

Foreshadowing

I am in the room at the end of the corridor with the twin Queen Anne beds and the wallpaper covered in overblown purple roses. I share the room with my sister, who sleeps soundly. I am nine years old. It is night in the bush that breathes.

After dark the room is a noumenal place in a mysterious land. I don't know it as I know it in the daytime. There, after lights out, I struggle to hold on to my body, which is slippery and pulled towards the long tunnel of the unconscious. Behind my eyes, a texture like mud, a field of crosshatching, an abrasive quagmire into which I don't want to sink. Sleep drags me away from my vigilant post, away from the phenomenal world. In sleep I have no body to invigilate, no head to keep on my shoulders, no hands to keep attached to arms, no breath to regulate, no heart to leap, no voice to shape, and no ears to hear that voice. In sleep I don't exist. I will never again exist.

One particular night, on the exhausting brink, I catch a not-ghost shimmering in the window, an energy that makes the material world ripple as it passes. The presence is not of colour, it is not of form, it is not of mass, but it is here. I shiver as it passes by. At first, I think it is an animal or one of the spectral beings that I live alongside in the bush, but it fluctuates in intensity as my trepidation grows. My breath, my heartbeat, and my electricity trigger subtle transformations in the spectre but it never fully becomes form. It vibrates between here and not here. This ghostly twin is ghastly.

Much later than this I will know that this shimmer is me or mine, and that it is of my making. I will know that I birthed this beside-ness that now abides, independent of me but connected by so many sensing tentacles, in a world alongside my own. I will acknowledge that it has been with me always, and that I am made by it and it is made by me. But for now, I don't know what it is that I know. I just feel this terrifying real unfurl, and I fly apart.

All that I think I know collapses since my knowing of the world and my place in it is rooted in believing that I am together as one, that constructing myself as a discrete unit is the only way to exist. This self that is one has a single timeline it travels along, moments following moments, marching single file. I can count these moments backwards and I can anticipate the next. I hold these strung moments like my mother's pearl necklace,

warming them in my hands, taking comfort in the coherent linear unfolding of the story that is my self, passing through time in my own bubble. How can I and my other—this companion self—exist together and yet apart, travelling in parallel worlds, parallel time?

Fear propels me out of bed, the ground falls away, the walls tilt, the stability of home reveals itself a fiction, no more concrete than light. I careen down the hallway towards the open space of the living room where my mother sits stitching. I veer into the walls, knees buckling, collapsing under the sheer weight of this new knowing, and with the gravity of no longer knowing anything. I cry out, and this sound is its own animal.

Next, I am on my knees at the feet of my mother, the mother whose world is solid, the mother knows who she is, who can say “I” with certainty. Who smiles down on me from her castle of light and puts her hand on my head. The world comes to rights under her touch.

I am beside myself. We are beside ourselves.

I made myself a *shimmer body*.

I called it many names and I called it *panic*, and now it was here to stay.