You’re off in that weird little world again, aren’t you. Not normal.
Sorry, Dad.

And the way his father was looking at him, almost with longing, as if nostalgia were seizing him from inside some private movie running in his mind, and through some freak connection in the space between their eyes, he could see his father, as a boy, flexing his legs before himself as he sat on his childhood bed, admiring himself in a pair of conjured shoes off limits to him, reserved only for women to enjoy or dismiss.

Bang bang bang! His father’s fist, hitting the door, the handle cracking into the wall behind it.

Why can’t you be normal! A freak for a son! My only son…
His heart rioting in his chest as his father retreated, I’ll own those red shoes, he thought, dream shoes, dream shoes, and the tiny girl fingers crept out from the dark, feeling for his edges, to loosen them, peel them right back.
But, sir, come on, we’re nearly out of here, the kid says, gesturing his head towards the window, toward where they all know the perfect bright white sun and clean blue sky exist outside, behind the drawn curtains, as if summer-soon is his alibi.

The science teacher pays no attention, just looks slightly hurt, as the documentary continues to play, deep sea creatures and ocean life reflected in fuzzy blue over the shiny faces in the classroom, their bodies slumped low in their chairs, imagining themselves up way further, on the ocean’s shore, their young skins radiating heat and light right back at the world.

Incredible, amazing life forms exist in the darkness, hidden away from our eyes, the teacher says quietly. Private, wonderful lives.

Boy’s hand had found a pencil and begun to draw strange looping mermaids in his notebook margins, their masses of hair coiling, tangling in one another’s fins, but he looks up at this.

They can breathe underwater, he thinks.

And tiny horses with fins come out to dance for him. Crowned horses of the sea, eyes cut from amber, ringed skin stretched over armour. Diaphanous fins, like tattered cloaks.

See here, everybody, the teacher says, See what’s going on here? It’s a courtship dance, a mating ritual.

Boy sees their tails entwine, like two shy teenagers at a high school dance touching palms to dance.

Like a ship going down, they dance, on and on. Bodies anchored to strands of sea grass, they twirl, they twirl.

And the really interesting thing here is, if you look closely, it’s the male seahorse, he is the one who gives birth. Truly magnificent.

Hundreds of tiny seahorses fragmented and reflected in Boy’s tears, his face so wet so fast, him turning blue from the ocean, it’s the sea he feels on his face, he tastes it, it’s where he came from.

Boy? Boy? Boy? Are you ok, Boy?
He’s got her. He’s pinning her down. Pushing the sharp end of the pin into the centre of a butterfly.

The painting is coming to life, there is movement, there is life in the colours and lines. The face is still unclear, but that’s ok, he thinks, there is mystery in her pose, sadness. You would ask yourself, who is this girl? he is certain.

So what’s this supposed to be?

She’s sitting on the edge of his bed, legs crossed, her back arched as she leans back on her arms, head to the side, regarding him.

He turns to look at her.

Well, it could be you, if you’d hold still long enough.

She laughs, turns her face from him.

Your girl needs work.

Crushing him, feet walking across a floor of dead dried up bee carcasses.
Sitting in the lunch room at school, alone, observing the chaos around him, all the other students.

Touch me, he thinks. Touch me.
Skin scalded scarlet from the heat of the water, he tilts his head back into the spray, the pour of the jets darkening his hair, reddening it further. He pushes shampoo and conditioner that smell like sweet green summer apples through it. He breathes in steam like cider.

Soaping his armpits, his legs, its vanilla perfume, its texture, bleeding with his imaginings that he is smooth-bodied from the stomach down. He props his legs up one by one, his feet sticking to the glass like an amphibian, as he runs a razor in upward strokes along each calf and thigh, up and up, he shaves himself, devotedly, until he is sleek and nude. Arms raised above his head – it’s like a ballet.

His hands soaping his chest. When will I grow breasts? he’d asked his mother. Waiting to bloom into a young woman. Still.

You’re a Boy, she’d said. I already have a girl. You’re my perfect Boy.
He’d seen the little girl at the beach groping at her mother’s breasts.
But I need them, he’d said.
Little boys don’t grow breasts, she’d said, and the new inflection to her voice frightened him. Other things will happen to your body, and one day, you will be grateful you were born a boy. Nature will be kinder to you.

His first memory of rage toward his mother.

The bathroom mirror, fogged over. He smears a hand across its surface. Hoping to defog a face once like blank paper, now with writing upon it. His small rosebud of a mouth twitches slightly.

He delicately applies a moisturiser made of honey to his face. It might attract a swarm of bees, which will carry him away.

Like a comeback thought of too late, years later in school, the teacher had written M-E-T-A-M-O-R-P-H-O-S-I-S on the blackboard and everything changed.

Why could he not, one evening, find himself fashioning a chrysalis on the ceiling of his bedroom? How could his skin not naturally peel back to an iridescent crust, to protect him in a sublime hibernation? Why not then might he emerge improved, beautiful, his true self revealed?

I will be what I will be, he thinks, and nature will not be kind to me.
What if it happened, right here? Just waiting for the school bus. What if I just began to transform? Tiny perforations opening up in my skin, big enough for white grey feathers to push through, tiny daggers that fan open to broad knives that could cut. And if I opened my arms I’d know exactly what to do, I’d just rise, flap and rise. Hover long enough to see their stares, how impressed they would be. Frightened. Boy bloomed, boy perfected. Species unknown, but wonderful.

Hey, man, where have you been?
Moth form filling the space in front of him, a shadow blocking out the sun.
So who is she? he asks, and moves to sit beside him. The light is born again.
Things rearranging inside of him as he looks at Moth for an explanation.
There has to be a girl. I haven’t seen you for ages.
The strange shape and distance of time in high school. An age can be a day.
There’s nobody, Moth.
I know you’re hiding a girl. I’ve always known you’re going to be one of those guys, the quiet ones nobody thinks of then boom, they just come into themselves, they transform, get their powers. From shy and awkward to men with unparalleled seductive powers.

He laughs loudly, he’d held Boy in this narrative, until the m word.
And now, you know what that means for me? I have to suffer through the summer, women swooning in your wake, dropping lightly in your path like shot birds from the sky.

Moth sees through him. The image is obscured, fogged over, but he sees the changing. Boy thought he was performing so well. But it’s still on his skin, the signs of a long, slow tumble into love. The agitation, the beauty, the terror, all shining through like flares in fog.

A feverish boy in a cool dimly lit room. A symphony playing from a record, gliding round like black swans on a blue green lake. A red rose between his teeth, as he writes love letters, screwing up the paper and beginning again and again as drops of anxious sweat drip down, marring his prose. This is what Moth must imagine.

So Boy steps right up, because to talk of her can only serve to make her more real, this Girl, this girl as perfect as invention.

Softly, softly, he says her name.
Moth looks confused. Where do you know her from?
Here.
Here?
Yes, but… *Just say it, just say it, Boy.* He thinks of saying, *through my painting,* but stops himself.
I think I conjured her.
You what?
The afternoon sun shifting across their faces as it sets, the light so bright and hot in his eyes, he struggles to make eye contact with Moth through the light.
I don’t know – I know, it sounds weird. Crazy, even. But don’t you ever think you make things just happen? Like, you’ve wished for them so hard that, you’ve succeeded in bringing them to life.

So raw, so naked. He’s exposed himself, and he watches Moth through the glare, his mouth making strange shapes as he processes this confession.

*He’s off with the fairies, that Boy.* His father’s voice, heard from his bedroom one night.

I don’t know, man. I don’t know about – what did you call it? Conjuring? It’s a nice idea though. But what’s so special about this girl anyway?

Oh how can be begin to answer that? He just closes his eyes, lets his head fall back against the burning metal seat. Something solid to hold him in this moment that is fluid, that is uncontained and leaking away to nothing.

I’ll tell you what you can do, though. Bring her to my party next weekend. It’ll be wild!

A party… Boy whispers, his eyes still closed.

Yeah, a party. But there’s one catch – you have to come in drag.
His manicured boy hand running gently along the spines of books, like fingers through water. Crouching before his small bookcase. He thinks he knows, but he needs to be sure. Too shy to ask Moth.

His fingers hit gold. He pulls the heavy book slowly from the shelf, with reverence, this moment so weighted. Heartbeat a bird flying along in a storm, waterlogged feathers, erratic flight.

Like a small omen, the book opens at *D*. He finds the word, scrolls down the long list of meanings. Adjective. Clothing. Characteristic. Opposite. Sex.

He picks up a pencil, draws an arrow into the margin, a green offshoot of this definition, potent with life. He scrawls *to wear the clothing that best expresses who you most identify with inside*.

He’s burning up from this act of vandalism. His new word, his new meaning. I’m a conjurer, he whispers.
Rolling over in the morning, propelled by a dream. Girl reaches across the sleeping form beside her, to the dictionary on the bedside table. She looks up ‘love’. Seeking to understanding.
You can do it, Boy, you know you can.

These delicate hands then, for a moment, hovering before the black drama theatre doors, then, pushing them open. Stumbling through, surprised by their weight, their force. As if they conspire to keep him out of this world.

He’s in a small dark lobby, and all over the walls are faces, photographs encased in glass cabinets. The headshots of all the actors who have come and gone through the school. He moves past them, boys and girls captured in black and white, all of these impersonal faces, he slowly scans through them until he finds her. Girl.

And yet – is that really her? It’s a face that could move effortlessly between weeping and laughter. One of her eyes is slightly smaller than the other, like a slow wink fixed and healed crooked. There is a single mole near her mouth. He could do without that.

Uncertain, he leans in closer, until his breath has fogged the glass before her face.

A dark reflection looms in the glass.

Can I help you with something?

Boy doesn’t move, just keeps looking at the drama teacher’s reflection in the glass. How large his face looks, and dark. The resonance of his voice. His smell. Something old and mildewed, something kept in the dark and forgotten.

You’re not an actor.

And then he hears her voice, coming from inside. Just sounds without meaning, on and on and on, a girl voice reciting a monologue. He’s turning and without making eye contact he’s pushing past the drama teacher, and he’s thinking only of the cat, the one he saved, he sees it lying on its back on a bed of pastel coloured silk cushions like macaroons, its diamond-studded collar glinting in the low light, a woman’s manicured fingers feeding oily mackerel, one by one, into its expectant mouth.

He moves through the next set of doors into the heart of the theatre, down a short black passageway, the air so cold against his flushed face. His eyes roam down the rows and rows of dark empty seats, until they reach the illuminated stage. So bright and so yellow, and she’s there, Girl, her arms hover in mid-air as he has caught her off guard, has pulled her from her scene, the world she was so deeply in. So quiet.
He hears the low mechanic humming of an air conditioning unit. What he imagines space to sound like.

Her hair shining all around her face. The skin her dress has left exposed, her legs, her arms, gleaming and yellowed, it’s difficult to tell where her body ends and the light begins. She is cut to fill the girl shaped void inside of him.

If a torrent of petals were to fall from the ceiling, making a path for him, he would cross over them to go to her. Instead he says the first thing he can think of. Calls out to her, over the divide of seats and stage and darkness and cold cold air and light.

Come to the dance with me!
From outside he can be seen, through his bedroom window. Boy sitting on his bed, peering into a small hand mirror. His lips are moving. Look closer, and you can make out the words.

*My name is Girl, my name is Girl, my name is Girl.*
Girl’s face seen through the lens of a camera. Clean and bare and colourless. It is a face in waiting, to have someone else’s dream reflected upon. A man’s voice is giving instruction, and her face is working itself into the appropriate responses.


She bends. She commits each feeling to memory so she’ll know how to fake it again. Who knows when she might be chosen to play the part.
I found things out today.

Boy at 8, waiting in the car with his sister after school while their mother attended to some errand. He remembers it well, the car was full of her vanilla perfume, like he was inside a cake being slowly baked. Sister looking out her window. Black clouds in the sky.

I learnt about bodies.

She began to tell him what, in time, would happen to hers. How a melancholy descended upon the girls in the classroom. As if they were all tiny dormant volcanoes.

One of the boys kept laughing. Saying how much better it was to be a boy.

He blushed. He had yearned to see her naked. To see what she had that he didn’t. He felt as if her body belonged to him. Because they were the same for so long. When they napped together as children, their foreheads pressed together in sleep, they often awoke and talked of dreaming the same dreams.

He reached out to touch her arm.

I want to be just like you. Just because I have a boy body doesn’t mean we can’t be the same genre.

She turned to face him.

It’s gender. You are so stupid.

No, please, I understand –

That’s the whole point, you don’t, and you never will. I shouldn’t have told you.

He could see the shining of the small white tears on her small white face and as she turned from him again, jerking away from his touch, he could hear the muffled sound of a door slamming closed, his mother’s huddled form hurrying through the rain to the car.

_Why did I not get to choose?_
He seizes her underwear from the bed.

Cotton, with a delicate, pale floral pattern. Limes, lilacs, peaches. The pattern beginning to warp a little from age, from love. Trimmed in black lace. A small bow at the back, above a tiny peep hole cut in the shape of a heart.

Girl watches in awe as he steps into them.

Travelling up his long legs in a tantalising snarled bundle. Unfurled, they fit his hips snugly – their maddening anatomical differences – her underwear does not accommodate him.

He turns to the mirror. From the back, he loves himself. The gorgeous crease of his buttocks revealed by the cut of the underwear, skin firm and creamy. They suit him from this angle.

He fancies arousal morphing inside her, seduced by him, in her undergarment. His pleasure lies only in his own image. As girl. Girl is merely spectator, he is fixated upon this body in the mirror.

Girl might think an introduction is taking place, between two selves. But Boy is adding to a long dialogue.

She reaches out her hand, pulls and snaps back the elastic of the waistband, seeking his attention. Her soft laughter, her flirtations falter when he turns around, and she sees he is crying.

He wants to pull off the underwear and see blood.
It’s dark outside. He has a window seat on the bus, the lights inside obscure his view out. He can make out vague, gloomy impressions, lights.

The surface of the glass is a mirror, his face shadowed, like the poorly developed photograph of a stranger.

The fabric of the woman’s blouse next to him rustles with each movement of the vehicle, her murmuring inertia. He hears a man speaking behind him, about his knee surgery. He hears *cut, sew, stitch*, as if the body were just a garment to be altered.

Stopped at traffic lights, through the closed window, he hears it. The car on the road below him, the driver’s window wound right down. Where the night air enters, a current of music meets it, pushes roughly past to make itself heard. A piano piece. Boy cannot see the face of the driver, who is revelling in this music, forcing the world to listen too. Victorious that they have made it through another day. Beauty unleashed.

Boy dips his head against the glass, drinks it in. He aches for these unexpected moments, chance encounters with the sublime.
Where are you tonight, Girl?

He summons an image of freedom. He can see her driving. Yes, that’s perfect. Where did she get the car from? Perhaps she stole it.

With her right hand she steers. With her left, she toys with the radio, scanning for buried treasure amid the clamour and static. Her back is softly cradled by a worn leather seat, and the window is down, the breeze ruffling her hair. Exposed shoulder gleams like polished wood as the car passes beneath streetlights. Her face is serene. Feet move on the pedals, shift through gears, with grace. Maybe she’ll smoke a cigarette. The same packet has been crumpled in the glove box for months.

She takes her eyes off the road for long stretches at a time, just to test herself. She’s a girl, she doesn’t need anything more than that, not even life itself. Thrilling in the danger, she drifts over serrated lines. It’s late enough, there are no other cars on the road, so she coasts, onto the wrong side of the road. The night and the road, open before her, like a flayed black lamb.

Accelerator foot pushes right down to the floor and the car moves off into the dark, so fast he cannot keep up, the noise of the engine making him frantic, he must regain control.

And he’s never seen snow before but sometimes he’ll picture it, coming down on him, a soft white blanket, out of nowhere, falling fresh from a summer sky.

She begins to slow down when she sees the tiny white flakes floating down onto her windscreen. Not by much, she flicks on her wipers and she just keeps on going, but her lips are turning into a small smile, the smile of a girl who knows exactly what is going on and exactly how to play it.
Your teachers are growing very concerned about you, Boy. Besides art, they say your grades are very poor. Some things you’re not even handing in. You’re daydreaming in class, gazing out the window, instead of paying attention…

The principal looks gravely at him, over steepled fingers.

You seriously need to be thinking about your future.

He feels the brushing of the feathers just beneath the skin, like they’re just on the verge of bursting through.

I am, Boy says. I am.
He feels as if he has run towards the cinema screen at full force, and instead of colliding with the hard surface of reality, has broken through to the other side.

Boy as bee gone into the flower, to collect its pollen. Hoping to emerge laden with nectar, legs softly powdered like expertly applied cosmetics.

He’s in her bedroom. At first, he just sat in a chair by her bed, like a shadow boxer, watching her sleep. A most quiet sleeper.

Picking up a snow globe from her bedside table and shaking it, holding it up to the window, the moonlight highlighting the snowy tableau, couples ice-skating around a castle. It reminds him of something from his childhood but he can’t quite place the memory.

Vase of long-stemmed red roses next to him, on the point of decay. He inhales from their decrepit petals, and leaning in, he’s so close to her, he reaches out his hand to touch her, he believes he can reach her, trying to fix reality. Watching his hand slice right through her.

Then he’s up and backing away, he trips, she doesn’t wake up. He’s in the bathroom now, where she would dress, apply cosmetics, the tools of transformation spread like an armoury before her. Like a painter, making herself up. Face expectant of colour, change, fables of metamorphosis running through her mind as a butterfly’s wings deposit their powder on her cheeks.

He breathes deeply, leaning down on the bathroom sink. His touch connects. His relief, he is real.

He’s come to this room so many times, he should know it all by heart, but curiosity seizes him and he opens the cabinet above the sink, begins to excavate objects. A pink hairbrush with long hairs entwined in its bristles. Deodorant, headache pills, toothpaste. Pastel pink boxes of tampons. Exactly the same brand as at home, he thinks.

And then it suddenly becomes too much. Surrounded by all of this dizzying female paraphernalia in this covert reconnaissance. His sister, his mother, girls, ovulating in unison, complicit, a rhythm he is painfully excluded from. The dialogue they would have shared about it, when his sister was inducted, his father distracting him.

You think you’re so good at this, he says aloud.
Opening her wardrobe, dresses like pretty maids all in a row, discarded skins, rage building, he is ill, feverish with jealousy, he has nothing but contempt for her silly accoutrements, her vagrant possessions. All soaking up the smell of dying roses. Taking on the look of darkened and wrinkled petals, curling up at the edges.

Hands groping through the dark, he hits on what his imagination has roamed to find, what he has conjured. Taking off his clothes, he slips into the cold silk shorts, slides the top over his head. He clumsily runs a tube of red lipstick around his mouth.

I can do this just as well as you, he tells her.

Contorting his body in front of the mirror, twisting, crouching down. His forearms pressed tightly to his chest, his breasts blooming under the pressure, his hands wedged between his thighs. He sees his gentle curves. He knows how beautiful he can be.

He climbs into bed beside her, their bodies tightly entwined. He cannot distinguish her limbs from his own.

You’re going to die one day, she whispers.

He puts his hands over her ears – she hears the sea.
He sees an old man’s face in his dream. Grief distorting his features beyond recognition, he is weeping, as Boy has never seen a man weep.

Losing her will be hard on you, the old man says.
He wakes up alone in his own bed.

Did I invent that? he wonders. The night has always taken on a different texture to the day, for him.

He stares at the ceiling, recalling the smell of her room, the rotting roses, the silk of her underwear against his skin. So this is love. She’s designing to take me over. She’s met me on this precipice, she is placing a long, elegant finger along the fissure in my life, and manhood is beckoning, way back on solid ground, like the figure of the drama teacher, big and solid and strong, tempting me back.

She makes it all look so easy.

And for once he doesn’t move his hands over his body, doesn’t inspect himself in the mirror, he pulls on his clothes, collects his books, and he goes.

Walking down the hallway towards his locker, he’s aware of a quiet descending as he passes, cutting through the clamour of chatter and the slamming shut of metal doors and heavy locks, heads turning to stare at him. Swan wings beat hard and frantic against his chest, caged and desperate to get out, in flight from this strange scrutiny, but he puts his head down and keeps going.

Three girls stand next to his locker, and they too quieten and watch him as he selects his books, grateful for the open door obscuring their gaze. But the eyes penetrate, they burn, he knows he has to emerge eventually. Closing the locker he turns to them, and asks, Can you please tell me why everyone is staring at me?

The three girls stare at him, a creature not quite human, not like anything they’ve seen or known. The girl in the middle reaches slowly into her handbag, and pulling out a small pocket mirror, opens it towards his face.

Oh, he says.

He’s been wounded. No. It’s – paint. Red lipstick is smeared across his face.

That’s a great colour on you, the girl says. What brand is it? I’m always looking for the perfect red.

Yeah, when I’m single, I only wear red. Like a small pleasure, just for me, that I can have when no guy is around to ruin my lipstick, another girl says.
Is this reality? Is this life happening to me? Does this happen outside of dreams, outside of theatre, the movies? And still they look at me, waiting for an answer.

What am I to you? he asks the girls.
They stare at him, dumbly.
Am I a boy right now? Or a girl?
With this red cosmetic painted on me, have I been inducted, he thinks, have I painted my way into being, into being her?
We don’t know what you are.
You’re a freak, the third girl hisses.
At first it stings him, the shriekish syllables escaping her lips and accosting him, but something about it soothes him. Better freak than boy. A third space.
Freak closing the locker door, walking away, turning back to blow them a kiss.
Standing in the dark at his window. He’s feathered, sexless. Looking down, feet comically huge and webbed, frightening, beak vicious. Swanlike, graceful. Ridiculous. This is a poor fit. The feathers have pushed through and I can fly away, wings pulsing and tensing, waiting for the brain command, big feet waiting to retract and fold into me, step right up, but I can’t do it. What if someone laughs at me? I’ll miss my mother. What if I regret it? Why can’t I keep, one foot in Boy, one wing on Girl. Will I slip, slide, break, be pulled, a mess of feathers and carnage, wreckage of boy parts, girl parts, bird parts? And where will I go? Who will love me? Winged freak with badly applied lipstick. I don’t have the hand for it. I’m a failed artist. I’m bound to clumsy maleness, this costume, this constant work, move right, speak right, don’t look at the flowers, don’t touch people, and don’t, and this is most important part, don’t ever cry. Be powerful. You have a penis, own up to it, it means everything, it means you can’t be Girl swan butterfly rose. You are closed, complete.

He kneels down, fists hitting at the sides of his head, beating fists, against his chest, his legs, then right between his legs, and then he’s on his back, and the pain is so bad he starts to laugh, I’ll show you, he says, GirlBoy creature writhing on the ground, he’s no longer the weary butterfly hovering in a pocket of air, refuses to be that, no.

You’ve got her, you’ve got her, don’t forget. She moves according to my mood. When she’s happy, I can see her, hair piled on top of her head in a hive, dancing around her bedroom, or soaring through the night in her spectral car, she glitters, trophy, princess, by day bees follow in her wake, by night, frogs leap from her path as she moves along abandoned streets.

Or sad – that’s when I like her best. Lonely. Morose, I’ll see her, despondent, come home and take off her dress. Lie on the bed, stare at the ceiling. Wishing I’d come to save her.

Climb on top of my back, her smooth legs sliding over feathers, wrapping around me.
There is a sheet draped across the painting now.

He has a new vision. His costume for Moth’s party. His debut.
Painting the imaginative portrait – what would she wear?
She’ll shine, she’ll smoulder.
He steps lightly across the carpet, practicing her walk. Murmurs softly to himself, getting the voice right, trying to remember its exact cadence.
It’s ok, he thinks, this behaviour, this is fine, it’s for the party, it’s the dress code.

I’m looking for a dress for my girlfriend. As a surprise.
The shopgirl eyes him curiously.
Here, he shows her a picture he’s drawn. It’s her dream dress.
Oh, how sweet, you even drew it! the girl says. Come with me.
He follows her through the shop as she rifles through racks, the clatter and explosion of hangers as they scrape along rails, she is hunting, foraging, she swears they have just the thing for her. His hands wandering along the rows of garments, catching and thrilling at the feel of the fabrics. Hoping, hoping.

Ah, here it is! she says.
And it is. His dream, his promise of a rose garden. Red and blooming and girl-shaped, with its tiny waist and big full skirt.
Oh my, he says.
Are you ok?
Everything tilts and shifts, so much beauty. He takes the dress from the girl’s hand, holds it against himself, caresses it against his body.
Can I try it on?
Eh, why not. It’s been a slow day.
And this time it’s him, parting the velvet curtains, stepping into the glorious dress, breathing in so tight, pulling up the zip. He spins round and round, everything illuminating, perfected, girl girl girl.

Leaving the dress shop like exiting the cinema. The stain of the film still on him.
Saturday, Saturday, when he will slide the black plastic bag out from under his bed, metamorphose, become real.
It’s now. Midnight. There’s a strange sound, shaking his sleep fog, trying to locate it. He concentrates. A sound somewhere between dying and ecstasy. He realises he knows, has heard it before, movie scenes that he’s squirmed and blushed through. Sister, he thinks.

Boy, disembodied observer, sees himself leave his bedroom, make his way down the hallway. Moonshine turning the floors and walls white, he moves sluggish, as if wading through boiled milk. The air smells different, sour, like something from long ago, childhood.

He presses his ear first to his sister’s door. Silence. In his dumbed down sleep state he doesn’t connect, doesn’t compute that the sound is elsewhere, louder, close, in their haste, they have neglected to close the door, he follows the sound right to the end, where the moon comes in the closest. Or maybe she whispered it to him, close the door, because she was in front, the leader, already pulling off her clothes, and he didn’t hear her, or wasn’t fully concentrating on speech, careless with creeping desire, he merely nudged it with his shoulder as his body was busy heaving forward, on a collision course with hers.

He watches them, he can’t look away. The horror of it. Pressed in a sticky spot by nausea, fascination, mother, bodies bared, shameless, to the moon, she’s so alive, he’s never seen her move like this. Mother and this man, entwined, they dissolve into a shared skin beneath the moonlight.

I’ve never witnessed real life passion, a distant voice contemplates. The closest I’ve come to it, happening upon two butterflies’ private coupling in the garden at dusk. On a fallen branch, they seemed so vulnerable on the ground, yet so intense, absorbed in their slow still union. Sitting watching them until it grew dark. So unlike this violence.

And those wide bird eyes he fought to forget.

After he went she had told him he was the only man in her life now. Man of the house, her sad smile, her neediness, he would do anything for her. I need you to need me so I can stay the same.

The flicker of girl petals unfurling inside him.

Midday. He wakes. He goes back to look for signs.
A small golden moth floats, shimmering, crumpled, drowned in a glass of red wine by the bed. Sacrificed for their pleasure.

A book of watercolour paintings he hasn’t seen before lies on the floor. With his toe he opens it. A used condom, pressed between two pages like a flower, souvenir of an evening of spent desire.

The world is unstable, everything is unfixed. He feels vaporous, he can’t distinguish himself from the solid things, the air.

Watching his mother on the page step delicately across water lilies, her skin adjusting to the palette of the painting. He recalls her cries from last night, so loud they cause ripples on the lake’s surface.
Hello. It’s me.

She hasn’t eaten for two days, and everything has taken on a fluid quality, surfaces are slightly ashimmer, the world dulled, softened, glittering, and she cosies on up to it, she shoots through seamlessly the fabric of the dress as she pulls it over her head and drags it down over her and she feels something lift higher and higher inside of her as the red rose dress lowers and lowers over her body. It’s a tight fit, but suffering has been synonymous with girl all along, it makes it all seem even more real to her.

These girl arts she’s learned from movies, these feminine rituals – she sprays perfume into the air, millions of tiny fractured petals explode around her as she steps through, murmuring, Hello, it’s me, a purring chant. Legs and armpits smooth and cool, her calves lick silk as they touch on passing.

Boy’s final masterpiece. She is infatuated with this woman.

I’m a movie star, she whispers.

The layers of the feathered blonde wig flick around her face, as she stumbles in the bedroom in her heels, arms extended as she wobbles, like trembling wings.

I can’t do this – you can do this – no I can’t – yes you can.

I can barely breathe. What if I faint, what if someone has to take off my dress, what they’ll see, their horror…

The bulge in his underwear, pink silk straining at the crotch. A dissonant physique. White socks turning grey, balled up in his bra cups. Blond hair in a stranger’s hand, scalp still attached.

A blooming fugitive, she leaves the house, and the land of boyhood. She avoids the streetlights, hugs the dark borders of people’s front yards.

There is the screech of tyres, Girl illuminated in the full beam of headlights, a red car hurtles past full of boy shapes, an elongated voice departing and arriving with the momentum of the vehicle screaming, HEY, SEXY!, but even as the voice moves away it’s jolted her. It has left its stain on her.

But you fooled them, she thinks.

Music is making shapes of the air.
Its mass and muscle and force surround the house, mixing with the lights, the clamour of voices, everything amplified, immediate, violent. She stops, closes her eyes. Pulls at the hem of her dress. Softly touches the crown of her new hair.

*Girl, girl, girl.*

Her eyes open, she can see through the front door from the street. Boys becoming girls, girls becoming boys, a chaotic haze of fast moving colour and sound.

Entering the party, she is aware of heads turning towards her. She detects a new thing, something fierce, animal, predatory male eyes in female disguise, as if glimpsed through dark trees. Like a jungle scene it takes a while for her eyes to adjust, to discern shapes, attitudes, and when the scene begins to come into focus, the distinct impression that something terrible is going to happen here. She will be prey.

She scans the crowd – oh – boys. Artless, thoughtless boys. All in shapeless floral dresses they’ve thrifted with mockery, stolen from grandmother’s closets, faces clownish with garish, ill-applied cosmetics, huge pink cheeks and frosted coral lips, heavy eyeliner migrating vertically and obliquely, muddling with facial hair. Ripped fishnet stockings. A few boys are in lingerie, their square bodies bulging and hideous in the smalls, fighting to escape the constraints of the delicate garments. Bra cups stretch hopelessly across pectoral muscles, small rolls of fat at their hips overlap the tops of tiny knickers. Some stagger and sway in high heels. One boy, in a large straw hat replete with artificial fruit, is passed out in an armchair, his knees spread wide open revealing his nudity beneath his skirt. Chipped red nail polish on his fingers.

And the girls seem just themselves. Girls can always be boys, she thinks. With every beat of the music it becomes more and more too much, as she sights another article or clothing or posture to remind her that she got this all wrong. A face looms up from the mass of bodies.

What are you, baby?

His breath sweet with liquor.

*Fool, fool, fool.*

She turns from the boy, scanning the room wildly for a familiar face, for Moth. She knows nobody, nobody is real.

Imagine if Girl were to appear. Dapper in a black trouser suit, bow tie, with a false beard and moustache glued to her face. Brogues a high polish. Bowler hat disguise, to hide under, until she would come to the rescue, she’d take my hand and lead me away…
But she won’t come. You are her.

My mother has that dress, a girl giggles as she pushes past.

Boy!

Someone is calling her name. Moth, far away, at the top of the staircase, trying to push past the fervour of bodies.

It’s like she’s jolted from sleep to waking as she turns and leaves, doused by the cool of the night. Picking her way down the front path, she stops, takes off one heel, then the other, and pitches them into the night.

Boy! Is it you? Hey, where are you going?

Moth’s heavy footfalls in his flat sensible shoes designed for movement. She feels his hand on her shoulder, feels him turning her body towards him, as if suddenly she has become weightless, without substance, Moth bending her body to his will so effortlessly. His breath smells like the boy’s inside. His eyes struggle to focus, he squints into her face, his eyes roaming, taking all of her in. And she realises she has seen this happen before, from another angle. Moth is checking her out.

Wow, he says.

Moth, I have to go.

You just got here, man.

She flinches.

They stand beneath a streetlight. From here it looks as if Moth has no eyes, just empty sockets, mascara pooling beneath them. His pink dress rustles as he sways, he cannot seem to keep still.

Taffeta, she thinks.

His feet are bare, grotesque. On his hands are white lace gloves, splitting at their seams. He places one gloved hand on her shoulder.

Hey, he says softly. Stay. Stay, honey, stay…

And then Moth’s eyeballs become visible. His face emerging from shadow, coming into sharper focus. Intrigued by the effect, she watches, as a dull thread of fear weaves inside, impelling her to move.

Stay, stay…

And then the other split glove hand is on her waist, and Moth’s mouth is on her mouth. And it’s nothing like the kisses she’s imagined. Moth’s lips seem to encompass hers, as if he is swallowing her lips. She panics at her lipstick being ruined. Moth pulls her closer, and instantly she feels both the wet surface of his
tongue and a sharp hardness against her groin and she breaks away, she runs, fast fast fast, Moth howling, wait, Boy, wait!

She flies, like swan wings have bloomed from her back, she feels the socks pushing their way out of her bra with every footfall on the pavement, she hears her dress rip, the wig sliding down across her face, obscuring one eye.

Boy’s dream a pile on his bedroom floor. Underwear, ripped dress, blonde wig as the crowning disaster. Stray translucent hairs gleam across the floor. He cannot look at his face. It will be the reflection of someone he doesn’t know, won’t ever know.

Just as he did a small child, he crawls beneath his bed. He just fits. In the space where his magic bag, full of dreams, lay just hours before, he now lies, trembling.
He passes through the day like air.

The disgrace of his father.

Moth’s large wet mouth. He pictures it, sucking the colour out of everything, everything grey.

He is walking, through the streets, through the place he has grown up in, grown into. Wondering where all the pained people hide. Everyone else seems so alive. Dog walkers, full of vitality. Children playing, laughing. A boy, leaning in to kiss a girl through an open car window. That one hurts the most. When their lips meet, colour is returned again, just a little, in a flash of sparkling red.

Last night he’d heard a siren ringing from far away. He wondered if it was an ambulance, if its sound would grow louder, if it would turn into his street.

Pushing through the day’s heat, in a long-sleeved shirt and crumpled jeans, mercifully held together at his waist by a belt, with a newly punctured hole. The excess leather hangs like a dejected tail.

This ill fitting body.

The jeans chafe against his left inner thigh, where last night, he emerged from underneath his bed and made a small, but deep incision there with a kitchen knife. Falling on his back with pain, gasping like a gutted fish.

*Coward. Freak. Weirdo. Is that a boy or a girl?*

His father’s voice, his sister’s voice, a chorus of voices, an eclectic collective from over the years, all joining in. Not even man enough to cut further, cut out this malignant thing that seems intent on destroying him.

As he craned his neck, swan like, to watch the blood collect and drip, across his smooth white skin, onto the floor, his own conjured menstruation, yes, and he started to laugh, despite the pain, in spite of it, because it felt so good as well. A hole in himself, to make it easier to shed his skin.

*Mother, you gave birth to a defective thing. Should I be grateful for the body I’m in? It goes – ten fingers, ten toes. Two legs, two arms. A fluttering heart.*

Holding a wad of tissues against the wound, he’d flipped through his book of maps. It calmed him, to remember his insignificance. One boy, one girl, in one city, in a world of boys, girls, and many cities. His fingers slipping on the silken pages – slip away, begin again. Wanderlust.
How can I know these places really exist, if I’ve never been? he wonders. There is so much that I believe, accept, blindly. Like being under the spell of a movie, in the cinema.

He saw himself, in the projection room of a theatre. Stopping the film that was running, letting it spool in spoilt ribbons to the floor, while he set up another. Like travel, like change, like putting on a better movie.

Moving from the floor, he limped to the window. The sun just beginning to rise. He could see her, restless, pacing back and forth in front of his house.
Useless and graceless this boy body, it stumbles through the school day. A wet moth fresh from its underground cocoon, pushed through the dirt, the filth and debris, the loam sticks to him as he stumbles along, still folded up into himself. His wound wincing with each step.

He avoids the drama theatre, fearing an encounter with her, imagining her disgust at his unravelling. Boy broken, and making no attempt to disguise it.

Life drawing, the last class of the day. A large man poses himself in the centre of the room. Rolls of flesh like fixed waves cascade around his abdomen. His face proud, haughty, like a royal from a forgotten era.

Boy begins to commit him to paper, laying the foundational strokes before building the man’s body. And everything else falls away as he is absorbed in this task, this one art. Eyes moving from flesh man to paper man, birthing him anew.

When he surfaces, stands back to assess the work, he cannot believe what he’s done. The body he has drawn is unmistakably feminine. Going back under, shifting the lines, staring hard at the man’s body before him. He is failing. Try as he might, he cannot stop the body on the page becoming a woman’s. Soft edges defy him, curvature, breasts, a roll of flesh obscuring the pelvic region mocking him. She inhabits the page, ready to rise, all woman.

How deep and black and endless the ocean looks at night.

He inhales its salt scent and believes it is restoring him. Watching its poise, its self-contained repetitive acts, of roll and crash, tide line advancing then retreating, he dreams of a life like this, monotonous, predictable, known. No surprises, just flat line consistency. Feeling the right self beneath hands every morning. With power, dignity, sparkle, like moonlight shattered on the moving surface. Life sometimes calm, then fierce, but as reliable as the moon.

He leans back against the bench, closes his eyes. The old swimming pool in the park behind him abandoned for the day by the skaters. Skid marks patterning its surface, crash scenes, endings unknown. She keeps rising to the surface of his thoughts, the woman he drew, created from man. Who she might be. She stares back at him in his thoughts, in her nudity. Is she offering herself up to him?
I already have a girl, he thinks to tell her.

A loud, grating laugh ripples past him, the sound swallowed by the sea, but its tone is familiar somehow, it puts him right on edge. A cluster of voices, coming closer, their talk wild and unhinged, he opens his eyes, and glances down the path. He is felled. It’s him.

Freckled face, arm around a girl, her face shining, features swimming with her laughter. Two other boys lag behind. Boy slowly turns his head away, like a creature attempting camouflage, desperate to blend in, merge with the surrounds, if he doesn’t see me, doesn’t recognise me –

Hey! I know you!

The group stop right behind the bench.

It’s him! This is the guy! Rescuer of cats! The hero!

He dissolves, as if his body is slowly being drained of colour, blood, bone, like a sheet of skin left folded on the bench, helpless, waiting its fate. Perhaps someone will come…

Cat man, what are you doing out here, all alone? No other lives to save?

The girl, hysterical, screeches with laughter, making his ears ring.

This one high note…

Hey! Answer me! the boy shouts, smacking him across the back of his head.

Boy slowly turns to face them. How strange, he thinks, to be in this moment. These faces. Human. Crowding around me. Wishing me harm. The girl, staggering now with laughter, knees buckled, swaying. She cannot control herself.

Stand up, pussy boy. I’m talking to you.

He stands.

The fronds of the palm tree above them clatter together in the wind, a staccato chop, like knives sharpening. There are tiny love hearts carved into the trunk, he notices, two sets of initials, one above, one below each engraving. He doesn’t care what happens to him.

Empty your pockets.

Wordlessly Boy obeys.

Guts his jean pockets, their tongues lolling out, coughing out the debris of his private world, his bower of larceny. Crumpled cinema tickets, their ink creased and faded. Front door key. A long white whisker, from his own cat, that he’d been
fascinated by. A stub of charcoal. Then – regrettably – out with the swatch of fuchsia silk, floating like a strange petal, to the ground.

The boy’s foot comes down on the swatch. He bends, collects it between his fingers, rubbing it slightly between his fingertips as he holds it up to inspect it closer. And for a moment, Boy wonders if it is having the same entrancing effect on him. The boy’s face seems dreamy suddenly, glimpsed through clouds. Boy imagines him closing his eyes, sighing, confessing, This feels extraordinary.

The boy flicks the petal of fabric into the air.

What’s that you’ve got there, gesturing to Boy’s black portfolio.

Handing it over, the boy rests it on one knee, unzips. Reaching in, he pulls out the drawing from tonight.

Oh, you’re a pervert. Drawing naked ladies. Look at this!

He hands the drawing to the girl. She studies it closely, her mouth twisting downward.

Oh gross, she’s fat!

The boy drops the portfolio. The rest of the drawings inside become animated, act on Boy’s own wishes, they unfurl with the wind and airborne they flee into the night. Boy watches them go. Nothing matters. He retreats further into himself, as if he is just a shell, a derelict home begging to be defaced.

So we’re even now. You took something from me, I took something from you. See, I’m a nice guy. I play fair. I’ll even let you hit me first. Go on.

He steps right up, right in Boy’s face.

His breath a foul bouquet, greasy food, cigarettes, alcohol. And more than anything, it’s the ugliness of it all that tips Boy, that undoes him. The treatment of his art, tarnishing the body of the woman he worked so hard to create. The smell of this boy, the girl, the girl. So far removed from what he’s dreamt, a girl that could not be conjured from his delicate, rich, inner world. And he’d thought himself powerful.

Boy begins to cry.

The group silent, the sound of the waves moving in and out, the hiss of the ocean spray, the clattering of the fronds. His drawings filling with air, white on the foaming shore. Pale, drowning bodies. Their lines running, obliterated. A garden inside him yellowing and dying, scent of putrid roses.

Come on, let’s go, he hears her say. You can’t hit a girl.

Boy opens his eyes. He sees their confusion.
Let’s take off, boys.
He watches them leave, salt tang in his mouth.
She saved me, he thinks.
Show me, he says. Show me how to be you.
Make me up. Paint me into existence.

Are you afraid of dying?
If I can’t ever be real, then yes.
Be real.
What if I can’t? I’ll be alien.
Then be alien.
Oh, but I can’t.
Then just live in dreams.
But there is so much waking.

When Boy and Girl speak together, it sounds like flowers moving. Soft, rustling, creating warmth and static. Electric. Makes their hair stand on end like a charged red balloon passing over their head.

Their faces pressed together, on the point of merging. He feels the smoothness of her cheek, the faint floral scent of its powder. She feels the slightest suggestion of stubble.

What do you like best about your body?
That my heart beats.

I think of all these things for my future, Girl says. Places I want to see, to live in. Lovers I’ll have, food I’ll eat, the smells of cities, the colours of people, the touch of new possessions – I wonder if I really want all that, or if the reality would prove to be crushing, mundane. If I’d rather not dwell in the dream of it, imagined explorations, in another life. Then it will all be exactly as I want it to be.

She knows everything, he realises. She has slept between these blue sheets, in my jeans when I’ve fallen asleep. She’s placed her hand inside my pants and felt revulsion. Has felt hollowed out with loneliness, has watched with dull eyes the grey swans clouding my eyes when I’m about to cry. Her, just outside the frame, out of
focus. Like constantly walking in half way through a film. A foot inside the cool dark theatre, a foot out.

   He lifts her dress, sees the scar on her thigh, barely healed. She shrugs.
   But don’t trust anything I say, Boy. I’m an actress.

Where did you come from?
   My father was a nightingale. My mother was a mermaid.

So that’s all you do, he says, watching her shrink with fear. You try being someone, then you move on. Escaping yourself all the time.

   I don’t want to be one person all the time. One character. Be made real beneath anyone’s gaze.
   His dream exactly.
Walking down to the esplanade, drawn to the sea. Roaring, the waves are cut in the shape of a lioness advancing and retreating, her mouth open with her protective rage.

Cutting through the skate park, the nexus of his nightmares. Walking right towards him, in a fatal beeline, is the boy with the freckled face.

The boy smiles. Leers.

He realises he’s not himself. He’s Girl. In her body.

Behind the skate bowl, concealed from sight, past the swings, the slide. The bodies of butterflies expiring in the grass, wings fluttering limply. The freckled face boy, unbuttoning her white lace blouse.
A child stares at him as he waits for the bus.

Her blue eyes narrowed, quietly assessing him, as if trying to figure out what he is. He shifts uncomfortably on the seat, looks away. He still feels her eyes.

Children are the worst, he feels apprehended when their gaze lingers on him a little too long. Like they can see right through to the heart of what he is. Abnormal. A freak. *Freak,* she’s thinking, he knows it. She’s unveiling him in her child mind.

Then the seat is vibrating as she’s scooting across, closer to him, her father watching her, Boy tensing up, shaking, she puts one moist little hand onto his arm and leans up, whispers.

I know your secret.

She smiles.

But it’s ok, I won’t tell anyone. I promise.
How much longer now?

All the years, the years, the time and distance between them, stretching ahead…

Spring is ending. Clouds drift overhead. Small lilac moths flutter in the grass past his eyes. They pass through him, tickling, making him tremble.

   The bell rings.

   School’s out for summer, freak! a boy screams past him.
Stops, stares at it for a long time. The dead bird by the side of the road.

All its feathers picked clean off its body. Its stunning frailty, just a lick of pink skin and a network of tiny bones. The sadness of its closed eye, a mournful sphere, never to be reopened. He wonders at how birds can only really be seen when all the life is drained of them. When they can’t fly away.

So few feathers seem to make up a wing, that propels them into the sky. Fleshy folds against its side, wizened skin on its feet. The alarming beak. A small figure of wax.

He takes out his notebook, flips to an empty page, drawn girl figures flicker across the leaves, animated, morphing and moving like a film playing. Stooping, he draws the lifeless bird.

Footsteps, he glances up. A boy and a girl approach, their arms wrapped around each other. He coos in her ear. Like birds, he thinks. They nuzzle up against each other, preening, eyeing him warily. As if he might encroach on their union.
Do you like it?
   She stands in his doorway, posing, her hands in her hair. So little of it left.
   You cut it all off?
   She laughs.
   Yes! How strange it all looked on the floor, like a little animal.
   He looks closely at his mother, hair cropped close against her skull now.
   Emphasising her smallness, her fragile neck, her delicate bones.
   Apparently I look like a little bird now, she says.
   Who told you that?
   But she doesn’t respond. All he can think is, my hiding place is gone. He took
   shelter there as a child, burying his face against her neck, beneath all her hair.
   Cloaked.
   Where do I go for protection now? Whose wing can I retreat beneath?
   And yours just keeps getting longer and longer.
   She pauses, staring at him.
   My pretty boy.
   He smiles, slant.
He’s walking back into the hospital, back through time. Night time, it’s quiet, not many visitors. He turns their heads though, the ones that see him. Heels loud through the corridors. Men look up in advance, anticipating a woman, entering their line of sight. A real woman, seamlessly passing by.

Father’s room number known by heart now. The old man should’ve been unconscious by now, but he’s lying there, eyes open. Conveniently, the rest of his body is comatose, as if anaesthetised.

Dad, he says.

The man’s eyes watch him as he rounds the bed, comes up close.

He picks up his father’s limp hands, smug at how easily they come away from the bed, obeying. Picks up his father’s hands and he places them on his chest, pressing them hard onto his breasts.

You should know, before you go, this is me. This is who I am.

Father saying nothing, eyes rolling around in his head as if seeking to flee, hoping the body will follow their line of flight.

I’ll keep growing, Dad. You can’t stop me.

And he holds him there, tight against him, as his father withers and dies, and if he had been armed with a more threatening weapon he could make him say, daughter, daughter, until he sounded like he meant it, until he was brought to life.
If dreams come true – I will tilt my head back and feel my hair, like a long sheet of blunt cut silk, skim my buttocks. My shoulders will narrow. My cheeks become rounder, bones having softened. My hands will cup mounds of breasts and my nipples, rose pink, will protrude to meet air. My waist will invert, my hips expand. Smooth skin, nothing until my fingers reach a slit in my flesh. *Labia vulva vagina clitoris cervix uterus* mine. Hymen, like hymn. My personal poetry.

All the pieces she takes for granted. I build her.

His blueprint a childhood book on anatomy, puberty and reproduction. Flicking through it with his sister.

Boy – that one is you. She pointed.

The dullness of the male silhouette. He placed his fingers gently on the female, tracing her.

She’d hit his hand away. That’s for girls! she shouted.

What were the words…


These elixirs of life. He’d thought, maybe one day, when I’m grown up, with grown up money, I could find them in a shop. Bottled and sold. I’d drink them every day if I had to. Like a witch in a fairytale, with her source of virgin’s blood to retain her youth.

Imagining a secret cellar in his grown up house, with a well hidden door. Containing a lifetime supply of womanhood, stacked neatly on shelves that reached to the ceiling.

But he realised he wouldn’t be able to leave the house, his secret source. Lest he transform back. He’d be trapped there forever. A private artwork witnessed by no one. Lest he let manhood infiltrate again. Creep back, poison black and gnarled and wicked.
Come on, let me cheer you up.

She’s leaning against her car, engine running, its low thrum causing her whole being to vibrate. She’s a million shimmering particles.

But she’s not she – she’s Boy. He wonders how she got his clothes. His uniform, it’s on her body, faded loose blue jeans, oversized t-shirt. Scuffed shoes, mismatching laces. Hair like his. Boyish and beautiful.

She hands him a plastic bag and he knows just what to do. He changes in the back seat as she drives. He tries to catch his reflection in the rear view mirror as the car moves, his reflection flickering, like badly wound film on a projector, as the mirror shudders. It pleases him though, this girl. Teenage girl dream, embracing the coming summer. On a drive with her boyfriend. Heartbeats so fast.

A sprig of lilacs on the dashboard. Their scent filling up the car. It makes them feel alive.

Boy looks at Girl, through the space of air warmed by the scorching hot, cloudless day. Knows her body is stewing beneath the layers of clothing. Boy’s flesh on display in a fresh summer dress.

Heading towards town, a pair of small lemon yellow butterflies, twinning, as they spin in the air, cartwheel, too absorbed in their dance, in each other, they head towards the vehicle, threaten to smash into the windscreen. Boy holds his breath. Girl swerves to avoid them and they glance off the side of the car, jettisoned, tumbling in their wake.

Girl turns to him and says, Boy, your brain is made of gold.

When she pulls into a parking lot, Boy freezes. Wraps his arms around his body in an attempt to cover himself. On a telegraph pole there is a poster with a smiling girl’s face on it, the words MISSING above her.

Come on, Boy. You can do it, she says. Watching him quiver in the back.

The scene of Moth’s party replaying in his mind, the footage cold and sharp, the stares when he entered the house. Moth’s mouth, the sweet smell of it, leering towards his in the darkness.

Girl steps out of the car, opens the back door, holds out her hand.

Take it, she says. Step out from behind the wings of life.

His hand, delicate, limp swan wing in her grip. Her shocking strength.
And they move through the streets, through the day, like this. Hands entwined.
Imposters. Girl in costume, Boy clothed in truth.
Everything glitters in the heat, smiles light up their faces, because they move unimpeded. No one seems to notice them. They are ordinary. They slice through
crowds of shoppers like hot knives, and people merely part and fall away, like gentle
waves. Their burdens swapped.

*My body just got lost on the way to Girl.*
She absently plucks a tiny white jasmine flower from a bush that hangs over a
fence. Closing her eyes as she sniffs it, collecting its pollen.
You can’t do that!
Do what?
As Boy, boys don’t pick flowers and smell them. Swoon over them.
She stops walking.
I’m better at being Boy than you, she says. I bend it to my own will.
He quietens.
You can have it then, he says.
Noticing her laces have come loose on one shoe, he bends to tie them for her.
And he can’t help it, he finds himself rolling up one jean leg, kissing her firm white
calf, white as rose petals. The brush of his lips bruises her.
She looks down at him, the sun all around her.
My skin is paper thin.
She takes hold of the front of his dress, and, laughing, drops the small flower
down inside. He feels its sticky sap against his moist skin.
I’ll get you for that! he says.
But he’s thinking, *I can be you, and better.*
Don’t die, Mum. Don’t leave me.

He’s following his mother around the garden, he can’t seem to keep up with her. She’s dying, he knows. She grows more and more faint, until she is almost just a vague outline of a mother, an artist’s impression. The portal through which he entered the world, closed forever.

Look, she says.

She points to a small green chrysalis that hangs suspended on a branch. Lustrous, otherworldly its shell. A black shape on its surface, like a shadow from the inside. A woman, her body curved to fit inside. Her shadowed stomach swollen, she gently grasps her belly in sleep.

His mother laughing.

She pushes her fingers beneath her jaw, lifts up the mask.

Girl.

What if she dies. Leaves. She is, after all, just costumes and a getaway car. Movies. Nothing solid to her. His invention, his conjuring.

Hey, Boy! she calls, trying to get his attention.

But she’s talking to someone who will soon no longer exist.

The girl with the bee in her hair – sting me.
Girl flips through the gossip magazine, its high gloss pages filled with gossamer women, actresses, famous, stumbling from nightclubs in high heels and long coats, eyes a little blurry, red lipstick subtly smeared, faces illuminated, pure white in the glare of the camera flashes.

She shudders at the thought. She hates to be photographed. So anxious at what she might become, what may be captured by the camera. Looks different in every photograph ever taken of her. Not many, admittedly.

She sees her feminine beauty as something dragged along behind her, through the dirt, like tin cans on the back of a wedding car.

Sitting in the diner, late at night, big white light trained on her like a spotlight, directly above. Reflected back off the table. Seat by the window. She’s the only customer. Half eaten slice of cake, black coffee.

Dressed to the nines, as if she’s come from somewhere glamorous, an audition.

Came to look at the script. Spread in front of her, attention caught by the women in the magazine. She must focus. She’s been learning it for weeks. A romance. Learning both the girl and the boy parts. Knowing she can play either convincingly, a star at becoming.

Boy. Thinks of him. Her fingers brushing over her lips. He’s never acted. Never kissed her. And yet – waking up, she swears she tastes his breath in her throat. As if he’d fed off her in the night.

Remembering, six years old, a girl producing a tube of lipstick at lunchtime, hot pink, the colour of doll lips, she passed it round a group of girls, giggling, smelling it, drawing luminous circles around their thumbs and forefingers, bony talking mouths imitating the speech of their mothers, approaching them, unscrewing the lid, applying the colour to yearning lips, that’s not for boys! – Wait!

Whose memory is that? She grips the table, seeking solidity. Was that in the script? It happens more than she’d care to admit, this strange bleed of life and play, forgetting where she ends and the character begins.
Dad, wait!

Following his father. Lost him in the crowd.

It’s a parade.

It’s hot out and there are bodies everywhere, dancing, free. Skins red turning to brown under the sun.

Floats, filled with men. Men in costume, feathers, sequinned dresses, sky-high heels, ankles shuddering, rolling, as some slowed down murky beat rolls over them, like a lethargic heartbeat amplified.

Wigs of cascading hair, pearls, diamonds, makeup smearing, long talons of red fingernails, they reach for him as he pushes through.

Smells of body odour, sweat, dehydrated breath, chaotic floral perfumes.

And the swans, giant ones, lumber through the crowd, their huge black clawed feet slapping the road, making everything jump a little on impact like an eroded record needle on vinyl, long necks undulating with grace, beaks snapping, faces coming down to peer at outfits that take their fancy.

Someone grabs him, and he turns, face to face with the drama teacher. Frocked, black eyes and huge pink lips, a line running across his forehead where his wig had been. Hair sparse and shaven, like a plucked bird.

We all pretend, he says, the man’s lips moving but the sound heard instead inside Boy’s head.

No, I’m not like you! wrestling furiously to free himself, the teacher’s nails scratching his arms.

Dad! he screams. Help me! Certain he saw him go this way.

He hears the sound of ripping, stops moving to see a seam opening up in the teacher’s dress, watches it move up and up his leg. He cries out as if in pain.

Boy makes his move, nails at the back of his neck, that voice in his head, urgent, Life is just a moment, Boy! and all of the bodies around him melting, as if deflating, plucked roses left in the sun too long, swans turned rogue, eating up the withered bodies like flimsy water plants.
He hears the flowers speaking.

He knows they are speaking to him, yet they talk in no language he knows.

Imagines they are calling him *princess*. Wonders if they look at other species of flower in envy, wishing for another’s petals, colours. Bigger, bolder blooms, slimmer leaves. Prettier patterns, like the spattered paint effect on orchids, the lurid chemical spills on pansies, like strange animal faces.

Like the girls at school he’s heard, wishing their body parts were differently proportioned.

Breasts, bum, legs, stomach, thighs, arms, *ugh, this face, I’m so ugly…* I want to be more than that, he thinks. A whole thing. Good in entirety.

Rose, he thinks, writes it down. That’ll be my name. Petals packed in close to protect me. Red for power, to ward off predators. My new name.
What would you do if you lost me?

His mother’s face, as if she’s been stung. A small hand flutters to her chest.

Why would you ask me that?

Sometimes… I… I didn’t mean to hurt you, I – sometimes I just think… well, I know I’m going to change, and I worry you won’t love me anymore.

Of course you’ll change. A bit anyway. But that doesn’t mean I won’t love you anymore – what’s wrong, Boy?

And gently she takes him, pulls him close to her, and it’s shocking, this solidity, this sure, firm contact of two bodies, it’s like a cold glass falling into hot water, all the pieces fragmented, he shatters inside.

He’s babbling through tears, but what if I become a monster, what if I repulse you, what if I – what if I –

And it’s then that he notices her. Not sure how long she’s been standing there. Leaning against the doorway, inspecting her nails, yawning a little. Disgusted with his display.

You’re too weak to be Girl, she sneers.

I won’t stop loving you, ever, his mother whispers into his hair.

But his crying’s stopped, his focus has shifted onto Girl. Her body glows then fades, like oil on water.

But sometimes you just don’t know people, is all, he says quietly.

He knows he has to act fast. The high school dance just days away.

Her lipstick stain on his bedroom mirror. Was deep red, now oxidising to pink pastel.

He’d painted his lips and kissed the glass.
She drives though the suburban streets in the yellow car, listless, agitated, eats from a bag of chocolate coated honeycomb that slides around on the passenger seat. Tiny flecks of golden crumbs collecting in her lap, smears of chocolate melting, dirtying her dress. She’s growing careless, she craves action, lights, camera. She knows the part by heart, has rehearsed it to death, knows every line, of every character, she waits now to just *live it*. Become it.

Drives past a huge billboard, a giant white swan taking off in flight from a rippled lake’s surface, an advertisement for a new television, with better vision, enhanced colours. She laughs, wonders, don’t the advertisers realise how vicious swans are? Fooled by their demure, their grace. She makes the sound of their hissing as she coasts along, *hhhhh hhhhh, coming to get you, Boy!*

Nothing can touch her now. No stage fright, no special effects.

Lights flash and boom gates lowering as she approaches the train tracks, she sighs, comes to a stop. Rolls down the window and closes her eyes, listens for the train coming from such a distance, feels its vibration, its thunder, like the rolling momentum of summer. Her heartbeat quickening.

The actress. Just a backdrop for his dreams.

The train in its roar and fury streaming past.

A brown moth, displaced by the sound and the light, alights on her upturned face. And the chaotic flashing yellow lights by the tracks give the impression of a life in a fractured fast forward loop projected onto her skin, grub to cocoon to moth, then back again, until the light dies away.
Wakes to the sound of the radio, down the hall, from his mother’s bedroom.

First day of summer today, folks, says the weather report.
The hottest day on record is predicted.
Makes people crazy, he hears.
Act out of character.
Flesh on display.
Time to get out your summer dresses, girls.

Wad of limp silk in his fist. Sleeping swan. Rising. Waking up.
Wears white cotton knickers with a satin bow at the front beneath blue jeans to celebrate his last day of high school. He picked the smallest size so that they’d contain him, restrict all movement, he feels the elastic biting into his inner thighs, creating ruptures of chafed red flesh.

He watches Moth, with the others, as they count down the final seconds until the last bell.

10…
like watching a very old film…
9…
a generation of young people…
8…
he has nothing to do with…
7…
their huge smiles…
6…
slow moving mouths…
5…
stumble, sway against one another…
4…
like old people, rapidly aged…
3…
no control of their movements, faculties
2…
youth evacuates…
1…
I’ll never grow old.
I’ll never be this Boy again.

The riot of feathery winged creatures in his belly as boys and girls scream and run all around him, fleeing for their lives, he sees white feathers falling from the sky and raining down on them all.
A reconnaissance, a dry run.

He drifts along, through the main streets of the town, acting aimless, carefree, white feathers in his hair like an angel messenger.

He can see the blinking sign of the hotel in the distance.

What if she’s there? Looking from the window?

Hope the dark hides him, blackens his plans, his person, like a shadow running along a wall chased by a car’s headlights.


The night turns inside out.

If his mother were there, she’d gently manoeuvre him away from the bright lights, but she isn’t, and so he keeps going, pushes through the crowd of bodies standing on the pavement beneath her window.

He jumped, they said.

Or was he pushed? they said.

The bloodied man, leaking onto the pavement.

He recognises him.

Boy falling from a tree. Small Boy, skin on his knee splitting like soft fruit. He stopped crying when he saw how deep the wound was, inspecting it, wondered how far inside himself he could see. The deep unfathomable inside of himself. Tree he’d climbed to impress his father, tree his father would eventually cut down.

*Guess what, girls when they’re older start to bleed between their legs, and boys do too, except their blood is blue.*

A girl had told him that at school. But he never bled, and when he was first cut open that day, he was red all the way through.

The drama teacher’s eyes wide and white inside his bloodied face. Boy watches him, sees his fingers moving, spasming, beckoning. Boy sees himself go to the drama teacher, directed towards him, kneeling down beside him, hear his loud rattling breaths, put his ear towards his mouth, hear him gasp, barely audible through the crackle and static and interference, hear him say, *Be a man.*

Boy slowly standing up, pushing back through the crowd, as the night widens, the shot pans out above all of the audience to this most terrible of scenes, Boy sees the
night enlarging, stretching, way out past through the city, to the future, towards all of the tomorrows, to where one day this will be so long ago.

Boy sees her walking down the front steps of the hotel. When she gets to the bottom steps, she gasps, her hand flutters to her chest, she might faint.

A man standing nearby acts quickly, reaches out to steady her. And he’s forgotten for an instant the dead man, the blood, the carnage, the lights and the wailing siren and the murmuring crowd, the smell of blood and exhaust fumes of all the cars in the street who’ve stopped to watch it all. Entranced as he is by this swooning creature, her beauty, the way light seems to seek her out and shine all around her.

Excuse me, miss, I can’t help but ask, are you an actress? You look like a movie star.

And Girl, she’s become so good, master of her craft, she doesn’t need to tell him anymore, doesn’t need to use that tired old line that she can be whatever he wants her to be. She already is.
It’s as if one, clear, high note is ringing right through the night, through these streets that smell of spring’s slow decay, petals of flowers yellowing, cooked by the warming days, through these streets where cars and dogs sleep, slowly relinquishing their heat from the day. This one note, guiding him through the dark, and he’s thinking how the night makes anything seem possible, that feeling, it just comes on right as night begins to fall, as he’s in the youth of the nighttime ahead, and he allows himself a smile as he watches his sexless shadow fracture and lengthen and bloom, then merge with it all.

These streets he grew up on, where he ran wild in the sun in the summertime with the neighborhood boys, while the girls sat in whispering circles on front lawns, impenetrable, eyeing the boys with derision in their sheer filmy dresses. Bars of sunlight gleaming from their slim shins.

These streets where everything will go on looking the same despite him.

And it’s like he already knows exactly how it will all unfold, tonight, the tomorrows, but maybe this strange certainty is born of being young, deeply afraid, and wanting to follow this one clear note on and on, like a humble, mindless vocation that will offer some deep reward for the spirit, not the flesh. Just a being, not a boy, following a call. Just a being, not a Boy, climbing the stairs of a hotel, the streets below showing no signs of death or bad dreams, just a Boy entering through an open door which leads to many strange rooms, where the bodies of strangers mass and surge, living private transitory lives before they move on, unknown, unseen by him, just Boy moving towards her door, raising his fist to knock, his other hand propping the painting against the wall as he adjusts himself, the deep red velvet dress he wears beneath his suit riding up, spilling up over the waistband of his trousers like incriminating lava. His skin itches, sweats. A red rose gritted between his teeth.

This sentence just comes into his head and it repeats over and over like an otherworldly refrain, I’m breaking into bloom, I’m breaking into bloom, I’m breaking into bloom, I’m the disappearing boy.

Oh, how he hates goodbyes.

He imagines her waking up inside. Born each time he evokes her. As his fist connects with the door, he feels her merging with the day, unfolding softly like petals from sleep. Blinking her eyes, trying to remember where she is, what she was dreaming of. Running her hand along a row of costumes at the back of a theatre. A yellow car, out of fuel, abandoned at the side of a road. An orange butterfly, trapped
after hours inside the school building, burnt orange fizz of fury, feeling for the wind
that would carry it away. Looking down at her hands, covered in its gold dust pollen.

She can’t remember what day it is.

The door pushes open as soon as he makes contact with it.

The smell – stale, like old sweat from night terrors, cat pee, rotten apples,
putrid flowers. Bed a mess of sheets like a strange nest. Empty wine bottles on the
kitchen table. An empty black suitcase open on the floor.

He takes the rose from his lips, places the painting down against the window,
as he observes the room. So unlike how he’d imagined it.

He can see her. She’s standing in the bathroom, looking into the mirror. The
light so dim, he can’t tell if her eyes are open or closed. Hair throwing copper tones
under the cheap fluorescent globe. To be inside that head. To see life from that
perspective. To look down the length of her body and be inside her. To hear people
point towards you and say Yes, that girl over there, she knows the answer.

Girl, he says.

She turns her head. And it’s the way she turns her head, with such grace, such
perfection, hordes of tiny white moths are conjured, they flicker against his skin from
the inside. Her nearness, setting the world softly aflame.

She turns her whole body towards him, she steps into the light of the room,
and immediately he can see, she is drunk. Eyes shot with red and struggle to focus,
mouth loose and wine stained. He didn’t script this. She leers at him, her teeth tinted
pink. Mascara spread blackly beneath her eyes. She wears a man’s soiled white
business shirt, her bare legs look yellow and bruised.

For me? she gestures clumsily towards the rose in his hand. Beautiful, Boy.
Just as you’d give an actress on closing night. I’ve performed well then?

He drops the rose to the floor. It’s all coming apart, she’s stepping out of
character, she’s taking over, her hands working to lower the red velvet curtains before
the final act has finished.

She’s behind him, pushing him into the bathroom. I need to get myself ready
for the dance. And she’s rifling through a makeup bag, pulling out small luminous
bottles and containers and brushes and wands, and he is powerless to stop her, can
only stare dumbly into the mirror and wonder at the strangeness of seeing them both
reflected there. Boy and Girl. Never seen together like this before, both in the frame.
Each time she reaches back into the bag, scrambling to find what she’s looking for, he thinks of her hands viciously shredding petals like his dreams.

He can hear faint music coming through the walls. Operatic, a woman’s high tremulous voice, like wailing. He shivers, his skin pimpling, swan feathers itching to burst through.

Now, she says, let me paint you.

Right up close to his face now. The force of her gaze seems to move him, he lowers himself until he is sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

Your eyes, he says stupidly. They’re blue. I thought they were green.

Same as you, she says.

She begins to create him. Layering perfumed beige oils, crushed rose petals for his cheeks, makes a silhouette of his lips then fills in the blanks, scarlet, she ignites them.

So strange painting someone else’s face. Everything’s in reverse.

Then, Close your eyes.

Brush bristles on eyelids, a warm finger, the sharp tip of a pencil. As if he were the canvas. His eyelashes being coaxed skyward, growing heavier. She begins on his eyebrows, plucking them from the root, but he makes no sound, no objection to the pain. He understands beauty as pain, always has, imagines the agony of a caterpillar’s skin bursting as it chrysalises.

His hair being combed. Rippling mermaid hair, sighted by a drunken sailor, a glimmer through sea water.

Smoothes off his jacket. Unbuttons his shirt. Unzips his trousers. Unlaces his shoes.

Oh, you beautiful creature, she says softly.

He opens his eyes.

I’m you, he says.

And then her lips are against his. True love’s transformative kiss.

Imagine different circumstances. Two parts making a whole that they’d show off to the world. Lifting her dress over head in his bedroom, climbing into his bed. She ok being Girl, him ok being Boy. Bodies shifting in love beneath their skins. Girl his sanctuary. Dress pooled on the floor, he’d admire how it looks on her body, not once would he wonder what it would look like on him, what the fabric would feel like against his skin. Watching them from above, as if through some spyhole in the ceiling.
– no, he’d be there in the moment, in his skin, he would see only her. If only they had a normal love.

But he feels nothing from her kiss.

He tastes the wine on her lips, her faintly sour breath, flawed, real. He would never let himself go like this as a girl.

Pulls away from her, her lips still in the shape of her kiss.

At the doorway, he’s pushing his feet into a pair of her shoes, laces that wrap around his ankles like ballet slippers.

Be your own girl, Boy! she screams at him, coming at him, and she’s pushing him, he’s stumbling backwards, tripping up from the unravelling ribbons around his ankles.

Stop, stop!

You think being Girl is just about long hair and dresses and makeup, air and fluff and artifice, and she’s shoving him, she pushes him hard and he’s falling backwards towards the painting.

He sees his Boy body falling, believes the painting will catch him.

His Boy body, crashing through the canvas.

Boy body falling through the window, how small and white that body looks, falling through the air.

The red rose on the hotel room floor, on the verge of wilting forever. Jostling to join the odour of floral decay. Maybe when it dies it will come back as something else. More beautiful.

A carefully painted woman, sitting in a midnight bus shelter. Lights flickering overhead, streaming far out into the moving night. Her eyes filling with tears as she watches a single white feather float down from the sky.
Bibliography


Broglio, R 2011, Surface Encounters, Thinking with Animals and Art, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.


Brophy, K 2009, Patterns of creativity: investigations into the sources and methods of creativity, Rodopi, New York.


Fraser, Z 2017, *His Uncertain Skin*, Unpublished doctoral submission, Gold Coast.

Freeman, B C 1995, *The feminine sublime: Gender and excess in women’s fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley.


Kraus, C 2011, *Where Art Belongs*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles.


Skoller, E H 1993, *The In-Between of Writing: Experience and Experiment in Drabble, Duras, and Arendt*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.


Viidikas, V 1973, *Condition Red*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.


Woolfe, Sue 2007 *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: A writer looks at creativity and neuroscience*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, WA.