

LBRIS

We know  
books

# Monsters

a memoir

ALISON CROGGON



SCRIBE

Melbourne • London

## The curse

Unusually, I am alone in the house. Later, I think this is just as well. I don't want any witnesses to my indignity.

No, that's not true.

After I read her letter, I call my father. For once in my life, I permit myself to spill my guts open before him. I have never done this before, in all the conscious years of my five decades on this earth.

I howl down the phone. I display my fury, my spite, my desolation, my bitterness, my anguish. Let it be said. Let it all be said.

When I hang up, there's a momentary respite, as if an abscess has been lanced. But then it pounces, squeezing me in its intolerable grip.

I name it, for the first time.

It's pain. I can't do anything to stop it. I can numb it, or wait for it to go away.

I pour myself a whisky and listen to the weather pursuing its pathetic fallacy: the winter rain, hammering down on my tin roof in the heavy darkness.

It will never all be said.

‘When one hears about another person’s physical pain,’ writes Elaine Scarry in her scrupulous masterpiece *The Body in Pain*, ‘the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth.’

Pain’s triumph is, she says, ‘this absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons’. It is here, says Scarry, that language fails, in this space between what is undeniable for one person and unconfirmable for another. That other person may be so close that they are touching the one in pain, but they may as well be, in terms of their subjective being, inhabiting another galaxy.

Scarry examines the languages in which we attempt to describe physical pain: medical, religious, political, social. And she prises open, with her cool, intellectual scalpel, some of the darkest regions of human experience — in particular, the desire to inflict pain on another human being.

She makes a distinction between physical and emotional pain. Unlike physical pain, which has no meaning and no value, psychological suffering does have ‘referential content’, so much so that ‘there is virtually no piece of literature that is

*not* about suffering’. Physical pain, she argues, is asocial and preconscious, while psychological pain is part of the social experience of the mind. Many people have argued with the absoluteness of this distinction, on many grounds: linguistic, medical, experiential.

Right now, that distinction doesn’t seem so absolute to me, either.

I am not expert in the worlds of physical pain. I hope I never will be. I have never been stoic. My experiences have all been temporary: minor accidents, migraines, illnesses, childbirth. Psychological pain? Emotional pain? They abide intimately in my body, in the smell that clings to my clothes and sheets, in the smoky oils in my hair, in my addictions, in the toxic narratives that I wind around myself, consciously and unconsciously, to protect myself.

Now all those narratives are torn open, and here, in the middle of the splintering, I no longer recognise my self. It’s as if the self I have known, through myself, through others, is suddenly harshly illuminated from a new angle, all shadows fled. I see the histories that I have denied all my life, the wounds that I have ignored, the pain that I never acknowledged.

We speak of these things in metaphor. The heart, that smoothly muscled pump, can be pierced and torn; its valves can malfunction; its arteries or muscles can bulge and burst. It is an absurdity to say of this fleshly organ that it can break, as if it were made of bone or ice. But we all know what someone means when they say, *my heart is broken*.

My heart is broken. But now I understand that it always has been broken.

Once upon a time, I began another story with 'once upon a time'. I knew much less then than I do now. I was more hopeful, and more deluded, and almost certainly I had less compassion. Now I am more angry, less hopeful, and both more and less certain.

Even though I know that progress is a myth, I like to think I am a better person than I was — or at least, a more knowledgeable person. I am quite possibly exactly the same as I was twenty years ago, in the same way that a fountain, which is always spilling different water, is always the same fountain. Yet I am convinced that something has changed. It feels fundamental.

How does one measure change, especially in something as uncapturable as one's own self? Does a shift in perception count as change, in any case?

I think of the ageing Buster Keaton in Samuel Beckett's only movie, *Film*, an exploration of George Berkeley's pronouncement that 'to be is to be perceived'. Keaton, eighteen months from his own death, plays O, a man who is evading, more and more absurdly, the tyranny of being seen. But he is also escaping the tyranny of being: if to be is to be perceived, then not to be perceived is an extinction.

The camera's indifferent eye stalks O with his head hunched down, his hat over his eyes, flinching away from the gaze of others, as he hurries down a street, up a flight of stairs. At last he escapes to his room, where surely he will be safe. But no, a cat and a dog are looking at him. A parrot. A goldfish. A mirror. He evicts the cat and dog, covers the parrot

and the goldfish bowl with his coat, conceals the mirror with a blanket. But still there are eyes: the buttons on a folder, the carved mask on the back of a chair, a picture on the wall that he tears down and rips up, trampling it into the ground. And all the time, the camera, which is never acknowledged, records everything for the unknown eyes that will watch it, fifty-two years later, on a computer screen.

Himself, finally, staring one-eyed into the camera with increasing horror, knowing that he can't escape his own perception of himself.

I always wanted to be invisible.

Once upon a time, there were three sisters. One was the oldest, one was the youngest, and the other was in the middle. They were born into histories, spoken and unspoken, that shaped the contours of their minds and their memories. And not one of those sisters escaped the curse.

There is no moral to be drawn from this fairytale. It isn't a story of redemption. Yet I know too that any story is a ghostly negative: all that is dark in the image is a record of light. And sometimes it's so hard to distinguish one shadow from another.

I can't even remember the final conversation I had with my sister. I had sent her flowers, because she was ill, because I

was worried, because, despite everything, I am not a complete monster, and she called to thank me. I was touched. Perhaps the old non-conversation would finally be laid to rest, like the zombie that it is. Perhaps the fairytale of happy ever after would come true after all.

And then, in this tentative place, which might have been the beginning of a reconciliation, she started again on the same old, same old. I pleaded with her to stop; I told her that these things she was saying were not true, were none of my business, were nothing to do with me. But she went on and on and on.

Finally, I lost it. I remember shouting. I remember slamming the phone down — she called on the landline — and shaking for an hour afterwards.

A few months after that, she sent me the letter. Written as part of her therapy, it outlined all the ways in which I had abused her. It was her response to an email I'd written months before. My email was written with both despair and hope: despair at the accumulating toxicity between us; hope that perhaps if I addressed her accusations against me cleanly, clearly, unambiguously, she would understand who I actually am. Hope that perhaps we could both, finally, find a way to be honest with each other.

I was cautious with this email. I cc'd in both our parents, so she couldn't misrepresent what I said. I wanted above all to be clear, so I made sure that I made no counteraccusations: I confined myself solely to defending my character against the stories that she had been retailing to almost everyone we knew, both inside and outside the family, in

some cases since we were young women.

I told her, for the first time in my life, how deeply these stories had hurt me.

'You are not a victim of me,' I wrote. 'You have never, ever been a victim of me. But you have said really horrible things about me. Just because you've been saying this stuff for years doesn't make it true. It just makes it worse. I have put up with this for years, being gracious for the sake of family harmony. I put up with it out of compassion for you, a compassion you have seldom extended to me. And after all these years, I don't see why I should put up with it any longer.'

Reading that now, I'm not surprised that it didn't end well. But when I wrote that email, I really did hope that we could repair our relationship, that perhaps we could become like siblings are supposed to be, when everything isn't broken. I see that sibling love — honest, clear-sighted, unconditional — between my children. I guess I wanted it for myself.

Perhaps the oddest thing is that I had never previously told her how much these stories wounded me. Perhaps it was because they seemed at once so trivial and absurdly incorrect that, aside from the odd argument, they scarcely seemed worth addressing. Perhaps I knew that she would simply deny that she had said any such thing, even if she had said it literally five minutes earlier. Perhaps — is this true? I am sure it is true — it was that I had always believed that addressing them would hurt *her*. That challenging those stories would wound her in a way that leaving them unchallenged wouldn't wound me.

She always placed me as a dark mother-figure, with a capacity for annihilation but not for feeling. Somehow, I had always believed that my resistance to pain was higher than hers, and that therefore it was incumbent on me to say nothing.

Her immediate answer to my email didn't address anything I had raised. Instead, there were new accusations. Later, in the final letter that broke us completely, there were more. I read that letter in growing rage because either she knew she was lying or she genuinely believed everything she was saying. I didn't know which, and I didn't know which was worse.

What I did understand, with a wrenching finality, was how badly she needed me to be the monster she had made me, how I had to be the one who dealt out 'emotional savagery' and toxicity and pain, how I was the one who distorted and changed what was said and done, how fundamentally that image of me underpinned her perceptions of herself. I also understood that, for her, my pain didn't (doesn't) exist, which was perhaps the worst thing of all.

It made clear something that I had known, underneath all our conflicts. If I were proved 'innocent' on one charge, the list of crimes would shift and dissolve and change to other accusations. I understood that there was no appeal against these accusations, that even to protest against their injustice and untruth was proof of my perfidy.

Over the next few days, I began to recognise how much I had internalised her perception of me, how it had shaped me into guilts I hadn't even realised I possessed, how in so many areas of my life it had silenced me and inhibited my actions.

I look at this monster — the monstrous me that she nurtured so carefully for so many years, since maybe from before we could speak — and I wonder how it happened. We aren't children anymore. We have children of our own, lives that we have made that extend far beyond the determinations and traumas of our childhoods. Yet here I am, back in the world of the damaged child who strikes out at hurt, unable and unwilling to perceive the lived realities of any other person.

Maybe she needs that monster. But now I know that monster is killing me.

What is this dark beast? How was she conceived?

The naming of the intolerable, John Berger once said, is itself the hope. So where I do begin?

How about me, idly tapping into Google the name of an ancestor. General Sir Beauchamp Duff, a third cousin of my grandmother, who was disgraced 'after failing to take Baghdad in 1915'. As the Scottish *Daily Record* reported in 2006, when his medals were sold at auction by Sotheby's, he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of India in 1913, the first to be appointed from the so-called Indian Army rather than the British Army. He was responsible for the war in Mesopotamia (which we now call Iraq). He sent an expeditionary force to occupy Basra in November 1914, to protect the oil interests of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (which later turned into British Petroleum), resulting in a five-month siege at Kut al-Amara by the Ottoman Army. Thirteen thousand British troops were captured, and many of them died in Turkish prisons.

Ultimately, it was regarded as Britain's greatest military disaster, with a loss of twenty-three thousand lives.

The Mesopotamia Commission of Enquiry into the disaster was merciless. Lord Curzon condemned it as 'official blundering and incompetence' on a scale not seen since the Crimean War.

The family secret was that he killed himself, announcing his intention in a farewell letter to my grandmother. But it was widely known, even at the time: Commander Josiah Wedgwood said that the Commission of Enquiry pushed him to take his life. The *Daily Record* baldly calls him the 'suicide general'.

All these secrets that everybody knows.

The family lore says that he couldn't carry the deaths of 'his men' on his conscience, and perhaps that was part of it. But Great Uncle Bee was already responsible for so many deaths. What broke him was being the publicly mocked face of an action that Lord Kitchener called a 'calamity' for British India.

I google some more.

By 1900, in his late forties, Great Uncle Bee was the Assistant Adjutant-General on Lord Roberts' staff in South Africa, during the Second Boer War.

Under Lord Kitchener, Lord Roberts was in charge of the occupation of Pretoria. When a massive British invasion failed to defeat the Boers, who resorted to guerrilla warfare, Lord Roberts oversaw the scorched-earth policy that defeated them. The British forces burned the Boer farms and rounded up the homeless civilian population in concentration camps

that lacked food, sanitation, and medical care. It wasn't the first time this tactic was used: the Spanish similarly imprisoned civilians in Cuba in 1896.

The British camps in South Africa were, however, far larger. They incarcerated more than 150,000 Africans and Boers, mostly women and children, in squalid conditions, where many of them died of disease. After the war, a report concluded that 27,927 Boers, half of whom were children under sixteen, had died in the camps. Rumours of the camps began to circulate in England, and in 1900 the South African Women and Children Distress Fund sent a three-woman delegation led by Emily Hobhouse — whom Kitchener later referred to as 'that bloody woman' — to investigate the so-called 'refuge camps'. Hobhouse called them 'a wholesale cruelty'.

In a time-honoured reflex, the British military denied any problems, and then claimed that if there were problems, it was the fault of women. The military governor of Pretoria, General John Maxwell, said that 'the inmates are well cared for, and though the death rate amongst the children is excessive, it is in most cases the fault of the mothers themselves'. A camp doctor memorably described Hobhouse and her companions as 'a few hysterical unsexed women who are prepared to sacrifice everything for notoriety'.

There was little attempt by the British or the Boers to keep records of the estimated 107,000 Africans who were interned, so precise numbers of their deaths are not available. But, says an anonymous historian on Wikipedia, 'it is thought that about 12 per cent of Black African inmates died (about 14,154)'. That seems to be a curiously conservative figure, given Africans