

The Blight, The Mildew and The Rust

Extract from Sir Joseph Banks' Journal¹

This morn... We immediately went on shore in the town of Fonchiale, the Capital of the Island, situate in Latitude 32:40 North, calld so from the Fennel which grows in plenty upon the rocks in its neighbourhood and which is calld Funcho in the Portugese Language [...] People were also employd to procure for us fish and shells which we could not have spard time to have collected ourselves, horses and Guides were also got for Dr Solander and myself to carry us to any part of the Island which we might chuse to visit. But our very short stay which was only five Days inclusive made it impossible to go to any distance, so we contented ourselves with collecting as much as we could in the neighbourhood of the town...

June 1810

This is how it really happened: The stocky, fair-haired, jovial Daniel was fabricated by Sir Joseph Banks. The villagers of Fonchiale did not choose to carry us to parts of the island, he forced them. The men on the ship were lazy; they had ample time to collect fish and shells to eat, but considered such tasks beneath them, and preferred to exploit the labour of the Portuguese villagers.

Our stay was indeed short. Upon Mr. Banks' orders, I was not allowed to leave the ship for fear of unwanted attention. However, on one occasion after exploring the vicinity with his men, he brought me back a single-stemmed *Strelitzia*, for me, Danielle. Its slivers of tangerine golden sunshine extended from a cool green base.

The town was beautiful; our dock was situated right next to the wooden barracks where richly blooming flower vines of vibrant red and purple extended from the coastal cliffs.

The Mildew – something that grows in a tropical climate

Fairest among the flowers

January 1789

Danielle wandered into the drawing room, with its various lounges, armchairs and upholstered chaises. Her sisters sat, prim and assembled. Elizabeth in an armchair next to the door, perpetually knitting, another village child waiting to wear her famed crocheted layette. May and Adele, together as always, whispering amongst themselves on the cream couch, and Ida at the cedar table, studious and sombre, composing a diary entry of impressive length. The inkwell was nestled within the cracks in the wood, where she tapped the quill softly before scratching words onto the parchment of the journal.

Conversation began between the sisters in a murmur. This time, evolving into animated chatter about this afternoon's visitor from church.

“The man visiting is *Sir* Joseph Banks. He has recently taken up residence in a house near to us. He's a botanist, I hear, and he's engaged in work and study at the new Herbarium in the village. Mother's organised a function to be held for the Church of St. Theresa; he's delivering a speech for us regarding his plants and travels. I've heard from the lecture printed in the Oxford Journal that Sir Banks is most interested in the exotic herblore of new places and means to travel the world in search of beautiful specimens.”

“Then it's surely our rose garden that attracts him to our village? It's renowned in these parts. I hear he was knighted just last year, and he's in correspondence with the village men who run the fair. He would have heard we won the award last spring for our rose bushes, I'm sure he'd be intrigued to view them.”

“Speaking of Mr. Banks, did you hear about Hackman?”

The prattling. The droning. The incessant hum. Danielle was glad to escape to Connie preparing tea. Mundane routines at least allowed space to think, and for Danielle, a spark, a curiosity had been ignited. She couldn't wait to hear the stories he had to tell.

But one story she already knew... Mr. Banks' crazed acquaintance Hackman had been declared insane and placed in St. Bernard's Hospital in Hanwell after shooting dead a young

lady of only Danielle's age, who had spurned him. Reverend James Hackman was a priest and deacon of the Church of England but had acted in a vengeful fit of rage after developing suspicions that Miss Martha Ray had a new lover. He had put a pistol to Miss Ray's forehead and beaten himself unconscious with both discharged pistols, the other having made a flesh wound but failing to take the life out of his body. He'd been found with a love letter on his person to Miss Ray:

My Dear Martha,

Though with you I am enamoured, you ignite a green chemical fire of potent jealousy within me that consumes my heart and turns my love to vengeance. I pray to the Lord that when we meet again you will have forgiveness for the deed I already deplore, and that you will not hold a grudge against a poor man powerless to the discretion of a minx.

I am, always yours, even in these most desperate of circumstances,

J Hackman

As the trays of almond cake and madeira, sugar pots and milk jugs were placed on platters and china plates, Danielle made sure to slightly mix up the order. Many a time when the sisters were young, Mother would send cards out to her friends to join her at the family home for tea. She had meticulously taught each of her daughters the importance of precision and care when entertaining and welcoming visitors. Now, Danielle placed the pot of sugar cubes next to the cakes, on the side of the platter, with Mother's words *Sugar and milk should always be placed alongside the teapots* ringing in her mind. A sliver of almond fell off the glazed top of a cake, a petal caught in a spring breeze. It fell to the floor, disregarded.

A flurry of movement around the front door sent unexpected twin currents of shivers down each of Danielle's shoulder blades, prickles of excitement for a reason she could not yet pinpoint. This man seemed to bring with him a sense of adventure, a purpose in life, travelling to the ends of the earth and coming back with the type of knowledge Danielle could never gather from between the four walls of a stately house. The visitor's frock coat was darkly coloured and gathered in swathes around his calves, with a wine-red velvet collar that intertwined with his smoky scent of fiery amber, tobacco and fruit. He moved with confidence, self-assured, using his steady hand to take Danielle's own and clasp it, rubbing his thumb briefly over her palm and catching her eye with the glint of a single star.

WHITE MOON-SHINE

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew

Extract from Sir Joseph Banks' Journal

Calm again: I again went out in my small boat and shot much the same birds as yesterday... . I again saw undoubted proofs that the Albatrosses eat Holothurias or Portugese men of War as the sea men call them. I had also an opportunity of observing the manner in which this animal stings.

When Mr. Banks began to deliver his speech for the church function, the room was captivated, providing an atmosphere of pure silence in which the wisdom gained from his travels could thrive and persuade. He spoke of the Albatrosses he hunted during his voyage to New Zealand, which preyed upon Portuguese man o' war; sea creatures which Danielle came to understand, were undoubtedly peculiar in the manner in which they sting. Its bladder on the side of its body had fixed to it a 'sail' which he may erect or depress at pleasure, with which he could catch the wind and move slowly along the sea's surface. Underneath the creature's bladder, its smooth and transparent 'strings', with the appearance of small beads of a lovely ultramarine blue, sting and burn one's body with acute pain. Mr. Banks had been stung himself once before, with millions of fine threads latching to his skin, appearing like small fibres of cotton as white as snow.

As was custom, the ladies were free to converse with guest speakers following their address, approaching with any questions or comments they may have about the speakers' stories.

“Tell me, Mr. Banks, how did your interest in plants begin?” asked Danielle, already revelling in the richness of a life of discovery, delighting in the reflection of the natural elements.

“When I was a young boy, I cared little for the conventions of grammar. Elegant composition was a skill beyond me. Ideas seemed to burst and blossom from my brain quicker than my hand could record them, let alone with eloquent tongue. I was not disposed to books but taught myself botany with voracity, beginning by submitting to the teachings of women who would gather seeds and plants for the town apothecaries.”

Mr. Banks began to promenade around the room as he continued, yet addressed Danielle with a vivacious focus, “I would pay sixpence for each leaf of paper that would record the names and uses for each specimen, and later go home and consult a book I had taken from my mother’s dressing room... Gerard’s Herbal, where each plant known to Western Botany was engraved through woodcut printmaking. It was magnificent, the only volume my harried tutor would ever find me voluntarily reading. The search for insects and plants outside of my school hours gave me a purpose I’d never had before, a freedom and sense of adventure I would that you could experience.

“If only you were a man and you were free,” he said, turning his head away.

NARCISSUS AMARYLLIDACEAE

Reuben stood with hope on the doorstep of the sisters' family household. A bouquet of daffodils clutched slightly too tight in his hands. If the afternoon went as he wished, he would meet the maiden of his dreams, with whom he could start a new life. He lifted the iron doorbell and let it go quickly. Anticipation made his movements clumsy. The bell's chime was fresh, a promise of spring. Something good to come.

The Blight – something that attacks, with propensity for destruction

ENSNAREMENT

Killing a dolphin to catch a shark

Late January 1789

By the time Danielle had collected the post twice, a new man had arrived on the worn instep of the family home. Daffodils in his hand, wilting against the stiff fabric of his collar, she knew why he was there.

The previous night, as the full moon glistened against mist in the sky, Mother's lip curled down. She'd always resented the fact that Danielle expressed contempt towards marriage and the ultimate *blessing* of child-bearing, but following Banks's visit, she'd been relentless in the search to arrange a match and schedule visits over tea. Haplessly misguided in the belief that Danielle would change the very fibres of herself through marrying a stranger she'd spoken benignly with for a quarter of an hour - was she not knitted in her mother's womb?

Danielle sighed as distant church bells tolled the death knell in the village. She glided, the way she'd been taught, to have her wedding dress fitted, her outer being emotionless.

A warm light burned in the small haberdashery where Danielle huddled, feeling utterly disgraced. The family stood in a tittering congregation, surrounding a small stool adorned by pin-punctured textiles and half-finished dresses. As the seamstress poked, prodded and rearranged Danielle's shoulders in order to fix her posture for the perfect trap, Danielle was reluctantly ensnared in the trap of feminine excitement for the drudgery that awaited.

The corsetry was tightly stitched with its whalebone ribs smooth, pushing her shoulders back and bosom forward with an irresistible pressure. Its back stitching was a woven cage, hiding the skin of her true self from view and instead creating the poised facade she would henceforth assume. She felt covered with barnacles, a black coating of sticky and harshly constrictive shells that clung to her shoulders and crept up her neck, rendering her immobile and claimed by a stronger force. Mother and the sisters stood back and gathered to admire the monstrosity.

Her anger, a simmering stew of bitter, starchy parsnips, cabbage and beef; fettered by the impartial boundaries of life in the home, with an identity nothing more than another person's surname. Danielle hated the fact that all she had to look forward to was the eventual raising of a daughter just like her, who'd eventually perch on a chair just like hers, to gather a perfect dress in which to be given away. The notion was hideous: either she'd take to it with vivacity and unequivocal prettiness, like any good daughter should do; or she'd slouch like an insolent and shameful mound, like her mother was at this very moment. The shame of it - and to think this process would simply repeat itself forevermore.

STRANGER

Early February 1789

The man, despite his woody, warm fragrance that emanated as Danielle drew closer, had the coldest countenance she'd ever laid eyes upon, and a piercing gaze that seemed not to search her eyes in a loving or curious manner, but instead constructed a power play. Danielle was seized by a grasping hand with grippy strength that sent dominoes of bitter goosebumps up her arm.

Later, Mama was glowing with the happiness of a mother fulfilled by the achievement of success for every one of her daughters. She twirled about the room, rapturously enumerating Reuben's winning qualities, providing little room for any reluctance, disagreement or unwillingness.

“Was he not just charming, Dani?”

*The charm was damp and angry, a
bee buzzing behind my ear.*

“He was so handsome, and those curls...
Truly a man who knows how to present
himself.”

*Mr. Banks has all the material riches
from distant lands and his enigmatic
countenance is more intriguing than a
starched shirt collar.*

“Reuben’s estate is second to none, with
vast greenery and trimmed hedges, skilled
gardeners and the most picturesque of
arched entryways.”

*But Mr. Banks’ estate is the world. The
ships, the sky, the stars.*

“Reuben has a host of servants and
his maids would tend to your every
need.”

*Mr. Banks would make me slave to no
man.*

“You’d want for nothing.”

Then why do I want?

SUNDAY BEST

May 1789

Reuben stood with hands clasped, the dark oak of the lectern providing a steadfast presence behind him. The sun glowed through the stained-glass windows, casting indulgent reflections of colour onto the white canvas of the marble stairs. The moment of promise, where he would finally see his future. As his bride floated down the aisle towards him, the light cast upon her revealed small bumps on her smooth dove skin. The feeling of anticipation, of a fresh beginning.

From the veil to the grave

Danielle hovered in the blustery corridor, the rich swathes of red cloth enveloping her.

The exposed skin on her wrists and upper neck stung with the church's chill.

The marble steps were just visible in the distance, leading to the endless church pews where faceless guests would admire her, the object of wonder, as she glided wordlessly.

She waited for the cue, where the best man gestured with an impatient beckon for her to walk out. Leaving the only safe place that still remained. Goosebumps prickled the skin of her forearms. A poised statue, marching to the tombs.

LINGERING

November 1789

“Maybe one day soon we’ll have a little visitor.”

He’s so hopeful. I feel obliged to him. I pity him, as I cannot abide the future he had always planned for us.

“I just don’t understand you.”

His presence is cloying, sticking to me like golden syrup, propelling the urge to escape.

“Don’t you want babies?”

That would tie me to you more strongly. I’d be trapped.

“Don’t you want the beautiful life I’ve provided for you?”

“I see beauty in *freedom*.”

“Help me to understand you.”

“I have to leave.”

“You’re my wife. You’re obliged to me. We’re one flesh.”

“You need to let me go.”

“I don’t understand why you need to leave. Explain it to me.”

“I’ll try to explain, I’ll show you.”

A LUCKY ESCAPE

Partly Fictionalised Extract from Sir Joseph Banks's Journal

We begin now to prepare in earnest for our departure, the Sails were today carried on board and bent, the guns also were taken on board. My Seamen bustled with yells as the goat was loadd upon the ship which Bleated with immense volume, seeming to protest...

For me, this was an escape from obligation. My sweet 16 year old Fiancée wept with decorum. Yet luckily her delicate eyes were spared the rough words of the Docks with the sting of salt as the barrels of Rum rolld onboard. From her I was lucky to flee. Too confining was the frothy daintiness of her Gypsophila countenance.

But as the ship left port, I stared out at the horizon and reminiscd about the ways of women. My housekeeper, who'd packed my Trunk this morn, a robust Gerbera strong and willing to take whatever I might offer to her. But Danielle, Danielle was something different. A Dandelion not mine to have, but a wish to hold.

DEPARTURE

Danielle's final folded handkerchief was placed in her suitcase. Allowing the briefest of touches to the soft linen and dresses that would now be stowed away for the long journey ahead, she buckled the leather strap tightly.

She had cut off a single rose from its stem in the family's garden that morning. She left it at Reuben's doorstep, leaving forever the house they shared.

BARREN

Extract from Sir Joseph Banks' Journal

For the whole length of coast which we saild along there was a sameness to be observd in the face of the countrey very uncommon; Barren it may justly be calld and in a very high degree, that at least that we saw [...] The Banks of Bays indeed are generally clothd with thick mangroves sometimes for a mile or more in breadth; the soil under these is rank mud always overflowd every spring tide. Inland you sometimes meet with a bog upon which the grass grows rank and thick so that no doubt the soil is sufficiently fertile. The Valleys also between the hills where runs of water come down are thick clothd with underwood, but they are generally very steep and narrow, so that upon the Whole the fertile soil Bears no kind of Proportion to that which seems by nature doomed to everlasting Barrenness.

August 1790

The coast of New Holland was one of the rare destinations where I could depart the ship and explore ashore. Early on as we began to sight this new land, Mr. Banks deemed there a 'want of People', so it was safe for me to wander without fear of villagers. The sand that led down to the scrubby coastal bush was dark and sticky, cool on my fingers as I bent down to touch.

The seamen had beached the ship for the unloading of cargo and for basic repairs for the rest of the journey. Its pine masts extended not nearly as tall as the trees whose velvety leaves were a cool grey, almost green. The *Endeavour* stretched along the entire length of shoreline where it was admired greatly by Mr. Banks along with Mr. Parkinson, Mr. Buchan and Mr. Sporing, whose presence on the travels gave Mr. Banks untold rewards and company, as he once told me.

The creatures and plants abounding on the coast of New Holland were incomparable to anything I'd seen before. Wild grasses were dense on every cliff and ledge, with tactile furry flowers in full bloom, and distinctive lemon myrtle blossoms filled the air with their scent. Within small holes on the sun-warmed black rocks adjacent to the ocean, peculiar new Sea Polypes extended their small feelers, waving them in the air like a flower with a million petals.

*The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white*

August 1790

Ship's Log: Danielle

It's an exhilarating feeling, travelling for my first time on a ship. As soon as I had gained my sea legs, the vastly stretching sky meeting the ocean's crisp indigo line was a beautiful sight and consoled me that my past worries in life were comparably insignificant. The cloudy streaks of each evening's sunset had the soft colours of pudding and the warmth of a crackling fire, and I soon requested that I be allowed up on deck at this time of day to watch the pink and amber tint the glossy sea below it.

The churning sea at first made my limbs feel weak, gave me an aversion to any food other than the blandest of crackers or bread, and made me long for the luxury of my bed back home as refuge from the hard bunk with its itchy wool blanket. But it didn't take long to adore that free feeling of dancing under an endless cornflower-blue sky, shedding the constrictions of a life on the land of London's city.

'One Continued Puke'

September 1790

With regret I record the illness of Mr. Banks with a bad fever... he has become too sick to write and has been confined to his bed, accompanied only by a bottle of bark at his elbow. Oftentimes when I visit, he is despondent, and despairs of his incapability to gather plants at the time of year where the sun warms the land, and they are 'most plentiful'. Life at sea is at times unforgiving and it is sad to look upon Mr. Banks knowing that illness binds him indoors, creating a boundary between him and the wide shore.

'Deus creavit, Linnaeus disposuit'

October 1790

Were it not beyond my rights to outright disagree with the views of a man, I would undoubtedly speak my mind of Mr. Linnaeus to his face. I would liken him to the goat aboard the ship who bleated no end, making himself a true nuisance.

Unique plants were in abundance as we travelled through the exotic Madeira and Rio de Janeiro en route to the east coast of New Holland. Mr. Linnaeus had a meticulous manner of organising each specimen into two dozen class systems, naming each one according to the genus and its subsets, about which I had overheard him speaking to Mr. Banks.

Despite being an esteemed physician who assumed the role of mentor for Mr. Banks, the man was egotistical and showed no humility for his achievements and pursuits. While Mr. Banks seemed ever eager to explain and demonstrate his latest findings with me, Linnaeus did nothing of the sort and seemed determined to act as though I were invisible and dispensable. I detest his pride and being made to feel silly, for I hold such an interest in the realm to which Linnaeus has devoted his life.

I methodically moved through the bundles of flowers and papers, folding each note into precise thirds with the tip of my fingernail. I was content with this preoccupation, a task I enjoyed. I had always yearned for a task to engage my senses and curiosity - I felt I had things to say, and that my life warranted more than simply a sacrificial display of beauty, like flowers that would wither and become sour, picked before they could fully bloom. The warmth of this new world freed me, while London rendered me only a trapped butterfly pinned underneath a sheet of glass, its liberties snatched for preservation.

The Rust – something growing out of space to breathe

SOLSTICE

July 1795

The delivery boy came early that morning. Reuben handed over a few pennies and took the tightly bound package, which smelled of the sea and the cigar of drawing rooms and the bitter stench of soured foliage.

He thought one thing.

Danielle.

The paper of the journal was stained with darker patches that were once soggy and had dried over time. Its binding was coming apart on one side. Once opened by rough hands, browned and dried petals (once a cooled lilac tone) came scuttling out.

Reuben detested the fact that his wife, for whatever reason, had lost the ability to converse in a civilised manner. Over the last eighteen months she'd been gallivanting away, halfway across the world, and no word until now. It was enough of an indication for Reuben to trudge with aggravated impatience towards the house. After all, she did promise that one day she'd explain herself.

She used to be so sweet in the way she'd spoken. Now, in all real respects, thought Reuben with bitter pragmatism, they may as well not have been married at all.

Once, she had spoken his name with reverence, or if not with reverence, at least with respect.

He'd had no choice but to fabricate a story of her illness.

'Bedridden with scarlet fever.'

'Thanks for asking, Mrs. Shaw, she's gradually recovering.'

'No, I'm sorry, no visitors, but I will pass on your best regards.'

'Yes, Doctor, bed rest does wonders.'

How else would he have avoided the neighbours' and villagers' probing questions? Why else would a woman believe that old, wilted flowers were acceptable replacements for explanation?

He'd taken the false identity of the madwoman in the bedroom so far that he had convinced himself of her reality. He kept a bed made up across the landing from his own. A bedspread of muted pinks, beiges and matured florals that reminded him of dignity. To the casual observer, Danielle Kingston's illness was a given.

He'd come visit her room.

Once a day.

Always, at the same time.

A forced burden.

He'd *isolated* her, but he'd speak *to* her. Saying the things that were not worth writing to her, because she'd not read or receive them anyway.

The room was small, constantly insulated by both its compact size and beige walls that enclosed Reuben like a rat between skirting boards. Coated with a thin layer of dust from the chandelier that frequently swung, with no semblance of wind to stir it, was a small glass nestled next to an amber bottle, potent and sour. More often than not, Reuben would sit on the lumpy mattress left cushioned by the rosewood colour of the bedspread, and lull himself into giddiness, unfathomable anger and eventual oblivion.

Reuben could not make sense of the diary. Its peculiarity could only stem from her surroundings in an unknown and dangerous realm where the oddest of animals and most violent of tides held unparalleled potential to fuel the fire of his wife's insanity.

One entry was dated the 28th of February. The last day of summer. As Reuben flicked through the bizarre book to this page, a disgusting little thing fell out from the tightly bound inner stitching. The small thing crunched under the pressure of his fingertips. Its cocoon-like body ballooned out to a smaller head, pincers and spindly legs that gripped to the fabric of his

shirtsleeve. Yet its interior was hollow, it was nothing but a thin amber shell of crisp yet delicate dried skin.

Cyclochila australasiae, the page's small note read. *The greengrocer, the twilight melody of the coastal line.*

Reuben could not, for the life of him, figure out her motives. He gingerly plucked the revolting little shell off the carefully stitched sleeve line of his forearm and threw it with repulsion across the room. It catapulted towards the drawing room's forest-green wall and fell like a small, injured soldier onto the floor. Defeated.

'Good riddance to that rubbish.'

It got what it deserved; it was nothing but a vessel in which to carry the ill wishes and backward landscapes of his traitorous wife's new home.

'Good Lord; a book which rendered me void of dignity entirely.'

AMBER BITTERNESS

February 1796

Cider burned in Reuben's throat, a small feral animal, growling and threatening to pounce. He felt vaguely irritated by the constant ruckus, people yelling out across the tavern. Yet he gained a sense of indifference from each cloudy, frothy mug. Each sip congealed the resentment, a heavy lethargy in his belly. It sloshed, a pool of stinking hatred for the whore who robbed him of the future he deserved.

He thought of it often - small children, the sound of laughter and play wafting from drawing rooms where men conversed earnestly about their prospering business and establishments, the tangy scent of Dr. Harris and Co's Freshening Cologne spicing the air. A life any respectable man was entitled to and, Dammit!, deserved to have.

Reuben had always held himself in rather high esteem.

He pushed the glass away, one lip snarling like a dissatisfied tomcat. That damned woman's fault. All of it.

He was seated at the dampest part of the tavern, where broken brickwork and crumbling window-panes allowed the outdoor elements to filter in. It had begun to rain; large, insistent droplets that managed to infiltrate the gaps between Reuben's coat and the exposed sliver of skin on his neck. It was as though every element of his world, the weather, the hateful people who surrounded him - the *drunkards* that pushed and shoved and hollered - acted against him. He could tolerate it no longer.

A jug lay abandoned, half-empty, leaking onto the wooden bar. Hands, shaking with anger, but fuelled by resolute and sheer *hatred*, he picked up the handle and hurled the entire vessel across the room, feeling sick delight at the screeching smash of glass and the sloshing of drink against the wall.

A flower seller crept through the door of the tavern, with a basket of cut blooms over her fingerless gloves. Reuben's vision had begun to distort, the scene in front of him morphing into an unsettling haze of fledgling understanding. A thing with feathers.

The words of the flower girl rippled slowly, sinking into his consciousness. *'Flowers for every meaning. Red roses for your love. Daisies for new beginnings. Marigolds for luck. A penny for your thoughts...'*

Festering petals rained down the internal walls of Reuben's brain. One clung to its squidgy grey surface, refusing to let go since its release from Danielle's book all those months ago. All the hours of strain, attempting to understand the drivel she'd written. The wilted leaves with their pungent smell, their original sweet fragrance waned with age and his wife's ill intent.

The diary entries had all held meaning!

Oh me! Oh Life!

The woman was a fleeting opportunity, one he'd let go to waste because

he didn't,

and couldn't,

Understand.

But Reuben understood Hackman in that moment, with a clarity that was frightening.

Each fibre of his being burned with delusion, his hands forming claws, tensed and balled into fists. Hot breaths escaped from his flared nostrils as though the devil had finally taken residence within his body. The tavern benchtop screeched as his ragged fingernails raked the surface, desperate for release from the cold sweat, thick as the oily fat from meat. He pounded his fists against the wooden surface that did not offer relief. It was too hot. He was being choked by the cruel truth, that he could have had every damned thing he craved, from the woman who'd never been insane at all!

Oh me! Oh Life!

Didn't,

Couldn't,

Understand.

Patrons gathered and stared, encircling him like those who pay pennies at Bedlam.

He grabbed the basket and shredded the yielding daisy petals apart.

The decision of the flower.

Reflection Statement

All history is fluid, a fabrication. History is told by the victors, by the effective communicators, by those who hold power, by men. Historically, the considerable gap between the statuses of men and women created an imbalance of power and thereby of story. History becomes HIS story. It is through this imbalance that a skewed recording of history occurs.

Adopting a postmodernist lens, my major work investigates the elasticity of time and experience through the short fiction form. According to Aristotle, '*lives do not form neat stories.*' With this in mind, my piece does not have perfect chronology. This reflects the imperfection of the lived experience of my characters, and indeed, of my audience. Had I changed the minutiae of setting, it would have transported the narrative to another time. Yet, the essence would not have changed, proving the transcendence of communication and emotion. Whether the Victorian-era drawing room were instead a 1960's diner or a 1980's lecture theatre, the sentiment would remain: that women are anchored by their circumstances.

While originally three different women were telling my story, feedback revealed that this would not achieve the amount of depth that one female protagonist would. I initially aimed to free the archetypal madwoman in the attic by framing madness as a liberating experience. However, as my work developed, insanity became a plot device to illuminate miscommunication. The 'madwoman' trope reflects Victorian notions of emotion and communication, where it was inappropriate for women to behave in an impassioned manner. Mad women were considered 'too complicated, volatile or just plain difficult for polite society'ⁱⁱ, and took the form of proto-feminist figures, the antithesis of the perfect wife who was decorous, dainty, dignified and above all looked pretty in the parlour.

I envision that my piece would be read by women who are engaged in a process of self-realisation, and that as Danielle discovers her voice and identity, they would find what's important for theirs. I am reluctant to put an age range on my audience, because women are in a constant stage of evolution and are multifaceted. This imagined audience aligns with the philosophy of the Australian Neo Perennial Press as they publish 'writing by women about women with a particular interest in women's history', through short fiction anthologies such as the *Heroines Anthology*ⁱⁱⁱ. This publisher privileges the short story form – this would enable me to unfold my narrative and achieve my purpose, to give women's history a voice.

My initial concept stemmed partly from my reading of Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves*, a fictional account of Australian colonial history from a woman's perspective, and Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, which utilises motifs of Australian native

flowers to focus on grief, loss and identity. Further, my textual studies in my senior English courses – in particular, Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and Campion's Bright Star – informed my female protagonist's development and allowed me to probe literary and historical interactions without being derivative.

Motif is central to understanding in my major work. The *'trapping of the butterfly'* collides with connotations of freedom established in Campion's Bright Star, illuminating Danielle's initial confinement by her circumstances. The inescapability of women's assigned societal roles mirrors the experiences of Fanny in the film. Reinforcing this sense of restriction through the biblical concept of one's very fibres that God created^{iv}, this *'knitting in her mother's womb,'* suggests that we cannot diverge from the paths we are given. Church bells act as a motif for marriage, death and birth; *'the fruit of the womb a reward'*^v. However, Danielle's wedding signifies a *'tolling of the death knell,'* where a burden is placed upon her, much like the punishment of the sailor in Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Her shedding of the restrictive persona forced upon her aims to strengthen the audience's sympathy, signified through her musing, *'the vastly stretching sky meeting the ocean's crisp indigo line consoled me that my past worries... were comparably insignificant.'* Danielle's albatross drops away.

Primary historical sources from Sir Joseph Banks provided a basis upon which I could explore historical fiction's paradigms. Depicting him as a charmer and a 'lady's man' was important in realising the historical integrity and dimension of my story, hence enriching my audience's immersion in the reading experience. To avoid anachronisms, I consciously created Banks' reimagined character with richness, incorporating the perspectives and language of his writings. The audience reads extracts from Banks' diary, but he is an unreliable narrator, as is the truth with all narrators – even Danielle. We hear of the Tahitian woman whom he rejected in order to sleep with a princess. We never hear her stories, thoughts and feelings. Left unheard is the voice of the woman, the voice of the colonised, the voice of the silenced. I created a female character to balance the truth; still unreliable, but richer. The opening of my major work – *'This is how it really happened: The stocky, fair-haired, jovial Daniel was fabricated by Sir Joseph Banks'* – deconstructs Banks' version of truth, lending historical veracity through the prospect of an alternative past.

The postmodern feature of fragmentation mirrors the similarly fragmented kaleidoscope of women's lives, supporting my concept of broken communication. I attempted to manipulate the triptych form – 'The Blight, the Mildew and the Rust', a title from one of Banks' botanical publications – each representing the perspective, tribulations or decline of my three characters. Danielle as the Mildew, *'something that grows in a tropical climate'*. Joseph as the Blight, *'something that attacks, with propensity for destruction'* of the marriage as soon

as it begins. Reuben as the Rust, with his anger and confusion *'growing out of space to breathe'*. The assignment of symbolic botanic qualities to each protagonist aims to strengthen continuity in my narrative through motif.

The practice of writing solely for oneself, for the 'sheer pleasure of pouring out your thoughts' is advocated by writer Robert Graham in his text How to Write Fiction (And Think About It). I adopted these practices in order to advance my drafts, incorporating my personal voice through gradually composing fragmented elements. Relying on Edgar Allan Poe^{vi}, I understood that 'brevity and coherence' are defining characteristics of short fiction – maintaining these elements was a challenge I encountered in the development of my piece. While my major work was hybridised between the three definitive types of this form – historical, dramatic and didactic – I aimed to braid these three threads together to provide a holistic view of the complexities surrounding gendered communication.

Narratorial voice was established in my piece through devices such as dialogic questioning and imagery. Danielle's *'Then why do I want?'* draws from the wistful yet detached narratorial voice of Atwood's Offred in The Handmaid's Tale. This represents Danielle's internal dialogue, attempting to understand her status and possibilities as a woman in the eighteenth century. I attempted to create a disjunct between the masculine and feminine voices of Danielle and Reuben through word choice and sentence length. Research into gender communication indicates that men and women communicate differently. Men seek to 'report'; women seek to build 'rapport'^{vii}. Hence, Danielle builds a rapport with the audience. Reuben reports what he sees. 'Men and women view the purposes of conversations differently... For women, a tool to enhance social connections and create relationships... For men, to exert dominance and achieve tangible outcomes.'^{viii} Danielle is distinguished by frequent use of dialogue, reference to nature and its cycles, and to sensory description: *'But Mr. Banks' estate is the world. The ships, the sky, the stars.'* Meanwhile, Reuben is defined by short sentences, visceral imagery – *'like the oily fat from meat'* – and coarse interjections: *'A life any respectable man was entitled to and, Dammit!, deserved to have.'* The final section, titled 'Amber Bitterness' to allude to the fossilised resin symbolising marriage vows, marks Reuben's loss of a fleeting and valuable chance because he *'didn't, and couldn't'* understand. The manipulation of language through narrowed poetic structure slows the pace, contrasting the density of my previous sections. Hence, I emphasise the dichotomy between male and female personas, and the subsequent disparity in understanding, that arose in the eighteenth century and continues today.

Conceptually, miscommunication transcends historical truth. Insights are offered into the way the line of history can be changed by looking at it through a different lens and considering

the reliability of the victor's narration. The short fiction form has allowed me to shape the story through episodic narrative, dialogue and recurring motifs. *The Blight, the Mildew and the Rust* has strengthened my voice as a composer, exploring the roles into which we are positioned. I aimed to subvert the reader's expectations by recasting the madwoman in the attic to the madman in the tavern. In doing so, I empower a once silenced voice. My major work creates a liminal space, ultimately revealing a sadder and a wiser (wo)man.

Addendum

ⁱ Banks, S. J., (1743-1820). *The Endeavour Journal of Sir Joseph Banks*. [Online] Available at: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0501141h.html> [Accessed 27 August 2021].

ⁱⁱ Kelly, A., 2015. *Literary Blueprints: The Mad Woman*. [Online] Available at: <https://blog.pshares.org/literary-blueprints-the-mad-woman/> [Accessed 22 February 2021].

ⁱⁱⁱ White, C., 2021. *Neo Perennial Press: Heroines Anthology*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.theneoperennialpress.com/the-heroines-anthology> [Accessed 24 August 2021].

^{iv} (Psalms 139:13)

^v (Psalms 127:3)

^{vi} Lawrence, J. C., 1917. A Theory of the Short Story. *The North American Review*, 205(735), pp. 274-286.

^{vii} Point Park University, 2021. *Gendered Communication: Differences In Communication Styles*. [Online] Available at: <https://online.pointpark.edu/public-relations-and-advertising/gender-differences-communication-styles/> [Accessed 26 August 2021].

^{viii} Merchant, K., 2012. How Men And Women Differ: Gender Differences in Communication Styles, Influence Tactics, and Leadership Styles. *CMC Senior Theses*, Volume 513.