

The Crone: A Figure of Desire for Revenge and Healing in the Writing of a Life

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An Abandoning Mother

Who is I? It is always a third person.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

IT'S 1972, a public holiday in late spring in Sydney, Australia, when Anna, a young woman in her early thirties, receives a phone call from her husband. He tells her he is in Los Angeles, on the way to Colorado: "You're a deserting wife and an abandoning mother, and you'll never see your children again!" A few months before, she had left him and her three young daughters, aged seven, five, and two and a half, in a North Queensland town. She left because he threatened her that he would kill her, kill himself, and kill the children if she tried to take them from him.

I speak of myself in the third person, because it was another "I" that experienced these losses, an I who is part of me but is not *me* now. I can connect with this younger self through writing the story of how I found myself in this cul-de-sac and of how I returned from it. I have fictionalized my story and revised it many times; it is now called *Desire's Web: A Fictional Memoir*. The parts of the story that

I will explore in this essay present a different persona, one counterpoint to Anna. The persona is that of a Crone who, in Anna's dream landscape, inhabits the arid Hay plains, in the southwest of New South Wales, Australia, where Anna spent most of her childhood. The Crone's nocturnal task is to weave a saltbush cover for the bare red earth, ravaged by the early settlers' practice of clearing and fencing the land, by the grazing and cloven hooves of the sheep, and by years of drought and harsh winds.

Why am I revisiting the Crone? Five years after completing the first draft of *Desire's Web*, why am I still rewriting the story? What is this strange attraction, this need to return again and again to the ravaged earth of the Hay plains?

This essay explores my attraction to the Crone as well as her dream landscape and reflects on the affective and aesthetic weight these figures carry in the narrative of *Desire's Web*. My purpose is to explore the transformative part that the Crone and her task of healing the landscape plays in my life as I live, relive, write, and rewrite it.

I interpret the Crone as a personification of desire on two levels. She is the desire of the earth to heal itself as well as the desire of the author and Anna, her pseudonymous persona, to heal her psyche by narrating her life. The imaginary landscape is an aesthetic figure for the damaged psyche of Anna, as well as being a "more real" world than the real world of loss and emotional and physical exhaustion which she inhabits. As A. S. Byatt (2005) puts it, "It's not nice not to be writing a book. It's not nice not to have a more real world than the real world we inhabit." Healing is a complex process driven by backward-looking as well as forward-looking desire: the desire to change the past and to avenge oneself on the agents of damage, on one hand, and the desire for understanding and renewal on the other. I read desire not as a negative force born out of lack and loss and seeking an unattainable ideal, as most Western philosophers since Plato have conceived it, but as an impersonal, amoral force that produces life in all its different forms.

The self, in my view, is a palimpsest. In being expected to conform to a male idea of what a woman should be, women have been written by a male hand, one that has repeatedly erased and rewritten women's selves. As a twentieth-century woman created from centuries of such erasures and rewritings in my culture, I performed the parts expected of me in the drama of bourgeois family life but failed to live them successfully and became, for a period of my life, a deserting wife and mother, a scarlet woman, a mistress, the other woman. Coming out of the late twentieth into the twenty-first

century, I now feel able to create for myself ways of being in the world that are more fluid and allow for more freedom of expression than those given to me by male scripts, and I see other women on a similar quest. I have discovered that I can consciously and creatively rewrite the palimpsest of my self, in the past written and edited to conform to restrictive codes of femininity.

In mythology and folklore, the Crone is one of the personifications of the desiring woman, and her appearance in *Desire's Web* is the beginning of a restorative journey for Anna, my pseudonymous younger self, and a marker for my rewriting of my own desiring self in life. The Crone first appears in the text of *Desire's Web* as an outsider, unconnected, it seems at first, to the story of Anna's separation from and loss of her children. About halfway through the narrative, Anna receives the phone call labelling her "a deserting wife and abandoning mother" and condemning her to a separation from her children that would last, with brief respites, for the rest of their childhoods. It was a defining moment in her life and mine, a moment from which she and I could never return to being a mother without the shadows of grief, remorse, anger, and unsatisfiable desire for what we had lost. Only now, when my children are mature women, with children of their own, and have made their own journeys of healing and reconciliation, am I less shadowed by those acute and painful feelings. Yet I am still haunted by what happened. The one feeling that has not abated much is anger, anger against a man who tried to destroy my relationships with my children and other members of my family. Perhaps that is why I keep returning to the figure of the Crone. I'd like to be free of the desire to change what happened and to avenge my losses. I am uncomfortably close to the demonic side of the Crone when I allow myself to feel that anger, and when I relish the fact that his selfish and possessive love has all but destroyed his own relationships with his children. And it is only now that my daughters perceive his love as unhealthy and have confronted him with their feelings that I feel able to express this anger to others by bringing the narrative to closure and reflecting on the journey of writing it. Now that my daughters see their father without illusions, I am free of the haunting feeling that I alone was responsible for the break-up of my family and the painful and difficult paths their lives and mine have taken.

A few months before the phone call, Anna had left her husband Robert and their three daughters in his home town in North Queensland after she revealed to him that she was having an affair with a man there. The family had been staying in that town after their return

from England, where they had lived for the past eight years while Robert pursued his career. In England, she had brought the marriage to crisis point by having an affair with a man in their village. Then, Robert decided to sell their house and return to Australia, because he was afraid that she would continue to see her lover. Before they left England, he had persuaded her to allow him to apply for separate passports for the children, because he said it wasn't fair that they should be on her passport. After he took the children to America, she realized that he had expected she would default on their marriage again, and by making it possible for the children to travel without her, he was preparing to take the children as far away from her as possible once she gave him an excuse.

His response to her second affair and to her telling him that she did not love him and was unable to continue a sexual relationship with him, had been to demand that she leave the children with him and return to Sydney to stay with her mother. These two affairs were the last scenes in the drama of her marriage to a man whom she had married for security rather than love. These events occurred in the early 1970s, before the Whitlam Labor government established Supporting Mothers Benefit in 1973, and before the Family Law Act brought in "No Fault" divorce in 1975 (Parker, Parkinson and Behrens 1994). Prior to these changes, there was no support from the government for a single parent, typically a woman who had given up work to bring up her children. Hence many women stayed in abusive or unhappy marriages for the sake of their children. Divorce was possible only if the suing party could prove adultery, cruelty, desertion, insanity, habitual alcoholism, or if there had been a five-year separation. After the new Act, fault or guilt was no longer a consideration in deciding custody and maintenance of the children (Family Court of Australia n.d.). In Anna's case, it would have been easy for Robert to prove that she had committed adultery. Moreover, with the proceeds from the sale of their English house in his bank account and professional qualifications at an advanced level, he was in a good position to provide for the children, whereas she had given up career training to bear and raise their children and had no money in her own name. She had little hope of winning a contested court case for custody and maintenance of the children.

In Sydney, after leaving her family, Anna saw a lawyer who was a family friend and gave her his help pro bono; he advised her to try to persuade Robert to share custody of the children with her, and to grant her a share of the proceeds from the sale of their house, so that she could retrain for a career. Robert visited Sydney and met

with Anna and her lawyer. He agreed to let the children visit her for a couple of weeks during the school holidays, and Anna was hopeful that he would find a job in Australia and agree to shared custody. She found a job as a waitress, and waited for the spring holidays and her children's visit.

When the fateful phone call comes, the news that he has taken the girls to America with him is a complete shock. Her despair and sense of isolation and powerlessness are compounded by yet another triangular relationship, this time with her lawyer. She breaks down emotionally and physically, and is hospitalized for an autoimmune disorder. After two weeks of strict bed rest, she convalesces at her mother's house.

After I wrote the scene in which Anna learns that her children are lost to her, I felt blocked, frustrated, locked out from my remembered self. How to write such loss? How to describe in words the remembered shock, disbelief, and despair that were the effects of Robert's taking from her the human beings she loved most? I sat staring at the computer screen, numb again. I was unable to continue with a realistic reconstruction of the past. When I put my fingers to the keys, the Crone appeared unbidden. She simply popped up in the midst of an unfillable void, and once there, although the narrative of Anna's descent into illness continued, she reappeared at certain moments of intense awareness of loss and unfulfillable desire in the story.

Enter the Crone

If you were to visit the Hay plains at night, when people and the animals they tend are asleep, you would, if you walked far enough, come across a curious sight. An old woman, wrinkled and skinny, sits on a patch of red earth, her head bent, intent on a patient and silent task. Her fingers, though knotted and twisted, move nimbly back and forth. It is not wool she is shaping into a simple chained fabric that gleams silvery-grey in the moonlight, but vegetable matter that she unwinds from a large irregular ball lying on the bare earth beside her. Her fingers twist in and out, and the soft, earthy smelling fabric falls on the red soil, spreading over it, cloaking it with a damp, springy, resilient cover. Soon the bare patch is clothed, and she winds up the ball and pokes it into a string bag she slings over her shoulder. She scrambles up and walks with the help of a knotted stick to another bare patch, and squats, muttering a few sounds in a guttural tongue and laying her stick and bag beside her. She begins again her endless task of re-

storing a moist, living cover to the plains ravaged by harsh sun and wind and many cloven hooves. (Houen 2006, 92)

At the time I wrote this passage, I did not understand why she suddenly appeared, though I was happy to allow her to do so and to disturb the flow of the narrative. When I reflected on her, I saw her as a mythological dream figure, wearing one of the three faces of the triple goddess Hecate, the ancient earth-goddess, who has many personae: Demeter, Hecate, Minerva, Persephone and Artemis in Greek mythology, and, as Joseph Campbell argues, many other names and faces in other mythologies, including that of the Virgin Mary in the Christian legend (1970, 9–41). The many personae of the goddess together represent three ages of woman—virgin, mother, and crone.

As I sat reading Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) in preparation for revising this essay, I felt a growing sense of excitement and intensity as I realized that I know the Crone on a level beyond representational and mythical constructions. I now see the Crone as more than a figure, a mask, a metaphor for the wounded female protagonist of my autobiographical narrative. I see her as a sorcerer who lives in my writing, and I see my selves—the fictional past selves and the writer—as “becoming-sorcerer” in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. By this I do not mean that I am practicing witchcraft in my writing or in my real life. I mean that the persona of the witch or the sorcerer works in my psyche and my writing in transformative ways.

Deleuze and Guattari (1994) speak of how artists and writers are seers or becomers (171). The concept of becoming is central to Deleuze and Guattari's production of desire. At sixty-eight pages, the “plateau”¹ titled “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .” is the longest section in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and for me, the easiest to read, once I grasped the key to it. Reading this strange book, I felt for a long time like Alice, trying to find her way through the door to a more real world than the real world she inhabits. I grasped fragments of sense, saw glimpses of a different world, but was not able to fit them together into a meaningful reality. Suddenly, I changed shape enough to fit through the door. I became Deleuzian-and-Guattarian. The awkwardness of the term that expresses my metamorphosis conveys something of the strangeness I felt in embracing a different way of seeing, and the disorientation and frustration I had experienced for so long, trying to understand texts I knew were important and could transform my

understanding, yet unable to find a way of crossing the threshold. I felt as if I had ingested something that changed my perception, allowing me to re-enter the door to the past and see the events that have shaped my experience quite differently.

Feminist theorists who have critiqued Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming have tended to focus on the term "becoming-woman," which is indeed problematic. Here, my purpose is to illuminate the experiences that Anna has when she becomes ill and relives some of the formative events in her life. To do this, I need to explore the kinds of becoming that connect us with childhood and levels of being that are outside of the organized forms of social life. Becoming, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the movement of desire. Desire invests the entire social field, surpassing the Oedipal triangle, which seeks to confine it to the monogamous reproductive couple and their family. The flow of desire is unconscious, positive, productive, impersonal, outside of signifying structures (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 89). We, and all forms of matter, are assemblages constantly forming new connections and transformations. The complex concept of assemblages was developed by Deleuze and Guattari as part of their philosophical project of challenging and reversing Platonic thought by restoring difference and multiplicity to their rightful primary position, with identity as secondary and dependant. Briefly, assemblages are produced in the strata or thickening of matter; they are territorial and doubly articulated, with two axes: one belonging to the stratum, with its stable, organised forms and subjectivities, the other oriented to new territories and drawn along lines of flight to make connections with other assemblages, bringing about change and transmutation (1987, 504). The lines of flight or deterritorialization flow along the axis of change and produce relativity, multiplicity, difference, intensity; the lines of reterritorialization flow along the axis of consolidation toward stability, solidity, unity, identity, subjectification (1987, 270).

Let me apply these ideas to my story. Anna had become stratified in a bourgeois marriage to a man she didn't love. She had three children whom she loved, but she felt trapped living with a man who expected her to have sex with him and be faithful to him although she did not desire him and he had had several affairs himself, some of which he had told her of. She loved her children and wanted to be with them, but she felt unable to fight him for them and had no money to do so. She felt guilty, a failure as a wife and a mother. Her desire for change, for intensity, had led her to follow "lines of flight," to "deterritorialize" by taking a lover; and when that failed,

forcing her back to the stratum of her marriage, she took a lover again, with similar results. But this time, it was worse. She had played into her husband's hands by having an affair on his home territory, under his surveillance. She had acted in a way that gave him the power to expel her and to take her children from her. Both acts of deterritorialization were, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, negative because they were compensatory reterritorializations. She was exchanging the stratum of the bourgeois wife and mother for that of "the other woman," aka "the scarlet woman," another aspect of the triple goddess Hecate). All the lovers she chose, including the third one, were themselves bourgeois husbands looking for a line of flight to relieve the sameness and emptiness of their marriages. Like her, none was able to make a positive deterritorialization, to move out of the stratum of the bourgeois family. The bourgeois or nuclear family is a stratification of life within capitalist society in which the flow of desire is confined, organized, and codified. Anna experienced desire as a destructive and uncontrollable force that made a mockery of the codes of reproductive sexuality in the family. It broke her family apart (as it had done in her childhood when her father had an affair and left his family) and threw her perilously close to the black hole of annihilation and self-destruction that Deleuze and Guattari say is a danger of the line of flight (1987, 250).

Becoming-Earth, Becoming-Elemental

Sorcerers have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages. [. . .] The sorcerer has a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous.

Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*

In her next encounter with the Crone in *Desire's Web*, Anna lies gripped by fever and is soothed by the Crone's healing touch. It is over a year since she left Robert, who is refusing to divorce her or to allow her access to the children. Her only contact with the children is by letter. She has been working as a psychiatric nurse when she falls ill, her legs erupting in red lumps that gradually spread to her torso and arms. Her doctor has diagnosed *erythema nodosum*, a disorder characterized by raised, red, tender nodules accompanied by pain and fever.

Her fevered nightmare takes her back to the plains of her childhood, where she crawls over the drought-stricken earth, seeking water:

Scorpions and bulldog ants crawl over her legs, piercing the tight-stretched skin with stabs of fiery pain. Wasps and hornets swarm, quarrelling over rights to the biggest lump. Wild cat's piss scalds her scorched flesh, where snakes slither with steely scales. An owl perches on the branch of a dead tree, and hoots every time she slips into unconsciousness. She crawls across bare plains, seeking a water trough, some green grass or saltbush she can suck.

I will survive, I will survive, she whispers through fossil teeth. Her lips, her fingers are becoming tree, her eyelids are sealed with gum, her nostrils are clay, her hair is matted with desiccated leaves and red dust. She mouths the scarred earth in search of moisture. Her heart, though still beating, is withered, irrigated only by dark, sludgy trickles of blood. She is becoming one with the empty sky, the red dust, the dry stalks of grass, yet she is burning, burning.

Dry, woody fingers touch her forehead and withdraw. The fingers return, placing something cool and soft on her brow. A smell of salty, succulent leaves and earthy roots drifts over her face. She falls asleep and dreams of the river, deep green under overhanging gumtrees. (Houen 2006, 105–06)

In hospital, she is subjected to numerous tests and confined to bed rest. She feels isolated, abandoned, and dehumanized in her single room. But the medical treatment, focusing on her body, is the stage for a healing journey that takes place in her dreams and reflections, while her body rests.

Her dream-encounter with the earth of her childhood is both a death and a transformation. The self she has lived and rehearsed since childhood, the persona of a failed wife and mother who tried to be a desiring woman, dies. In the text quoted above, the erasure of the persona of a bourgeois wife and mother is figured by the feverish illness, exaggerated in nightmare, and reflected in the scarred and eroded landscape. In dreaming that she is becoming part of the earth and its starved vegetation, Anna experiences the metamorphosis of her body into something nonhuman, elemental; she yields to an earth change that is both the death of and a liberation from the failed human life she has lived so far. The possibility of rewriting her desiring self, if not of restoration of the “original” self/landscape, is

suggested in the gesture of the Crone, who touches the fevered forehead of the young woman, then places some saltbush on it, which soothes the fever with its salty smell and succulent moisture, as well as bringing healing images of the river that is the lifeblood of the Hay plains. Restoration is not possible in the case of the landscape, because it has been changed forever by clearance, fencing, and the grazing of stock. It is not possible in the case of the desiring self, because she has lost her children, her life as their mother, and there is no way of returning to the innocent polymorphous amoral desires of the young child. We are all coded, subjected to the shaping influences of the culture we are born into and live within. But within the narrative of desire and loss, there are limited possibilities that follow two trajectories: repetition of the pattern of failure, or recognition of the futility of this pattern, which allows one to search for different ways of becoming-woman.

For Deleuze and Guattari, there is no absolute liberty or escape from one's situation since it is shaped by the events and circumstances of one's past, but there may be a way out of it that changes that situation. Anna's way out, her line of flight, is to become ill, and in becoming ill, she becomes earth, elemental. The illness immobilizes her so that, in the period of recovery, she is able to take stock, to revisit the past, to see the patterns of desire and loss that have led her to her present impasse. From that vanishing point on the edge of the drawing that has been her life, she can begin again; she can have, as Deleuze (1990) puts it, "one more birth":

To become worthy of what happens to us, and thus to will and to release the event, to become the offspring of one's own events, and thereby to be reborn, to have one more birth, and to break with one's carnal birth. (Houen 2006, 149–50)

Becoming-Child, Becoming-Murderer

We write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present.

Deleuze and Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*

The next revisiting of the Crone on the plains occurs when Anna, immobilized in her hospital bed, relives some of her childhood memories. Her memories before this interlude are of the time after her father left the family, when she and her mother Martha struggled to run the property together. Anna remembers one day when Martha went into town on business and left Anna at home. The child has occupied the morning with chores, eaten lunch, and is waiting for her mother's return. She climbs the large cape lilac tree that shelters the house and perches in forked branches, watching the road for her mother's return. She closes her eyes and, in a reverie, imagines her that driving home, her mother fails to take a bend, is thrown out of the car, and breaks her neck. Anna sees herself following the coffin at her mother's funeral. Then, eyes still closed, she sees a figure trudging across the paddock from the main road. She imagines it is the murderer who had recently escaped from a prison southeast of the Hay district. When the figure draws near, she sees it is her father, thin and tired. They throw their arms around each other and sob. She wakes from her reverie:

Fat blobs of rain were falling, leaving watermarks on the dusty leaves. Tonight the murderer would come, for sure. He'd walk stealthily through the black dark of the stormy night, slash the throats of the barking dogs, shoot Martha in her sleep and carry Anna off, bundled over his shoulder. (Houen 2006, 142)

The child Anna's apocalyptic fantasies of her mother's death, her loved father's return, and the violent intrusion of the murderer/father are relived by the older Anna, now the failed mother, wife, and desiring woman, and re-created by the author when approaching old age. This failed, desiring self is narrated by the author, who is at once the child, the young woman, and the older woman. By this I mean that the time of the desiring self is the time of *aeon*, not *chronos*. *Aeon* time is all there at once, whereas *chronos* time is separated into past, present, and future. In *aeon* time, becoming is possible, for past and future are two dimensions of the present.²

Deleuze and Guattari describe *aeon* time as indefinite, fluid and simultaneous, *chronos* time as regulatory and subjectifying:

Aeon: the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened. *Chronos*: the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject. (1987, 262)

Subjecthood is a result of the coding imposed on us by society, which seeks to channel and regulate the flows of desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 33). Society has a limited array of masks that a subject is expected to assume: one of these is the bourgeois wife and mother, whose life and experience are measured and regulated in *chronos* time: marriage, childbirth, motherhood, old age/grandmotherhood. In reliving the past through writing it in my memoir and other pieces, I rewrite my self and move out of *chronos* into *aeon*, becoming a desiring woman. My desire informs everything that I write.

From a psychological perspective, it is clear that, in the child Anna's unconscious mind, reunion with her father Henry can only take place if her mother dies—since Henry left the family in part because of his failed relationship with Martha. In addition, the child conflates Henry and the murderer/abductor; she both longs for and fears him. This fantasy scene in *Desire's Web* is true to my experience insofar as I did imagine my mother's death many times, particularly when she left me alone on the property. I also fantasized living with my father in a distant place where there was no room for her. I did dream—perhaps as a child, perhaps as an adult—that my father returned to our house on foot, thin and tired, and we embraced and cried. The murderer is a personification, not just of my father, but also of the child Anna in her desire for revenge on her mother for driving her father away and being the parent she was stuck with, the one that she loved less.

The ambivalence of the child's feelings for both mother and father would be no surprise to a psychoanalyst. My childhood love for my father was intense, as was the pain of abandonment when he left, and my rival for his affection, as well as the apparent cause of his leaving, was my mother.

The figure of the murderer is a vestigial memory that, rather like the Crone, just popped up as I was writing the scene where Anna fantasizes her mother's death and father's return, but he does not reappear in the narrative. The desire for revenge, the fear of male sexuality, of death and destruction that he represents are minor themes compared to the desire for healing that the Crone represents, though she is not a benign figure; as sorcerer, she has, as Deleuze says, an alliance with the demonic world, and she appears at night, in dreams and altered states of consciousness.

As she reflects on her childhood experiences, Anna falls asleep, and has another encounter with the Crone.

The young woman dreams again of a grey-green pattern, crocheted by the wrinkled old woman, who learned the pattern long ago, before she can remember, and spends her life repeating it, compelled to turn the red into green. She works all night, when the blinding sun has set, winding her skein of saltbush green, then twisting and turning it with knotted fingers into a secret design that binds the dusty red soil, and provides the sheep with feed when all else fails. The young woman lies on the red ground, her eyes burning. She watches the crone work, and gradually, her flesh, her red and angry flesh, is soothed as this cool grey-green blanket falls from flying fingers and creeps over her. (Houen 2006, 142)

When I began to write this essay, I reflected on the Crone as an aesthetic figure and wondered why the sorcerer persona appeared in the story in a female incarnation rather than a male, given that Anna's desire was for her father/lover. I reasoned that a man could not heal her because an agent of loss cannot logically be an agent of healing. When I began to read more about the figure of the Crone, I saw another layer of meaning. The Crone belongs to the early archaic period of mythology, which Joseph Campbell (1964) identifies as encompassing a lunar, mythic view of life, where dark and light interact in one sphere, as distinct from the patriarchal, solar point of view, where life is seen in terms of binary opposites (27). In myths, she was associated with fertility, healing, night, and the moon (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1949, 407). Campbell (1964) emphasizes that "the pre-Semitic, pre-Aryan mystic-emotional religion of the agrarian Neolithic and Bronze Age populations" contrasts markedly with the warrior-like patriarchal religions of the Semitic and Aryan folk who have ruled the history of civilization ever since (53–54).

In my Crone passages, the images of old woman/witch/healer/crone/earth mother, the parched grazing land, the sustaining and moisturizing saltbush, the night, the moonlight, the attendant owl and other natural creatures and vegetation all mark my imaginary landscape as archaic, mystical, emotional, and female. It is a landscape of female desire that has been ravaged, all but destroyed, but can, as Deleuze (1990) puts it, “have one more birth” (149).

The next meeting with the Crone comes after a section in which Anna, still in hospital, relives being sent to boarding school by Martha because she has fallen behind with her correspondence lessons in her first year of high school, and Martha wants her to have a good education (as she herself did, being a graduate from Sydney University in the early 1920s, when few women had the chance of a higher education). Anna is unhappy at school, feeling uprooted and doubly exiled—from her childhood, lost when her father left, and from the wide-open plains and beloved Murrumbidgee River, which have romanced her family’s hardworking days. One day in Anna’s second year at school, Martha unexpectedly arrives to tell her that she has had to leave the property because Henry has returned and resumed possession of it. Martha stays for a while with her sister in Wollongong and returns to teaching towards the end of that school year. The next year, she comes to teach at Anna’s school:

They’d been without a teacher for a term, and Miss Matthews begged her to come. It was the year of the Intermediate exam, and Martha felt she owed it to Anna to fill the gap. She taught Latin and her daughter’s favourite subject, English. Anna was now not only a beastly swot—she was the teacher’s pet. Her feeling of homelessness wasn’t assuaged by her mother’s presence. She felt more of an outsider than ever. (Houen 2006, 187)

Anna, toward the end of her stay in hospital, remembers how she had felt an outsider in her childhood when she lost her father and was exiled from her home. She has another vision of the Crone, herself an outsider, an anomalous figure like the murderer, but benign rather than destructive.

The old woman is growing tired of her endless task. There are so many bare patches of soil. She remembers a time when the ground was covered with vegetation: a mixture of trefoil clover and tussocky wild grass, round prickly bush, and woody old man saltbush. In spring, there were pink and purple vetches, yellow bachelor’s buttons, white and pink everlasting daisies, scarlet and purple

desert peas. Weeping myall trees once graced the space above the embroidered plain, with their long, pointed grey-green leaves, yellow puffball flowers in summer and autumn, and wood that smelled of violets. The early settlers cut down most of the myall for posts to fence in their herds, and the cloven hooves of the sheep worked with the wind and the drought to erode the groundcover.

She must do what she can. The creeping silvery saltbush that falls from her fingers stores water in its small round fleshy leaves, and the sheep love it. She works on, with rhythmic movements of her hands, humming a monotonous tune. (Houen 2006, 188–89)

The images in this passage tell of lost fertility and the Crone's desire to cover and heal the scarred earth. In imagining the plains as they once were, I had to search through printed material that reconstructed a picture of the plains, as I had only known it bare of trees, except for the occasional eucalypt, and eroded of vegetation in many parts. I did recall springtime flowers and grass after a good winter, but knew little of the original vegetation. There was perennial saltbush, the seeds of which had been brought by the giant dust storms that darkened the skies in the early years of my childhood. There were no myall trees that I can recall.

The significance of this appearance of the Crone is that she holds a memory of the Hay plains before they were changed irreparably by the actions of the early settlers and their animals. The Crone is unable to restore the plains to what they were, but she does the best she can to heal the earth. Through her vision of the Crone, Anna (and her author) mourn the loss of the landscape's fertility and abundance, both for its own sake and for its personification of the promise of her childhood, lost when her father left, lost again when she was sent away to boarding school and her father returned to expel her mother, and lost when her children were taken from her. The Crone plays a transformative part in Anna's journey of healing, by rewriting the palimpsest of the plains; she acts as a medium for Anna's return to the beloved landscape. Through her, Anna becomes-earth, becomes-sorcerer, and from these metamorphoses, is able to begin a new phase of her life, to have "one more birth."

The Smell of Rain

True revenge [. . .] can only be a revenge on time. But how can time be revenged, overcome? Only through a certain submission to its necessity, a certain reactive position that converts that necessity itself into will. The past is a series of events we do not make but inherit, or inherit even if we have made, which we must nonetheless affirm as our own in the sense that past events make us, and our overcoming, possible. To affirm a future, to affirm repetition of what will wills into the future, it is necessary equally to affirm all the accidents, events, humiliations that make willing itself the highest force.

Elizabeth Grosz. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*

The story of Anna's school days ends her reliving of her childhood while she is a patient. She is nearing the end of her hospital stay and bed rest, almost ready for discharge to her mother's care for a period of convalescence. She has to face life without her children, without love. A theme in the narrative of her life that emerges after her loss of the children and runs parallel to her descent into illness is that of "the other woman." The two affairs she had at the end of her marriage were precipitated by her search for love and colored by her desire to escape from a marriage in which she felt trapped. Her third affair with the lawyer is another attempt to find a man who will love her for herself. She once again falls in love with a man who is married and unable or unwilling to commit himself fully to the relationship. She is now alone, without financial security, children, and a structure to her life other than what she can create for herself. She is free to create a life for herself when she embarks on the affair with her lawyer, but she is still trapped in the old spirals of desire and loss since she chooses a man who, like her father, is unavailable.

As she has lain in bed, Anna has had time to review her relationship with her lover. She now sees that, like the first two men she became involved with, he will not make more room for her in his life than he has thus far. He has abandoned her when she most needed him, not visiting her or trying to contact her while she's been ill. She has begun to be aware of the pattern of desire and loss that began with her father and has been repeated in her life so far. She faces the

reality that she can never be “the one” with the lawyer, or any man like him.

She realised she’d been waiting all her life for a man to rescue her. Ever since she’d lost her father, she’d had a romantic idea of love as a transforming power that would make her life meaningful and happy. Even before Henry left, she used to fantasize about the ideal lover, and since there was no-one outside her family to project her dreams onto, she made it all up in the stories she created. (Houen 2006, 193)

The Crone’s slow progress in covering the rusty red soil figures Anna’s painful growth of awareness of how her life has reached an impasse. Because of this awareness, once she leaves hospital, she can begin to change the pattern of her life, to rewrite her self.

The last section of the main narrative tells of Anna’s return home and her serendipitous meeting at a friend’s party with the American consul, who promises to help her get a visa so that she can visit her children in the United States. Until this meeting, she had been frustrated by the refusal of the U.S. consulate to give her a visa because she is not divorced from Robert, but is not intending to return to being his wife. The consul official had told her that if they gave her a visa, she could enter the country and stay there illegally so she could be near her children. Apparently they considered her less likely to stay if she were divorced and had legal access to her children for a limited time. Through his lawyer, Robert has refused to divorce her and grant her access, stating that he wants her to return to the family. Anna knows this is a strategic position, not a genuine desire on his part. It is part of a pattern in his behavior, that of manipulating her into a “fault” or no-win position, as he had done when he persuaded her to allow the children to have separate passports before they left England, because he had secretly expected that she would fail to stay in the marriage and he was determined to keep the children with him.

After the party, Anna writes to her lawyer to tell him the good news about the visa, and he phones the next day to ask if he can visit her. When he does, he acts as if nothing has changed and wants to make love. She hesitates, caught once more in her desire for him. But she remembers her children and has a vision of visiting them. She refuses him, saying it’s over, but asks him nonetheless to help her get access to her children. He agrees and leaves. With this, the narrative ends. Anna has moved beyond the failed bourgeois persona

of the other woman and is on the threshold of becoming-different, allowing the flow of desire to take her into new pathways along lines of change and new growth.

The passage that follows is the Epilogue, which gives the Crone the last word.

There's an easterly wind blowing across the plains. It smells of rain. The old woman shivers, and draws her shawl of saltbush green around her thin shoulders. She's finished covering this stretch of rusty-red, just in time. There'll be a big rain tonight, breaking the long drought. She twists her hook through some threads of the last ball, and drops it in her bag. She moves towards the river bend, taking shelter. (Houen 2006, 201)

The “smell of rain” images the promise of renewal of the landscape, of new life for the pasture and the creatures that graze on it, as well as for the humans who make their livelihood from it. It also images the promise of a rebirth for Anna, a departure from the exhausted patterns of childhood and young womanhood and the possibility of at least a temporary reunion with her children.

In real life, I have experienced a long and painful pathway from that point in Anna's narrative, which is my narrative in many ways. Separation from my children was punctuated by brief reunions throughout their childhood. I struggled to create a meaningful life as an independent woman; my lingering love for the lawyer kept haunting me; after a series of unsatisfactory relationships, I entered a second marriage that promised great happiness but failed; I endured a long period of single parenthood with the son of that marriage. Now, having returned to study and writing after half a lifetime, my life is much freer of these old patterns of desire. The children of both marriages are my closest friends, and I am happily reconciled, though not living with, my second husband.

Elizabeth Grosz, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this concluding section, glosses Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, which was embraced by Deleuze. She explains that will creates the future by willing it, though this can only be by accepting the necessity of time's past action in a series of events, and uniting our will with those events, so that, as Deleuze says, we can become worthy of what happens to us and by accepting the event, release it (1990, 149). I have found that it is only through conscious affirmation of the past in a reactive (fictional) reconstruction of it, an affirmation of the loss and destruction that I experienced, that I am becoming able to

take my revenge on time and the past, to release the event of the loss of my children, and have one more birth. The desire for revenge has not left me, but it is taking a positive turn.

I am no longer “the other woman” to myself, and I am rewriting the desiring female self. I am not in a time of peace and stability; I have not yet had a homecoming; I am not attached to a particular stratum, such as that of postgraduate student, independent older woman, or creative writer and editor. I cannot settle for long, for fear of becoming fixed. These strata attract me, and I am drawn toward them, but I am also drawn to lines of flight, new territories. I am not the Crone, but I am becoming-Crone, becoming-Sorcerer, becoming a creative and desiring woman.

Notes

1. A plateau is a concept Deleuze and Guattari have borrowed from Gregory Bateson, of whom they write,

[He] uses the word “plateau” to designate something very special: a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culminating point or external end. Bateson cites Balinese culture as an example: mother-child sexual games, and even quarrels among men, undergo this bizarre intensive stabilization. (1987, 22)

They go on to explain that, in conventional books, a chapter has culminating and terminating points, whereas their book is composed of plateaus that have a circular form and can be read by starting anywhere since each plateau is related to all other plateaus in the book.

2. This explanation was given by Ian Buchanan in a lecture on Deleuze’s philosophy in a postgraduate master class, “Negotiating Deleuze,” at Curtin University, 2005.

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