

PRAISE FOR *THE ASKING GAME*

‘a real page turner,’ *Bookseller & Publisher*

‘a teaser of a novel,’ *The Age*

‘intelligent and curiously affecting,’ *The Canberra Times*

‘impressive ... no tentative beginner’s piece,’
The Australian

‘an unexpected treasure,’ goodreads.com

‘*The Asking Game* is serious play – an interrogation of realism and the real, of the rip tide of memory, of the riddle of identity – in writing that is lyrical, edgy, intellectually provocative, and sly.’ Janette Turner Hospital

‘I was thrilled when I first published Rose in *Best Australian Stories* 2004 . She has gone on to write with great flourish – to quote one of her characters, her writing is like chilled gin “as thick as syrup, as sticky as lust”’ Frank Moorhouse

Born in England, based in Melbourne, Rose Michael is a writer, editor and academic who has been published in *Griffith Review*, *Best Australian Stories*, *Island*, *Muse*, *Cultural Studies Review*, *Review of Australian Fiction* and has won a number of short story prizes. Her first novel, *The Asking Game* (Transit Lounge, 2007), was a runner-up in the 2002 Allen & Unwin/Vogel award for an unpublished manuscript and received an Aurealis Award honourable mention.

THE ART *of* NAVIGATION

First published in 2017 by
UWA Publishing
Crawley, Western Australia 6009
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au
UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing
a division of The University of Western Australia



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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Michael, Rose, author.
Title: The art of navigation / Rose Michael.
ISBN: 9781742589213 (paperback)
Subjects: Speculative fiction.
Gothic fiction (Literary genre).

Printed by Mcphersons Printing Group
Cover design and typeset by Carolyn Brown www.tendeersigh.com.au
Cover image by Wyman H www.unsplash.com



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

ROSE MICHAEL

THE ART *of* NAVIGATION

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'What seest thou else
In the dark backward and abysm of time?'
Prospero, *The Tempest*

3 DECEMBER 2057

Back then I had no idea – a grown up might've, maybe; but I was six, after all. Seven. Crouched before the narrow gap between my mother's door and the floor, posting my drawing into the darkness.

The first magician I ever drew was in 1995 – lead-grey beard and hat coloured in black. She always said, with that slight shake of her head, watching the pictures my pens conjured, that I was born a listener. Her stories were my world: soon, she promised, I'd go to school, but for now I could amuse myself among her books. That morning, I remember, I'd been looking for a picture of her favoured chess-piece Queen when the polished pages – the sound of their turning slicing the quiet room – drew a red thread from my bub thumb; but who was there to tell? I sniffed a breath. Inhaled our house. Stopped flipping on and instead turned back to two men who were made to look 3D by the parabola of paper when all the other prints were as flat as their original portraits: no depth, no shadows.

Face-out in full light the rest of Elizabeth's court stared back at me, but those two looked at each other instead. I dug out my favourite 6B pencil and began to copy. Faithfully. Curving a skinny arm about my drawing and bowing low over the page – almost as close as when I pressed my forehead to Nat's so our lashes brushed and eyes on either side were wateringly wide.

One white corner disappeared under her bedroom door. I pushed the whole sheet in, pulled my hand back to suck

the stinging cut. On the other side I sensed Nat's dreams crowding in that dark room, which smelt of something medicinal, and mothers.

I realised it was up to me to free her from the sleeping spell. I stood on tiptoe, the better to turn the porcelain knob – with two hands, which I did. Carefully, so it didn't catch. And saw for the first time what everyone had always said. How very small she looked, lying down. Not like a mum at all.

I beat a retreat holding in my hand the notebook that'd fallen from hers. Flushed with pride – now she would wake and open curtains and windows and doors and arms. Shake off the curse that had made her forget *I* was the love of her life. Her little man. When she saw my drawing she would smile and tell me there'd never been any magic, only ever science. That there was no such thing as a potion, only prescriptions like hers. And if I ever heard her talking it was just inside her head ('not yours,' she'd promise – a finger pressed to my kiss – the words would never be in mine). But I had never. Not a murmur. Until, unpacking, she came across that diary covered in a collage of cut-out rock stars.

'An old journal,' she said: 'an odd journey.'

I fingered the peeling tape that had pinned the paper men down my lifetime long. Rifled through pages I couldn't read – her teenage script was hieroglyphics: running-writing recognisable, but indecipherable – wondering at the story her words spelled.

I knew the perfect place.

I hid Nat's old diary – paper crinkled as the soft skin around her eyes, ink faint as the veins appearing there – at the bottom of one of the leaning towers that walled in our new home. Not intending for *me* to never find it again. Though now I'm not so sure: she always said I was smart.

'Jo,' she'd say, 'you're sharp enough to cut the pair of us.'

1981

1987

10.00 pm

The year of the Slippery When Wet Tour, Di and Nat took to hanging out at Lizzie's house and never leaving. The three of them said they were orphans, had only each other to rely on. 'There's only us,' they swore, and promised to love each other forever – even if they killed each other first – and die together if everything ever got too much. Or, as Di pointed out was probably more likely, life turned out not to be enough. Though surely she was joking.

It was 1987, the year cock rock crossed into the mainstream, and in the Yarra Ranges one night in May our trio were belting out 'Livin' on a Prayer'. Lizzie might've said they sounded like choirgirls from a religious school that'd buried its virgins alive out there, but Nat secretly – sacrilegiously – thought chipmunks described them better. The rock anthem, sifted through their private girls' school soprano, came out sounding too perfect, prissy: neither the hit single of the year (not that they knew it'd be that), nor ghost girls singing. But it was, for the moment, their song. They liked it because they'd discovered it, because it wasn't whatever the rest of their classmates were tuning in to. Because it wasn't U2.

'Wo-ah, we're a pathway there!' The lyrics echoed their own desperate fixation on the future.

And they were in love – *sooo* in love – with glam metal's self-conscious pose. They had no idea grunge was waiting in the wings, no inkling of the gritty guitars and angst-filled lyrics already rising from the Seattle streets – the

indie attitude that would define their generation. They didn't know they *were* a generation, one that'd be labelled by a letter for the first time that year. As far as they were concerned they were alone and unique, probing their parents' lies with X-ray eyes. Seeing, they thought, right through society's façade: searching for answers, seeking identity, singing themselves into being as they mixed romantic lyrics into mashed-up messages. A cryptic kind of code.

Even if you could've warned them of the massacres that year would bring – named after the city streets where two twenty-something boys went on separate shooting sprees – they'd have acted unsurprised. Hoddle Street might make history by winter's end, its clippings inspire the Queen Street copycat come summer, but back then there'd only been the Russell Street bombing a year before. And – they were teenagers, remember – the fact that a cop shop had been targeted made it a meaningless move in a grown-up game that didn't concern them...no matter that the nutter had come from the nearby town of Kallista.

Foreknowledge of those shooting sprees might not have had the effect you would've expected; it'd take other unimaginable events to turn that year into a mercurial amalgam of wrong times and right places.

But while Nat and Lizzie, and Di too, may've been naïve, their cynicism could make them seem world-weary – almost wise. If you'd told them the Cold War would end before the decade was done, the Berlin Wall fall, they'd barely have cared. It wasn't that they were apolitical, or not exactly; they just knew they were powerless. Seventeen and stuck in the sticks. There. Then. In an outer-suburban upstairs bathroom, light filtered through a creepered window. In a not-so-modern mansion on the edge of

Sherbrooke Forest, above a cellar jackhammered into a green hillside. A lonely walk from the end of the line.

There they were then, that night when three girls pushed something to breaking point – and someone broke. The self-styled misfits watched themselves being best friends in an amber-tinted mirror. Nat teasing Lizzie’s hair into a pink–gold mane as they sang their hearts out, riding the high of those days and – Nat’s skin constricted as she surfed a feeling she didn’t dare describe – a wave of preemptive nostalgia: cresting, crashing, with the conviction that their youth was almost over. And they’d done nothing with it except try to ditch it. Being away, and coming back, made some things clearer than any crystallised cliché: this golden scene was an unreal moment; these girls were no fixed triptych. Nothing was solid and no one was sure, certainly not unstable Nat.

‘We gotta sol-dier on, ready or not!’ Di’s alto barely made it. Was Nat the only one finding it forced? As though the girls were acting out how they thought they were supposed to be.

‘We could row out to the Bermuda Triangle and wait,’ Lizzie said abruptly, pulling her hair out of Nat’s hand. The image fitted Nat’s feeling that the three of them were floating: unhinged, adrift. The only set thing the pyramid of their friendship – or the solid line joining the other two, anyway; she wished she were more sure she was part of it. No one, she knew, had ever felt such sympathy, such synergy. It was everything: worth living for...worth dying without. That, and Bon Jovi!

‘When we’re thirty, maybe,’ shrugged Di, swinging her foot so her heel hit the side of the bath: hard flesh on harder tiles. That seemed a lifetime away, a lifetime again from seventeen to then. So Nat thought, anyway, as she

returned to Liz's hair, teasing it into knots as the other girl dug through a nearby drawer, picking out a pale lipstick. Then a bright-blue eyeliner that she handed to Di. The two leant side by side over the basin, peering speculatively into the darkish mirror. Nat drew back.

'*An angel's smile is how you fool,*' Liz pouted to the mirror, leaving her faithful friends to finish...

'*You promised me hea-ven then put me through schoooool!*

'If we don't burn up before then,' Di said, screwing up her face. Her tanned features throwing Liz's into pale relief. 'Man, thirty.'

'I feel about to explode,' Liz declared. 'I might spontaneously combust, right now, so only my fingers are left.' She stretched her eyes. 'Don't I look witchy?'

'You know what they would've done to you,' said Di, reaching for the brush to fluff up her own unruly mullet, 'last century? A dirty virgin dreaming of hairy men?'

'You know what *we* would've done?' Liz retorted. 'Been mediums, like the Fox sisters, communing with angels and falling into trances. Touring the country turning tables – cracking our toes in code.'

'Like *who?*' Nat asked – which was all Lizzie needed to launch into what she'd been learning at the esoteric Belgrave bookshop they'd passed on their way here. A coterie of homegrown Goths hung out there, making it the closest thing to the city in this hippie shire of towns that sounded like they'd been founded by flower fairies – Olinda, and Sassafras – or foxes, for that matter, and only lately overrun by rogue rednecks.

Di snorted into the mirror as she opened and closed her aqua-rimmed eyes, handing the brush to Nat behind her, who absent-mindedly picked their hair from it: strawberry-blonde and Lady Di brown. She added some

of her own more mousy strands to the pile then quickly – surreptitiously, superstitiously – swept the tangle to the floor. Something about the night was pulling Nat’s nerves tight.

‘We wouldn’t have *been*,’ Nat said, channelling her most matter-of-fact tone, ‘not who we are, anyway. No school for girls —’

‘No BJ!’ shouted Di as Lizzie pushed her out the bathroom door and towards the stairs that led back to the heart of the house.

‘I would’ve spoken in tongues,’ Liz continued, ‘worn a white nightie with nothing underneath – hidden behind a curtain before wafting out.’ She gestured to demonstrate, exposing the shadowy hollow of her armpits and the sparse hair growing there. Bringing Nat back to the here and now of them, the where and when of then, as she wondered whether maybe her friend didn’t use deodorant because she was *proud* of the musky odour that – Nat breathed in – wasn’t actually that bad. Though it certainly wasn’t good. Maybe Lizzie wanted to be teased. Maybe she thought standing out for the wrong reasons was better than not standing out at all.

Lowering an arm in a faux-regal wave, Lizzie directed them out. And down.

‘Covered in KY, so they felt your ectoplasmic coolness when they groped you in the dark!’ Di grabbed at Liz’s acid-washed crotch, but missed.

‘Was it all a con, then?’ Nat asked, trailing after. ‘No real ghosts – ever?’ She ran her hand down the banister as she followed the others to the ground floor. ‘I guess no one would’ve known...’

‘Yup, one huge hoax,’ Lizzie kicked a strut. ‘Exposed a hundred years ago – A hundred years ago *exactly*, actually.’

She stopped short, looking back up at the others for a hung moment before jumping the last step.

‘What happened?’

‘The sisters? Alcoholics. Seriously though,’ as they entered the kitchen she raised her voice above the sound of Di rummaging through the pantry, ‘why don’t we give it a go? Hypnotism, mesmerism...Precognition.’ She rapped her knuckles against the pine bench behind her: rat-a-tat-tat.

‘Nat?’ Tat-tat.

Nat shifted from one foot to the other as Di stacked the kitchen table with a box of Cheezels and bag of Smith’s chips. Their perpetual gourd of Diet Coke. ‘How d’you know about this anyway, Liz?’

‘I’ve been reading up on séance shit since we moved out here. The Dandenongs is like a nexus for weirdness: first in the twenties, then the seventies. This forest is so *ro-man-tic*.’ She shrugged so her white T-shirt slipped off one shoulder, shaking out her Petra-pink-streaked hair: ‘What else is there to do at the arse end of the world but commune with the dead?’ The others knew neither of her parents were ever around. ‘You got any better ideas?’

‘You just said the Fox chicks were phoneys.’ Nat watched Liz’s eyes slide between the pair: careful not to stare at the odd one out, no doubt.

‘Then it doesn’t matter, does it?’

‘Now now, ladies,’ Di interrupted, loading her friends up with snacks and propelling them towards the couches at the far end of the room, where the open-plan living area was separated from the back deck by large glass doors. ‘Leave her alone, Liz.’

‘The theory is,’ Liz continued, and Nat was listening, even though she wasn’t looking, ‘there isn’t a single heaven

or hell but a series of spheres.’ She dumped an armful of food and gestured a universe with her hands.

‘And God communes with the living through the spirits of the dead.’ Not until the silence became palpable did Nat realise she’d spoken aloud. She wished she hadn’t; Liz was getting her going again.

‘Right on!’ Di snorted, as though some old Nat were on her way back. Di dropped to the ground and leant back against the couch, stretching out denim legs: kicking off sneakers and flicking on the TV. Stuffing her mouth as though she couldn’t see that something was going wrong. As though she didn’t know that anything was going on.

‘Or,’ Liz stared at Nat with shining eyes, ‘we could try the Wicca rite Drawing down the moon. That’s when the High Priestess enters a trance, after a ritual bathing, and requests the Goddess – the moon – to *enter* her.’ She raised her arms high above her head so her T-shirt, thin with wear, revealed ribs beneath barely-there breasts. Lizzie closed her eyes: ‘*If I command the moon, it will come down; and if I wish to withhold day, night’ll linger over my head.*’ She spun on the spot, spun once around again. ‘*If I embark on the sea, I need no ship; and if I want to fly, I’m free from my own weight —*’

‘Ri-ight,’ repeated Di, pointing the remote at Lizzie and miming changing channels. ‘Whatever you say, B-itche. Personally, I think we should do like those Fox chicks and get toe-pop-ping-ly drunk.’

‘Or that,’ Liz agreed, unoffended, as she crashed onto the couch and reached for the bag. She made a grab for Nat’s hand. ‘Come on, Nattie, don’t be afraid of Big Bad Lizzie because I can call on the Goddess Trinity. I’ll let you be the god within? The spark of life divine!’ Laughing, she pulled the shorter girl to her so they sprawled together,

limbs mingling. Surely she too could feel their separate hearts keeping the same time?

Nat tried to push herself up, pull herself away. 'Forget about it, Our Nat, I never meant...or not much anyway!' Quick as a trick Lizzie licked her finger and slipped it into the other girl's ear – 'The small straight pin is mightier than the pen!' – so Nat squirmed to be free of that feeling: a wet hole in her head. Laughing all the same. Finally, losing, letting herself go limp.

'In red voodoo the Queen Priestess or Doctor Priest serves the spirits, drawing them near by binding hair into the heart of some form with a thorn,' Lizzie whispered, pulling a strand from Nat's scalp and winding it tighter and tighter around her own finger till the licked tip turned purple.

These two, Nat thought, almost as though she'd slipped outside herself to look down on them: we interchangeable three. Was the ache she felt recognition that what they had wouldn't last? Or was it fear that the symmetry and perfect harmony weren't real? She wondered if the others felt that too. Was she only outside it now, or had she always been and it was just that she'd forever feel it from now on?

Now that most days passed as though she were living someone else's life.

'Another time, maybe?' Lizzie whispered just as the stillness seemed about to settle, so they started laughing again and were soon crying so hard the whole couch shook beneath them. The world rocked and rolled, and good old Di thumped her head back in camaraderie as she channel-surfed with the remote.

At last the chaos subsided. The background sound and shifting light of the flickering TV finally only interrupted by an occasional comment from one or other of the girls in the room, the rare response.

There they were then, our three teens: seemingly so similar – even if two of the girls were following their more forthright friend, and one was wondering if she weren't on the outer of this trio of self-professed outliers. Nat sighed, gave a brief half-laugh and wriggled into the cushions, burying her face in the back of Lizzie's cotton tee, its Radiant soap smell achingly familiar. She curled around the other girl, closer: clung. And finally felt herself relax, her softness cleaving to her friend's sharper angles. There might be only this, she thought – no more, no forever (she trusted nothing now that everything was at once the same and so, so subtly different) – but there was this.

Is this; Nat was almost absolutely sure.

But Lizzie could never stay still for long. When she shifted, which wasn't much later, Nat took the chance to pull down her own top where it was riding up. She shuffled the seams back into place and tried to tuck her tummy in, noticing as she did how day had faded, the last of the light drained from the sky. Evening had wrapped itself around the house, the room growing dark about them while MTV strummed on.

Lizzie sighed – did she too sense the moment's passing? And sat up to speak, but before she could make the suggestion that would determine the evening's direction, Di turned to the others from her seat on the floor and offered her rare two cents' worth. Which made what she said all the more surprising.

'I know,' she grinned, turning off the TV. 'Ghost stories!' Billy Idol's pouting pose contracted to a single pixel and the screen went black.

Before Nat had time to hesitate, Lizzie'd seized on the idea. 'Oo-oo-oh yeah!' she sang. Jumping up she began

to gather Tim Tams and blankets and – from a kitchen drawer as she swung by – a box of extra-long matches. ‘Come on, girls, come *on*. Let’s go...Gothic!’

Back towards the stairs they went, this time heading down a flight to the dugout below. Nat put one cautious foot in front of the other on a curved metal staircase that must’ve come from the garage sale of some tree change gone wrong. And reached rough-hewn rooms that stretched almost the length of the house – from what she could see in the strobe of one swinging globe. Liz’s father’s last project, started with wine in mind, presumably, or real-estate prices. Or had it just been a way of keeping busy when his wife was leaving? Did he jackhammer it out before or after Liz’s stepmum left? Nat’d been too caught up in her own drama then to know, but could see how any activity might be better than an absence, and wondered if an obsession didn’t make the best repression.

In the weaving shadows, made more wild by the flare of Liz’s match, Nat scrambled aboard an ancient couch. For a moment the room seemed to open out around her: walls retreating into blackness, furniture and bric-à-brac shuffling back. But strange shapes crept from the corners and leapt onto the ceiling.

‘Don’t be such a scaredy-cat, Nat!’ Di said, so Nat untucked her legs and let her feet dangle over the edge.

‘Well I already told about the Foxes.’ Lizzie threw herself onto the cushions beside her nervous friend. Tweaked Nat’s hanging toe: ‘Three sisters. A doorway in time.’

‘Or not,’ Di pointed out, ‘since it was just a hoax,’ pulling on her fringe so it stood up like Bono’s Live Aid do from a couple of years before – a style that’d taken a while to reach their shores, and longer still to sprout among dags like them. ‘And wasn’t a *story* anyway.’

Liz slid onto the hard-packed floor and threadbare rug beside her and Nat shifted into the space left behind. She leant into the cushioned arm of the couch, coughing on damp dust as she tried to reduce the height that made her feel unfairly exposed. ‘Okay,’ she forced herself to say, copying one of the other girl’s shrugs. ‘Sure – shoot.’

Lizzie turned so they were all facing in towards each other and sucked Cheezels from her fingers as they waited: five – four – three – two – one. Di began.

‘D’you remember what happened here?’ She poked the thin carpet under their feet. ‘Right here?’

‘What?’ One of the others asked.

‘It wasn’t that long ago...’ Di said nothing for a minute. ‘I can’t remember exactly, but there were some kids...’ She chewed her chapped bottom lip, trying to remember the details, or maybe just building suspense: ‘A brother and sister.’

Nat searched for her friend’s face in the limited light; it could be anyone, *anything*, over there. Or just a paler patch of darkness, her own eyes playing tricks. She knew enough at least to know what not to trust.

‘The last anyone saw was the two of them walking into Sherbrooke Forest,’ Di continued as Lizzie broke a line of Cadbury’s off the fast-disappearing block. ‘That’s what everyone remembered – afterwards, anyway.’

‘So what happened?’

Now Nat – eyes adjusting to the darkness that crowded out Liz’s candles – could see Di’s wrists clasped around drawn-up knees. And there was the other head, tipped forward expectantly. They were her best friends, but how much did she really know them? Not like they knew each other, came the quick retort. Nat frowned, digging her chin into the sofa arm as she struggled to recall: dark

water, a distant pale reflection. Was it some urban myth? They were way past the urban zone out here. Nat dimly remembered the story of a boy who climbed a tree and refused to come down when his mother called. Who said he wanted to stay up there forever. How gradually his hands became claws, his ears got bigger and fur grew to cover his body. Eventually, when his mum passed right beneath where he was sitting, all she saw was a koala, beady black eyes staring in shocked surprise as she walked – and kept on walking – by.

‘Wasn’t there a pool?’ Nat gave an exaggerated shudder to hide the hint of a real one. ‘Didn’t someone see a ghost?’

‘What made it so weird,’ Di went on, ‘is there weren’t any clues. There was this huge search party. Which turned up nothing. It’d been a couple of days and everyone said there was no way those kids could still be there —’

‘And then the girl appeared,’ Nat took up the tale, seeing, as she said it, a small figure stepping between enormous trees. Visualising it vividly, though she knew she must be making it up: a pale androgyne emerging into watery sunlight as if passing through a dark doorway.

‘It was right here,’ Di said again, so the girls turned as one to where the cellar reached back beneath the Belgrave home. And there, in a glass door abandoned at the bottom of the stairs – a blind window, framing a forgotten way – they saw themselves reflected back. Sitting in a circle of sorts.

‘She just kind of *appeared*.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Liz, watching her see-through shadow open and shut its mouth.

‘What’s to get?’ Di shrugged. ‘Everyone just thought the teacher did it – whatever *it* was.’

‘The girl walked out,’ Nat interrupted, ‘but the brother...’

Di nodded. ‘The sister had a few bumps and bruises, some pretty vicious scratches. She was soaked to the skin.’

The image of the lost girl at the edge of a big wood waned. The feeling of sun on long-chilled skin receded. Nat wondered what it was about the tutor, and then remembered: the young woman claimed she’d seen ghosts. Or one, anyway: a man out of time. A shadow from some other side. Nat’s skin crawled with warning.

‘That’s it?’ Liz asked.

‘That was it,’ Di shrugged. ‘Foul play and the dark arts suspected but nothing ever proved. No body found. I’m surprised your new friends at the bookshop haven’t filled you in.’

‘A *vanishment*.’ Liz shivered with pleasure.

Nat kept quiet about the haunting man – not sure why exactly, just some sense that she didn’t want to draw who-knew-whose attention to this. To them, sitting in companionable silence as the story settled: two children entering a forest but only one emerging.

‘Maybe time stopped,’ Di offered. ‘I mean, it isn’t real for kids anyway, is it? So maybe it ceased to exist. Maybe they were just, literally, caught in the moment. You know, walking, stopping. Minute by in-the-moment minute. Hour by getting-colder-when’re-they-gonna-fucking-find-us hour.’

Her nonchalance made Nat wonder why she’d brought it up at all; it wasn’t like Di to fixate on something so fantastic. Maybe the story wasn’t actually hers, but otherworldly words channelled through a down-to-earth dummy. Nat tried to give herself a shake...

...but had never been able to resist where a good narrative seemed to lead: ‘Maybe the *sister* was never found,’ she whispered and felt familiar chills. She could

scare herself better than her friends ever would. ‘Who’re we to say the same girl who went in walked out?’

The others looked across at her, their faces masked in the dark, and she felt a shock of premonition at the pattern they presented: them and her. Two, to one.

‘I mean, just because she was the right age, wore the right clothes – looked the same.’

Nat didn’t mean it was the brother who’d emerged; she was picturing two silent siblings frozen hand in hand on a deathbed of dank leaves. And an apparition – like this returned her, which was either the realer girl or her erstwhile shade – walking out into the world.