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CULTURAL WORK

Extracts from the Novel *Chiaroscuro*

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Abstract

Chiaroscuro is a short novel that alternates between autobiographical narrative, myth, and queer hallucination. Its title invokes pictorial chiaroscuro — the play of light and shadow that structures both the text and the lived experience of its narrator. The story follows a young protagonist escaping suburban working-class precarity and family violence, carrying the haunting presence of a dead brother, a destructive father, and a mother transfigured into a glamorous, spectral figure. In his flight, queer survival in nocturnal spaces — clubs, prostitution, drugs — intertwines with visionary obsessions: apparitions of Salome as lover and ghost, the figure of Nefertiti, biblical echoes of Mary Magdalene, and apocalyptic prophecy. Structured in veils or fragments, the novel unfolds as a mosaic of testimony and mythic parable. Religious and cultural iconographies are not ornamental but constitutive: Salome embodies seduction and threat; martyrs and virgins serve as doubles of the narrator; prophets and the disappeared converse with family histories of violence and silence. In this interplay, memory becomes unstable, queerness visionary, and myth a narrative technology for rewriting trauma. *Chiaroscuro* is thus a narrative of disappearance and survival that interlaces family archive, queer memory, and sacred myth. It illuminates how gendered life stories reveal structures of patriarchal violence while also re-imagining new forms of desire, identity, and survival. In the tradition of Jean Genet or Jeanette Winterson, the work merges narrative and poetic registers to show how the marginal becomes vision, and how the broken reinscribes itself as myth. Three extracts are included here.

Keywords

Chiaroscuro; Family Violence; Trauma; Memory; Queer Autofiction

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SENSITIVITY NOTE

This work contains depictions of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. Readers are advised that some material may be distressing.

Chiaroscuro

We moved so often in those years, I can scarcely re-trace our haphazard itinerary. With no compass, no map, we uprooted from suburb to suburb at the drop of a hat. Oh, my father had his reasons alright, but they were not discussed in front of the children. *Little pitchers have big ears*, my mother would warn.

Piled into the car at 1 a.m., with all our earthly belongings in the boot, my father would look suspiciously on all sides, checking that the coast was clear. We ended up in places unknown to us. Once, a mining town, where my father got contracted to extract bauxite for Alcoa. He'd disappear for a week underground, then return on Saturdays, arms full of treats and body covered in a grey grime. *For my Musketeers*. Every town we were surrounded by ugly freckled children with sandy blond hair who spoke differently and played different games. We had to get accepted all over again. As it would happen, sometimes we stayed enemies. Children can be incredibly territorial. In some senses, it's the logic of childhood. You never quite know where you're next meal's coming from, if you'll get that ride home from school. Maybe your parents will stop loving you. Maybe they'll leave you stuck on your own. So we cling, invariably, to any scrap of home. *Gratitude*, *that's what you kids need to learn*, my father would say, out of the blue. *You don't know how lucky you are*.

This was rare. My father was not usually so stern. He cared for us, and he was trying his best. He was just having a rough time, he said. He'd already hit the financial rocks too many times: even been declared officially bankrupt. He dreamed of making millions like his brother, who'd opened a chain of butcher outlets along the East coast, but somehow that dream evaded him. He got into the car game, but still couldn't strike gold. Underneath, he was bitter. But he found it hard to be bitter, and he tried not to let it show. He drank instead.

So he would never leave me—or any of us. He needed us too much. *Promise you'll visit me in jail if I'm ever put inside boys, won't you?* My father the gangster. What else could explain this?

Nevertheless, this fear haunted me—I would wake one day to find I was alone, nowhere to live. In the back of the car on our journeys to our next destination, I would count the flickering shadows passing over the inside roof. It was a chiaroscuro that absorbed me—this pattern of light and dark, that strobed to the rhythm of my breath. This gave me security—like not stepping on cracks in the footpath, convincing yourself that the stability of the world depends on it. One false move.

It seemed we were always in that car. The nights were the worst. The nights embodied my fear. I would wake in surroundings so unfamiliar. I couldn't remember where I was. So the years went and vanished like flares. One constant was the call out for a glass of water to make sure I wasn't alone.

My older brother—the dead one—used to enjoy a particular torture. 1979. He'd take me to his room, ELO music playing in the background. He preyed on this fear. He knew all my weaknesses. Maybe they were like his own. He had his own predictions—*mum and dad will die*, he said, and *you will be nothing*. *You cannot change this. Slowly, everyone will be gone. They will get old, they will get sick, and they'll leave you. They'll disappear. There's nothing you can do.*

Room divider

That summer in 1982, when my mother left him, she wore dark glasses to hide her eyes. She seemed distant, sitting flanked by lawyers, in a pine- panelled office in the city. She would not disclose where she was staying, not to anyone. She was *under advice*. She would see us every few days, each time in a different location, so she couldn't be traced. I asked her, why was she wearing the glasses? Slowly she removed them from her

face, and looked down. Her left eye was suppurating. The two lids were crusted together painfully, with little crystals of dried blood. She strained to look.

We were to stay with her brother, Bern. She had taken a restraining order out against our father. We would have to be patient, she explained. There was a lot to be done.

I remember it clearly. It was Friday night. My brother and I had just watched *The Monkees* on TV. Our mother was in the kitchen, preparing dinner: spaghetti bolognese. There was a freak storm outside. Rain battered the windows and tossed the trees in the front yard like wild hair.

My father returned home drunk. He slumped down in an idle chair, and said he wanted to watch the news. My little brother and I scuttled off to our rooms. Like cats and dogs before earthquakes, we knew trouble was on the brew. But unlike earthquakes, where you are warned to take to the safety of doorways, the only safety could be under our beds, ears covered to muffle the impending noise.

And so it started as it always did. My mother's face was blue with recriminations. Blue from restrained breath. She screamed at my father in his chair. What a bastard he was, walking in like that. Not a good husband to her or father for his children. A joke. A failure.

She had tried to leave him so often, but she had never been so decisive. So small a woman to take on such a bear of a man, yet she did. By his account, repeated over the years, she lured him into it. She harangued, she harassed, she threw her shoes at his face in disgust. She had it coming to her.

Only my little brother was witness. He remembers exactly what happened: the fist coming down on her cheek. Her collapsing weak body sprawled next to the room divider. He had stood, dumbfounded, and then let out a yelp. My father's angry expression was etched in the air like a frieze.

I remember running, running to the telephone box in the rain, its hard needles cutting into my face. Running with my sister, forever, checking over our shoulders for the dark shape of our father in pursuit. Running to ring the police.

A few moments of escape, and it was over. My father's arms snagged at my wet shirt and hauled me back inside. My sister sat, terrified, in the back of the warm car.

Get inside! My father locked all the doors of the house and turned the lights out. We were prisoners. He pulled the phone out of the wall. I watched my mother's body shake on the ground. She was moaning. She was calling out my dead older brother's name.

Stop your theatrics Mira and get up, he said, giving her a kick. My mother only called out more loudly. She was communicating with the other side. She was saying it was not her time, telling my brother she would wait for him. For when he would return. In Glory.

The police broke down the door. I saw my father led off in a headlock to a growling divisional van parked on the nature strip. I looked at my mother, who was being attended to by the paramedics that had followed the police through the shattered front door. She must have been dying, but she murmured in a kind of ecstasy, a kind of trance.

The doctors had said, half an inch closer and she would have haemorrhaged. She's a lucky woman. Well, lucky considering.

The next day, my father came back. His best friend, former partner-in-crime, in all manner of dodgy deals, had raised the bail. *Your mother's a mad bitch, kids*. Still, one lousy night in a jail cell, and he was free. We stayed with him for three days in that empty house. I thought I'd never leave.

Where was my mother? She was here, in this office, filing divorce proceedings. She had forgotten us. At least for the time.

Had she never learnt from anything? My father had proved what he was capable of; numerous times he had kidnapped us from our beds, in the wee hours of the morning, and fled with us—his only possessions,

his insurance of another kind—to dingy hotels in Esperance only to make foreboding phone calls intimating his own brand of revenge.

He used to tell us we were going on holidays, that he missed us, needed us. Had to get away. He bought clothes to replace the ones left behind. He took us to the barber's to get haircuts or made us wear straw hats. It was all part of a game. I had nothing to suspect.

Now I read stories of the disappeared. I could have been one of them, on those long nights into nowhere, on dark dirt roads out of town. Only my father's sense of Catholic guilt had reined him in. Fate had forked in two directions; it was only by luck he hadn't chosen the cul-de-sac of hooking up the exhaust pipe to the car's interior in some lonely, desolate place, like those described in the headlines he would read.

My mother was out to save her own skin. In the meantime, I would endure early Sunday mornings with my Uncle, forced to eat porridge full of weevils and to withstand the supervised visits of my father, head hung low, but full of excuses.

He's not a bad man, Uncle Bern would tell his wife, apologetically. *He just goes too far sometimes.*

Bern resented us. His own children were already fully-grown and farmed out—this one a secondary school maths teacher, that one a doctor. His sister had foisted her problems on him—all six of them. She had always been a little hysterical, a little out of control. My father blamed the Libbers—any female friend she had. Bern blamed us. In return, we called him Uncle Grouch. *Scallywags*! he'd complain, and Brenda, his wife, kept us out of view.

They should never have married in the first place—I overheard him say. *You know how mum disapproved.*

He got that part right, the rest was mysterious, pre-history, like all the other facets of my mother's life.

Had they ever loved one another? Maybe: but force of circumstance brought them together. My mother had seemed stuck in his hopeless orbit. I wondered if it was truly the end, watching her, tight-lipped and decided as a Prioress in that office, signing things away. She smiled weakly at me, and we were ushered to the stairs.

The Sacred Heart of my Father

Even though he wasn't a good Catholic, he tried. Never one to shirk the bonds of responsibility . On the most important religious days, even after their separation, my mother consented to allow my father to take us to Mass for Christmas and Holy Week. Every good Catholic would attend, the church overflowing this time of year.

He taught me that prayer. Sometimes, after a bout of drinking, my father would lumber upstairs to my little brother and me, seeking solace in that mantra. We've got to pray, boys. Pray with your father.

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us,

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us,

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, grant us peace.

My father would clutch me by my pyjamas and kiss me with his whiskered face. I remember the rashes from that steel-wool brush. That is what it feels like to be kissed by a man. I learnt early.

So my father would keep mumbling, realising his wrongdoing even as he climbed over me, sweaty and beer-breathed, in the dark. I repeated the prayer as he rubbed himself all over my body. His body, a wasteland, a tundra of white hairs and white fat, which had been muscle, in his earlier days.

Images flood me: living in the hills years ago, the sharp smell of wet clay ground. Running to watch the bushfires that licked closer the rim of houses that lined the street. Neighbours in a flurry reticulating water

from garden bores to calm the fury, and the heat sweating beads on our faces. My parents at their most human: in fear, just like children.

The coldness of early mornings and the emphysemic cry of magpies. Myself running down old tracks through the bush on my way to school, shading my mop of black hair from their ravenous beaks. They built nests out of human hair; they were coming after me like Tippi Hedren in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

The primal smell of oil from cars parked in the gravel driveway. My father's low-sunk dirty motor LTD, that always caused me to get sick inside, or my brother's own gold Torana, gritty with sand from the beach. The sight of my brother's car being brought back without him, to sit in the garage on stumps for years, rotting away in its own rust.

Holding my breath under water. Swimming out to the black rock in Albany . If I reached the horizon I would reach the other world. I would be too far gone, too far out for rescue. Visions of mermaids and submarines.

A big dusty wardrobe. Locked inside by my older brother, who has tied a satin dressing gown cord between the two pearl handles. I go inside seeking Narnia, another door to another time, or like the Tardis itself, big with concertina space, like memory, but instead hit the chipboard, reality, the black rock at the beach, my head going under.

Now voices. I shiver as in a sickness. Like in all fairytales, I have eaten something poisonous: my own dreams. I bang at the walls that enclose me in darkness but I can only hear the taunts of one thousand devils. My asthmatic wheeze splits into their thousand voices, *I am the boy with the thousand voices*, as my brother had called me, and the record booms like something deep underground, an explosion. Echoes.

Run for the shadows

Run for the shadows

Run for the shadows in these golden years

A weight falls on me. It comes out of a growling, black cloud. The black cloud changes into an animal with a giant bullhead, like the Minotaur. I am heavy as an astronaut on re-entry: my body is pressurising under several hundred Gs. I try to shift but I am entirely paralysed: only my eyes move. There are two new sounds: a child moaning and a man talking to him. These voices come from outside the evaporated cloud, they are a stuck record. What I hear are words in prayer.

The axis of my spine bends; I am unlatched. I look back on my paralysed body. I am leaving. I walk towards a garden, where my mother is. Perhaps this is Gethsemane. There is always a garden at the heart of everything: of creation, Eden. My mother brandishes a sword, which flashes in a million brilliant colours. A concatenation. A pixellated diagram. My eyes sting on seeing this. It is almost too much to bear. Like looking in the sun too long, I will go blind, so I look away.

I look at my feet, naked and light. I look at my nails, which glow faintly like half-moons. My mother says she has protected me, she has killed the Beast. She is a messenger from God. She exhibits both the high regal bearing of Nefertiti, the florid sanctity of Mary Magdalene. One and the same. She bids me to come with her, the time has come, *The Kingdom is at hand*.

These words lacerate me: I remember the pain of being human, my body has started to convulse, I am not breathing. I know my mother as a liar; the Beast has won. Its claws sink into my chest. I am doubled over down there. Paralysed still, I am trying to reach for something. It's a ringing, beyond the sounds of the two voices.

Childhood is a secret encryption. Hard to decipher. A series of signals tapped out in Morse Code, but over the years, you lose that original encryption, and all that comes out is a jagged communication, with intermittent bursts of something intelligible. I remember few other sounds, always the same… the jangling

of keys and coins in his baggy pockets. But I am unsure what it all means. Again I am like an astronomer searching the skies, picking out white noise from the satellite disks for galaxies and time that took place thousands of years previous but perhaps no longer even exist.

Can you even trust memory? Memory can change, just like feelings. Memory can also be like The Blob, it shatters parameters, crushes things in its way. Amorphous.

I don't have any neat certainties, anymore. I have no map. Life—it seems—becomes a series of discontinuities. Possessed by other voices, perspective offers slippery footholds. You can only sink back into that Blob, memory, and hope you don't get crushed.

So much time gazing into the heavens. Looking at the night sky is actually looking into the past, scientists tell us. But we always look to the heavens with a different cast – the future. Where my brother is, as my mother says, the place of all our origins. The night. Like Jesus and his Sacred Heart, the night embodied my fear. A shiver of expectations. I had always been a dreamer, my father said.

Now I'm the one who has been transformed. The transfiguration. I am no longer found, or findable. Even if they had a chance, my mother and father would find it difficult to trace any resemblance in this—my face—which has a new cast of confidence and hunger to it, my hair shorter, my likeness reshaped. I do not fit any identikit now, made in my own image.

> *Mother, what have I become?* **She would not recognise me at all.**

In some ways, I have spared them a kind of curse. Right now, my mother holds her graven images of me, all saintly, close to her breast. I have disappeared. I have even become a sort of myth. I have been re-written. Just like my brother in Heaven.

In the Bible there are predictions of this. Sudden disappearances toward the end of time, romantically known as The Rapture.

> *Take notice, I am telling you a secret. We shall not die but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet call. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*
>
> *That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.*

So, I—without sin—one of the Chosen—have disappeared. Been taken. The only explanation possible? *For these are the end times*. But who walks among you now? That is changed? Who has risen from the Dead?

Biography

Vek Lewis is an academic, writer, and poet of Anglo- Indian heritage whose work explores memory, trauma, migration, and identity across multiple geographies. Her writing spans lyrical poetry and semi-autobiographical prose, blending intimate, confessional narrative with mythopoetic, hybrid Indic-Christian, and visionary elements. Lewis is the author of two poetic manuscripts currently under development *Words: Sutures* and *Loop Vertigo*, which examine childhood, family, queerness, exile, and survival through fragmentary, spectral, diasporic, and multi- temporal poetics. In her prose, including the novella *Chiaroscuro*, Lewis extends these explorations into the terrains of childhood trauma, domestic violence, and spiritual and bodily transformation, drawing on Catholic iconography, myth, and visionary imagination. Across genres, Lewis interrogates memory, archive, and imagination as tools to reframe experience and forge new forms of genealogy and history-telling. *Chiaroscuro* exemplifies this approach, charting a child's fractured perceptions and the later transfiguration of the self, illuminating the liminal spaces between trauma, myth, and survival.