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## RESEARCH

# Bleeding Panels, Leaking Forms: Reading the Abject in Emily Carroll's *Through the Woods* (2014)

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Seeking to move beyond Scott McCloud's spatio-temporal reading of the bleed (1993: 103), this article explores how Canadian writer/artist Emily Carroll's graphic narrative *Through the Woods* (2014) employs the bleed as a means to give form to a mode of horror known as the 'abject'. Employing theories of embodiment that excavate historical connotations of femininity and nature, in addition to socio-cultural discourses that figure the female body as more uncontrollable than the male, this article explores the anxieties experienced by Carroll's adolescent protagonists as they traverse the boundary separating girlhood from womanhood. By paying particular attention to Carroll's excessive use of bleeds, this article argues that the stylistic convention of the bleed is utilised to adumbrate and illustrate the abject horror of such boundary crossings.

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**Keywords:** Embodiment; Emily Carroll; Gothic; Horror; Nature

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## Introduction

In his iconic study of comics and graphic narratives, Scott McCloud draws our attention to those incidents when discrete moments of time are no longer separated by or contained within the borders of individual panels. According to McCloud (1993: 103), these cases, when 'a panel runs off the edge of a page', are called 'bleeds'. The evocatively titled 'bleed' indicates that 'Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the *closed panel*, but instead *haemorrhages* and escapes into *timeless space*' (McCloud 1993: 103, emphasis in original). McCloud's conception of the bleed as the seepage of form into the atemporal space beyond the borders and gutters that normally connote the diegetic space of the comic has certainly provided an

innovative means of understanding the phenomenon. However, at the same time, it is also a characterisation of the bleed that is very much beholden to McCloud's own interpretation of comics as a 'temporal map' (in Chute 2011: 109), a form that renders time spatially through panels, sequences and gutters. The influence exerted by McCloud's *Understanding Comics* from its initial publication in 1993 through to its gradual absorption into the academy has meant that critical conversations on the bleed often hew closely to McCloud's spatio-temporal model. Although a valid reading of this stylistic feature, confining the bleed to a mere signifier of temporal slippage abrogates the potential for other interpretative appraisals. This hemming in of the bleed's representational function is regrettable, as it draws the reader away from other possible interpretations of the effect. In recent years, however, scholarship has begun to investigate and chart the full potential of the bleed as both a stylistic and narrative feature of graphic storytelling. Lee (2017) explores how GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* redeploys black bleeds as means of portraying unspeakable traumas, while Earle (2013) has argued that Joe Sacco's use of 'heavily-crowded page bleeds' in his book *Palestine* not only replicates a stream of consciousness narrative, but also mimics the packed pages of a journalist's notebook. This article, likewise, suggests some ways in which bleeds might fulfil an aesthetic and narrative function beyond signposting the image's slippage into the timeless space beyond the boundaries of the page.

Focusing on Emily Carroll's 2014 collection of short graphic narratives, *Through the Woods*, the present article argues that Carroll's creative use of bleeds, her regular erosion of the stable borders that so often act as a container for discrete images, simultaneously bolsters and expands on the collection's key thematic concerns. *Through the Woods* is comprised of seven short tales, most offering dark reworkings of popular fairy tales and all serving as profoundly gothic meditations on the fragility of the ontological borders that separate distinct and oppositional states of being: male from female; adult from child; inside from outside; subject from object; civilisation from wilderness. Replete with shapeshifting monsters, predatory wolves and threatening landscapes, *Through the Woods* is largely concerned with girlhood and the dangers

inherent in crossing the boundary from child to woman. Many of Carroll's tales thus evince an anxiety about the liminal state of adolescence or young womanhood that is projected onto and echoed by the gothicised landscape inhabited by her characters. Throughout the collection, horror arises from those moments when bodily boundaries are threatened, ontological states traversed and the border separating wilderness from civilisation breached. This article argues that Carroll's representation of both the female body and the titular woods (entities which are revealed to be closely linked) constitutes an example of 'abject horror', a form of terror that arises out of that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 1982: 4) and threatens the categories by which we constitute ourselves as subjects. Moreover, positing that abject horror derives primarily from the transgression or nullification of boundaries, I argue that Carroll's bleeds serve to represent, pictorially, the terror of abjection.

Bleeds are a recurring stylistic feature in *Through the Woods*. Carroll's work assiduously avoids anything resembling the conventional nine-panel grid so often deployed by mainstream comics. Individual panels are rarely hemmed in by a clearly discernible frame. Instead, Carroll's panels more often than not simply dissolve into the darkness that lurks at their edges so that there is no longer an identifiable distinction between the image and the negative space that constitutes the rest of the page; the line between pictorial representation and blank nothingness is rendered tenuous and meaningless. Unlike, mainstream comics, which tend to reserve bleeds for cover art or splash pages, utilising the unconstrained image to call attention to a moment of decisive action or narrative significance, Carroll's bleeds are an integral and ubiquitous motif throughout her work. Often the capacity of her images to seep beyond the borders of the panel helps to contextualise her stories within an immense wilderness or sinister space; in other instances of seepage, the bleed suggests moral ambiguity or existential threat. In a tale entitled 'His Face All Red' panels are generally rendered without the representational infrastructure provided by the frame. Instead, the panels simply merge with the page's black background. Without the spatial distinction created by frames, the images held within each panel appear to be forever threatened by the darkness massing just beyond their edges. This echoes

the story's thematic concern with the dangers of wilderness and the unknown. The story takes place in a small village at the edge of a gloomy wood and so the artistic failure to distinguish between coherent panels and black background indicates the omnipresent threat of incursion by this dark wilderness. As the narrative progresses, the panel images become smaller and darker, and so it becomes increasingly difficult to separate these images from the darkness that surrounds them.

Thierry Groensteen has argued that the 'gutter', the blank space that traditionally divides successive panels from one another constitutes a core facet of comics' semantic and representational logic. For Groensteen (2007: 2.4.), this gutter is not 'the seat of a virtual image', the reader does not literally project a phantom panel into this empty space. Instead, the gutter 'is the site of a semantic articulation, a logical conversion, that of a series of utterables (the panels) in a statement that is unique and coherent (the story)' (Groensteen 2007: 2.4.). The gutter, the emptiness that punctuates the flow of panel images, can therefore be figured as essential to the visual and narrative logic of the comic sequence, mediating the relationship between individual panels. Without these blank spaces and the coherence of frames, this logic falls apart. In works like *Through the Woods* where gutters and solid frames are jettisoned in favour of an almost continuous seepage between panel and container page, the narrative seems perennially on the verge of collapsing into chaos and abject indeterminacy. In those sequences where panels do not simply dissolve into inchoate nothingness, they are instead held or suspended within larger images. As discussed below, in a story entitled 'Our Neighbor's House', the unsettling immensity of the woods is evoked by placing a borderless panel depicting interior scenes within a larger image of the wilderness, which itself lacks borders and runs off the page. Here, there is no space, no discontinuity between panels, but rather the two images flow into each other and ultimately off the page. If the 'intericonic gutter' ordinarily functions to mark 'the semantic solidarity of contiguous panels above all' (Groensteen 2007: 2.4.), in *Through the Woods* the absence of such gutters renders the dialectic interaction between panels fluid, thus suggesting a disturbing slippage of categories and modes of being.

As Carroll's panels overspread their frames, seeping out into the darkness of the page beyond and spilling over the edge of the book itself, this erosion of aesthetic

borders reinforces, and renders explicit, the unsettling abjection explored thematically within the individual stories themselves. In much the same way that Carroll's text grounds its horror in the contravention of the perimeters that separate self from other, civilisation from wilderness, adult from child, subject from object, so too do her bleeding panels visually evoke the evisceration of these binaries.

### **Forms of Excess: Comics and the Gothic**

*Through the Woods* is an undeniably gothic graphic narrative. Echoing the concerns and motifs that have defined gothic fiction since its birth amidst the revolutionary turbulence of the late eighteenth century, Carroll's collection deals primarily in themes of transgression, taboo and the silent ubiquity of the supernatural. In Jerome E Hogle's (2002: 2–3) delineation of key gothic themes, he posits that gothic fictions are those that 'play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural [...] often siding with one of these over the other in the end, but usually raising, the possibility that the boundaries between these have been crossed, at least psychologically but also physically or both'. The doppelgangers, shapeshifters and inhabiting spirits that abound in *Through the Woods* equally suggest a vacillation between the natural and the preternatural that troubles these ontological categories, as does the collection's use of gothic spaces and iconography derived from fairy tales. *Through the Woods*, as a gothic comic, also calls attention to the fundamentally amorphous, metamorphic nature of the gothic as a literary mode which habitually grafts itself onto other genres and forms, from Victorian novels to television dramas. In her study of the gothic and graphic narratives, Julia Round (2014: 7) stresses that despite the ostensible disparity of these forms, there have been numerous, significant sites of engagement and encounter between comic books and the gothic. For Round (2014: 7), horror and comics have a 'long and intertwined history', and aspects of the gothic can be easily discovered in American pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* in the early twentieth century, 'at the same time as comic books were emerging from the pages of newspapers'. From a stylistic and narrative perspective, comics and the gothic also display numerous parallels. The 'multiple and mobile perspectives' created on a comic page, as narra-

tive perspective shifts between an extradiegetic narrative voice and the intradiegetic visual perspective of an illustrated character within the story reflects the carefully cultivated inauthenticity of gothic tales and their authorial uncertainty (Round 2014: 9). Equally, just as gothic narratives are defined by notions of stylistic, structural and thematic excess, so too do comics 'offer an *excess of style* as words, images, emanate, and other icons are presented as idiosyncratic hand-drawn devices, separating signifier and sign through their materiality' (Round 2014: 76, emphasis in original).

Beginning her career in webcomics, a form which lacks the restrictions imposed by pagination and its attendant borders, Canadian writer/artist Emily Carroll works in a style defined by an abundance of bleeds. In *Through the Woods*, her first published work, panels frequently lose their structural integrity and leak into the black space that surrounds them. This seepage of the image into inchoate nothingness suggests a gothic excess, as unable to be constrained by the organisational infrastructure of panels, the horrors contained within these tales haemorrhage out beyond the confines of the page. An intriguing example of Carroll's innovative use of bleeds can be seen in the collection's opening tale. Simply titled 'Introduction', the story narrates the author's own experiences as a child reading by the light of her bedside lamp. The text describes how the young Carroll would read by the 'light of a lamp clipped to my headboard', a lamp whose light shone 'stark white, and bright, against the darkness of my room' (Carroll 2014). The artwork, rendered in ink and graphite and digitally coloured, shows a small figure bathed in warm yellow light while the rest of the page is engulfed in a blackness that emanates from the drawings and swells to fill the entire page, seeping out beyond the confines of pagination.

Describing the origins of the term 'bleed', Harriet Earle (2013) notes that it is commonly used in printing to describe an image that is printed to the edge of the page. In comics, Earle continues, the term takes on a wider and more creative meaning because

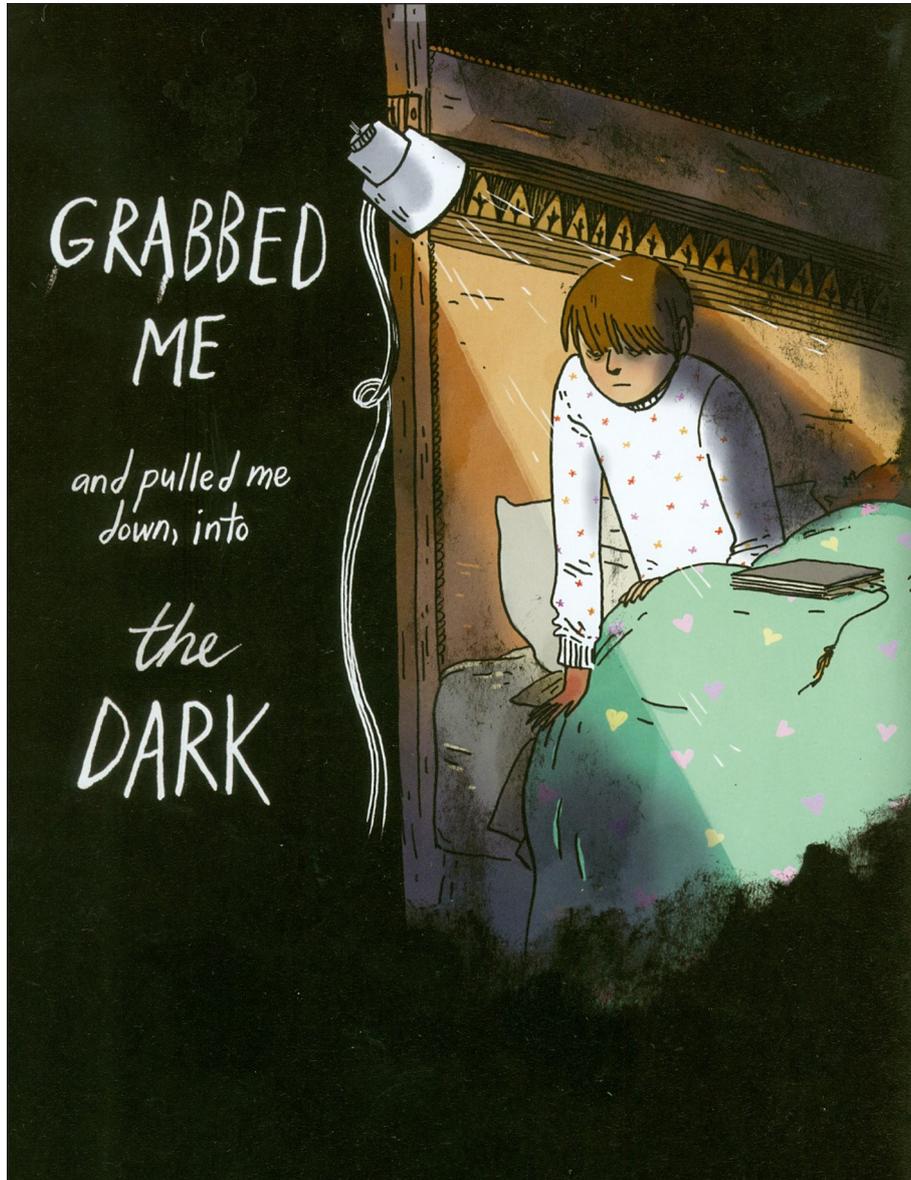
Bleeds are, by their nature, dramatic and often violent. The image's domination of the page is striking and demands the reader's complete attention. The removal of frames from the page edges removes any sense of constriction or confinement – the image has total control of the page. (Earle 2013)

In Carroll's 'Introduction', the bleeds are indeed dramatic and violent, transcending the constriction of panels and frames, and offering instead a violent dissolution of boundaries. From an aesthetic point of view, then, the bleeds give form to Carroll's childhood fears of the dark, presenting darkness as viscous, invasive and threatening (**Figure 1**). At the same time, 'Introduction' does not simply harken back to the author's youthful anxieties; it also gestures forward to key themes that will be explored throughout the collection. Specifically, the young narrator's fears of reaching out beyond the beams of light, 'just past the edge of the bed and something, waiting there, grabbed me and pulled me down into the dark' (Carroll 2014).

The anxiety Carroll expresses in **Figure 1** is intimately linked to the crossing of boundaries, transgressing the border separating the safety of light and the unknown dangers of the darkness. This boundary between the known and the unknown is one that will reappear throughout the collection, and when a sense of horror arises in *Through the Woods*, it arises out of the crossing of this border. The use of bleeds, both in the introduction and subsequently, parallels this act of transgression, as the aesthetic dissolution of panels and frames reflects the thematic dangers associated with border crossings throughout the collection. Moreover, the dissipation of the borders, panels and frames within the comic signals an abject horror whose power to unsettle resides primarily in acts of transgression, ambiguous in-betweenness and the confusion of categories.

### **'These body fluids': Bleeds and the Abject**

The use of the word 'bleed' to signal those instances where an image seeps out beyond the confines of neatly ordered comic book panels is an intriguing lexical choice. Bleeding, after all, suggests violence, injury and the penetration or evisceration of corporeal boundaries. Even McCloud (1993: 103), in his spatio-temporal explication of the phenomenon, categorises the bleed as a moment when time 'haemorrhages and escapes into timeless space' beyond the confines of the page. McCloud's language, and the concept of the bleed in general, appears innately violent, animal and physical. Significantly, this viscosity, the lexicon of seepage that attends the bleed, also recalls one of the twentieth century's most influential theorisations of horror, Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. For Kristeva, bodily fluids – blood, excrement,



**Figure 1:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

pus – and corpses do not repulse or unsettle us because they signal death. Rather, these fluids arouse revulsion because they call attention to our status as boundaries, the fragility of our subjectivity and the permeability of our corporeal being:

as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva 1982: 3)

Within Kristeva's schema, the body's surface is figured as a permeable film. Bodily fluids arouse anxiety because they remind us that our subjectivity is contingent upon the integrity of this film. If penetrated or traversed, the body is reduced to a mere object, indistinct from the rest of the material world.

Further expanding on Kristeva's concept of abjection, the critic Barbara Creed (1993: 11) observes that cinematic and pop cultural constructions of the monstrous are dependent on the presence of a border, the crossing of which is designated abject. Creed maintains that while the nature of this border may shift across different texts, the function of the monstrous is to unsettle the divisions that give meaning to our social and epistemic order (Creed 1993: 11). Thus,

In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (*Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *A Reflection of Fear*); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (*The Hunger*, *Cat People*). (Creed 1993: 11)

Border crossing is conceived as essential to both horror and the gothic. However, while Creed's examples of abject transgression are limited to horror films, similarly unsettling traversals of boundaries can also be found in literature, the visual arts and a host of other media. Carroll's *Through the Woods* utilises the unique hybridity of the graphic narrative form to arouse and interrogate this mode of abject horror. From a

narrative perspective, each of her stories contains an instance in which pivotal ontological and existential borders are threatened. In 'Our Neighbor's House', 'His Face All Red' and 'The Nesting Place', doppelgangers and shapeshifting monsters disturb the boundary between human and inhuman, man and beast. In 'A Lady's Hands Are Cold' allusions to dismemberment, concealment and cannibalism unsettle the border between good and evil, subject and object; while in 'My Friend Janna', the presence of a possessing spirit confuses the border between inside and outside, natural and supernatural.

Moreover, in each of these distinct tales, Carroll utilises the aesthetic effects produced by the bleed in order to dissolve both the borders between panels and the boundary demarcated by the edge of the page. In this way, the comic's visuals reflect its core thematic concerns. In 'A Lady's Hands Are Cold' – a reworking of the fairy tale 'Bluebeard' – the heroine's suspicion that her new husband might in fact be a killer is represented visually during a sequence wherein the newlyweds dine together (**Figure 2**).

In **Figure 2**, we are presented with a number of telling closeups: a fork, the husband putting bloody meat to his mouth, his wife's neck, a dinner knife and his wife's red cheek. None of these images are contained by conventional frames; rather, they bleed out into the blackness of the page beyond. In the centre of the page sits a bloody cut of meat, penetrated by a carving knife and fork. This image is likewise uncontained, merging with the blackness of the page and seeping out into the blank space beyond. As noted in the introduction, the gutter, the emptiness that separates individual panels in conventional comic sequences, exists to punctuate and render comprehensible the visual language of the narrative. On this page, however, the absence of clearly defined borders between images propels the narrative into an abject space devoid of coherence, threatening in its all-consuming blackness. Groensteen (2007: 2.2.) argues that it is from the juxtaposition of panels that we can deduce a narrative proposition. Yet, without the meaning created and bolstered by frames and gutters, the dining sequence in **Figure 2** dissolves into a series of fluid vignettes: teeth, blood, meat, flesh. Indeed, according to Groensteen (2007: 2.4.), narrative can be salvaged from the comic's flow of images because 'the gutter



**Figure 2:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

(provisionally) cancels the already read panel in order to allow the next panel to exist in its own right, in terms of a complete and compact form'. The dining sequence in 'A Lady's Hands Are Cold' offers no such respite: the panels, such as they are, are not divided by the blankness of the gutter. They simply merge with the trichromatic image of the bloody meat.

While the sequences and panels that both precede and follow **Figure 2** also employ bleeds to a greater or lesser degree depending on their subject, the individual panels appear more composed and less fluid than in the dining sequence. Indeed, the image in **Figure 2** is almost surrealistic in its fluidity. In order to comprehend its meaning, we need to turn to the panels that come before it and those that follow on from it. This also aligns with Thierry Groensteen's writings on panels and sequences, and in particular it reflects his belief that

the meaning of a panel can be informed and determined by the panel that preceded it much like the one that follows it. If there is a vectorization of reading, there is no unidirectional vectorization in the construction of meaning. (Groensteen 2007: 2.2.)

In the case of **Figure 2**, its meaning becomes disturbingly apparent if we read it alongside the panels that precede it – the young wife dresses for dinner, and is later seen sitting anxiously at the end of an immense table – and those that follow it – at night she hears a strange song and follows it to discover the body of her husband's previous wife. If we move forward a few pages from **Figure 2**, we are presented with an image of the protagonist again dressing for dinner, though the narration, significantly, tells us that 'she was being *prepared* for dinner' (Carroll 2014, emphasis mine). This lexical choice is unsettling; 'prepared for dinner' suggests the preparation of a meal, and so if we move backwards, reading **Figure 2** with this later panel in mind, the scene is not only given greater context, but it becomes infinitely more horrifying. In order to fully understand the unmoored fluid images that threaten to dissolve into the blackness of the page, we need to read the more coherent sequences that come both before and after it. On its own, however, the dining sequence is chaotic. The panels, lacking the stability of frames and the punctuation of gutters, simply bleed into one another and the blackness beyond.

The nameless husband's monstrosity, and the violence of his desires, disturb the borders between human and inhuman, natural and unnatural, and this echoed by the dissolution of visual boundaries on the page itself. Numerous analogous sequences

litter Carroll's book, as violence, monstrosity and the incursion of the preternatural are repeatedly represented through the bleeding of images. However, for the remainder of this article, I would like to focus on how Carroll utilises bleeds to expand on and develop two key concerns within the collection: the uneasy boundary between nature and civilisation that exists in the heavily gothicised wilderness her characters inhabit, and the anxieties that many of her characters, primarily adolescent girls, experience about the prospect of growing up and entering womanhood.

### **The Nature/Culture Divide**

Born in London, Ontario, Carroll's work evinces an anxiety about the border between wilderness and civilisation that has been described by many as characteristic of Canadian literature. Although admitting that she likes to think of her work as 'set somewhere in a made-up forest' (in Hubbard 2014), the uneasy boundary that separates nature from culture in Carroll's stories draws on a long history of anxious Canadian writing about the natural world. Shoshannah Ganz (2013: 88) notes that 'Canadian literature has a long history of writing about nature in gothic terms. Historically, nature has been the threat, the ever-present and fearful monster seeking to swallow human beings whole'. Early Canadian texts like John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832) often present nature as ravaging monstrosity, an unknowable, voracious entity that threatens to swallow the isolated settlers who inhabit it whole. In these works, settlers are portrayed as anxiously erecting boundaries, building walls and fortresses to keep nature out (Ganz 2013: 88). So pervasive is this fear of the natural world that the critic Northrop Frye famously described early Canadian culture as defined by a 'garrison mentality' (Ganz 2013: 88), a desire to construct heavily-fortified enclaves of civilisation into which they can retreat, secure against the danger posed by an ever-encroaching wilderness. Likewise, Alanna F Bondar observes that Canadian literature has consistently displayed patterns of retreat from an 'unnatural' wilderness that threatens to devour any human interlopers who might leave behind civilisation to explore its depths (Bondar 2013: 72).

In *Through the Woods* there is a ubiquitous and persistent anxiety about the boundary that divides nature from culture, civilisation from wilderness. In the first

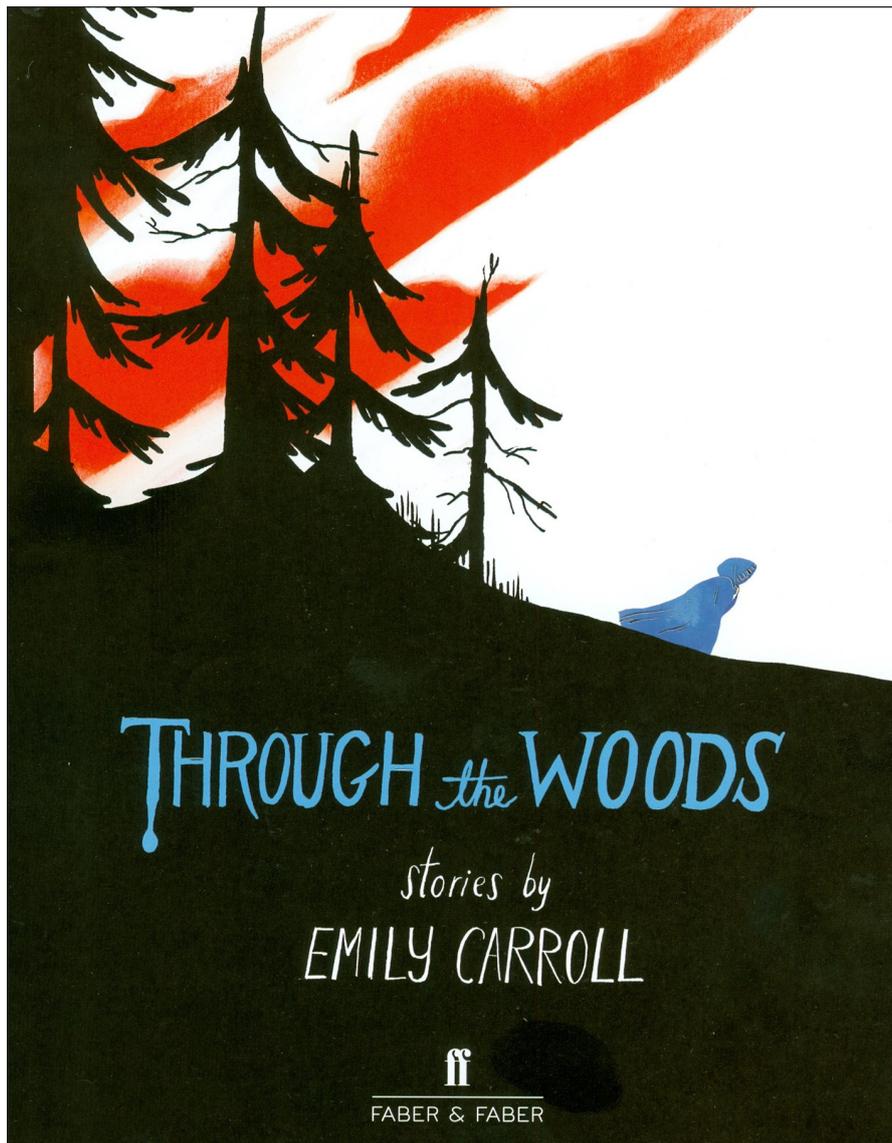
story after the introduction, 'Our Neighbor's House', the wilderness is portrayed as all-consuming and rapacious. The tale, which explicitly reworks aspects of 'Little Red Riding Hood', centres around three sisters: two adolescents, Mary and Beth, and one younger girl, Hannah. The setting, though not explicitly stated, appears to be the nineteenth century, and so the story can be situated in a period when the frontier of European 'civilisation' was spreading across the wilds of the North American continent. When the girls' father leaves to go hunting he warns the girls to stay inside, but if he does not return by 'sunset on the third day, pack some food, dress up warm and travel to our neighbor's house' (Carroll 2014). When their father does not return, Beth decides that the sisters should undertake the journey to their neighbour's home. However, the other girls resist, telling Beth that they will starve in the forbidding wilderness if they leave the house. 'Our Neighbor's House' is therefore characterised by the construction of a border between the safety of the home (civilisation) and the dangers that lurk in the woods (wilderness). Yet, as much as the sisters seek to sequester themselves safely within their isolated house, the woods and its attendant terrors appear massed at the fragile walls of their home, threatening to traverse the boundary that divides nature from culture. When Beth realises, as she lies in bed on the third night, that her father has died, a small panel depicting Beth cuddled up with her younger sister Hannah is framed within a larger image of the woods, its towering trees and vast expanses of snow bearing down on them, threatening to engulf their home (**Figure 3**). The claustrophobia of this small rectangular panel is both reinforced by and juxtaposed against the dark trees and infinite woodland that surround it. Significantly, the image in which the interior panel is encased, this uncanny representation of the wilderness, is a bleed; it seeps off the edge of the page refusing to be contained, just as the wilderness itself cannot be contained.

As the days slip by, Beth's sisters begin to disappear, lured away by a mysterious, smiling man in a wide-brimmed hat who appears at their door by night. When Beth goes to search for them, hoping they are waiting for her at the eponymous 'Neighbor's House', she treks out into the foreboding woodland. Her tiny image and dainty, bird-like footprints are dwarfed by the enormity of the black trees, the



**Figure 3:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

immense snow drifts and sanguine red sunset that surround her. Echoing the image that appears on the title page (**Figure 4**), and as a motif throughout the collection, Beth is reduced to a minuscule red-cloaked figure, rendered small and vulnerable by the landscape that threatens to swallow her whole.



**Figure 4:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

Again, bleeds are employed to suggest the immensity of the natural world, its refusal to be contained. In the final sequence, Beth knocks on the door of her neighbour's house only to discover that it is occupied by the mysterious man in the wide-brimmed hat. However, upon seeing him, Beth realises that 'My sisters were wrong about one thing: while the brim of his hat is very wide, and while he does smile (indeed, it looks impossible for him to do anything else), it is obvious, just at a glance, he is no man' (Carroll 2014). The story ends on these ambiguous words, with the text hanging in the air of another bleed in which the vastness of nature spills over the confines of the printed page. We never discover the identity of the man, but certain contextual clues (his massive, permanent smile; Beth's assertion that he is not really a man; Beth's trek through the forest and her vibrant red cloak) suggest that he may be something akin to the Big Bad Wolf of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. In that case, whether wolf or werewolf or shapeshifter, the man in the wide-brimmed hat is a thing of nature. He belongs to the woods and the night. Yet, he is also capable of crossing the border that separates civilisation from the wilderness, appearing at the door of Beth's home to lure away her sisters. The smiling man's appearance therefore signals the incursion of chaotic, dangerous nature onto the ostensibly stable, ordered realm of culture. His presence at the threshold of Beth's house and that of their neighbour represents a collapse of both the topographical and the existential boundaries that divide the natural from the cultural. These moments of categorical slippage and boundary crossing become even more unsettling in Carroll's work as the individual pages of the comic, the leaky panels and uncontained images, reflect the abject dissolution of these borders. On each page the wilderness stretches on infinitely, spreading beyond the edge of the page and engulfing the porous panels within.

### **"The mantle of monstrosity": Adolescence and the Abject**

For as much as *Through the Woods* meditates on the disconcerting slippage of the borders separating civilisation and wilderness, so too does it engage with anxieties about growing up and the liminal state of adolescence. Many of the central characters in Carroll's stories are young women, poised on the boundary between girlhood

and womanhood. 'Our Neighbor's House' presents, alongside its deep-seated unease about the incursion of the wilderness, a profound terror of maturation and all that it entails. Isolated within their home, the three sisters at the heart of the story pass the time by completing chores and playing games. Their home is a refuge, a space of eternal, extended childhood. Their resistance to venturing out into the wilderness could therefore be understood as a reluctance to leave behind the innocence of childhood. Nevertheless, the girls are pulled away from their youthful state. We are told that on the third day after their father leaves, they are struck by 'a strange lethargy and barely moved at all' (Carroll 2014). Their lethargic state mirrors various pubertal symptoms, as menarche is often attended by a heaviness, as well as tiredness and depression (Ussher 2004: 32). Tellingly, as the girls are lured away from their home by the 'tall man, in a wide-brimmed hat, with a smile that showed all his teeth' (Carroll 2014), there is a suggestion that they are somehow enamoured of this strange figure. Beth observes that following the first nocturnal visit of the mysterious man, her sister Mary – the eldest – is happy. Panels show Mary smiling gently, secretively, as though a handsome suitor has called for her under cover of darkness. Yet, the sinister implications of this eternally smiling figure emerging from the woods to woo Mary at her doorstep, suggests that Mary's sexual awakening is dangerous. The next day, Beth awakens to discover that Mary has left their house, this childish space of games and chores, and ventured out in search of the smiling man. He has lured her away from girlhood into the obscure, uncertain space of womanhood. The next day, the grinning figure visits Beth's younger sister Hannah, and she too vanishes into the woods. Resolving to find her missing sisters, Beth drapes herself in a red cloak and sets off through the woods. This iconography, the small red-hooded figure venturing into the forest, immediately conjures up childhood memories of Little Red Riding Hood and her fateful trek to her grandmother's house. Imbued with the deep allegory that so often attends fables and fairy tales, 'Little Red Riding Hood' has been read by both psychoanalysts and literary critics as a story about puberty, predators and the difficulties of navigating mature female sexuality. Writing in 1951, Erich Fromm observes that Little Red Riding Hood's red cap or hood is 'a symbol of menstruation' (in Dundes 1989: 211), while her encounter with the wolf represents the threat of

sexual predators. In various iterations of the story, Red's success or failure in eluding the wolf echoes the difficulties inherent in grappling with adult sexuality. Numerous later readings and rewritings of the tale frame it as an allegory for puberty and maturation, with works such as Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves' (1979) subverting punitive interpretations of the story and imaging a denouement in which the girl becomes an active agent, in command of her own sexual desires. Thus, in 'Our Neighbor's House', when Beth crosses the boundary between civilisation and wilderness, she is also crossing the boundary between girlhood and womanhood, and confronting all the fears and dangers that entails.

Many of the other stories in Carroll's collection also engage with the anxious liminality that constitutes the adolescent's position between girl and woman. In particular, Carroll's construction of female adolescence appears acutely aware of the centrality of borders and the rhetoric of abject boundary crossings to popular representations of the pubertal body. Culturally, adolescence, and female adolescence in particular, has been understood as a liminal zone that separates the child from the adult. As Jane M Ussher writes in her study of the female body,

Menarche marks the point at which a girl becomes a woman; when childhood innocence may be swapped for the mantle of monstrosity associated with abject fecundity. The physical changes of puberty—breasts, pubic hair, curving hips and thighs, sweat, oily skin, and most significantly, menstrual blood—stand as signifiers of feminine excess, of the body as out of control. (Ussher 2002: 18–19)

Puberty, or the onset of menstruation, is therefore conceived as a boundary line, the crossing of which situates the girl in the realm of Otherness, excess and corporeal uncontrollability that defines womanhood. At the same time, not only is the adolescent body imagined as a border zone, an embodiment of the transition between girl and woman, so too is the adult female body conceived of in terms of boundaries; in particular, it is construed as an improperly mediated boundary. Writing on cultural representations of the female body, Margrit Shildrick (1997: 43) observes

that in many societies women are viewed as 'ontologically out of order'. Their bodies, which leak menstrual blood and distend in pregnancy and childbirth, are seen to embody 'a resistance to closure which threatens disruptions ultimately to the whole structuration of the Western logos' (Shildrick 1997: 43). Echoing Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, the female body with its unstable corporeality is conceived of as undermining the integral existential categories between inside and outside, self and other, whole and porous. Within this conceptual framework, the female body is imagined as disruptive, transgressive and essentially monstrous. If, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996: 6) would have it, the monster is 'the harbinger of category crisis', then the female body because it is understood as a 'form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions' (Cohen 1996: 6) is easily situated within the realm of the monstrous.

Emily Carroll's adolescent girls are frequently portrayed as both existing within the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and anxious about an impending womanhood that is understood as indeterminate and ontologically unstable. In the collection's penultimate story, 'The Nesting Place', tomboyish adolescent Mabel is consumed by a fearful disdain for her older brother's fiancée, Rebecca. In contrast to Mabel – or Bell, as she likes to be called – Rebecca is hyperfeminine and fashionable. Visually, Rebecca is portrayed as a light, lilting presence. She is rendered in pastel hues, and while other characters are outlined in black ink, Rebecca is – in certain panels – outlined with a white ink that highlights the luminosity of her skin. Bell, conversely, is coloured in grey tones, her clothing, skin and hair are gloomy and pallid. Early in the story Rebecca offers to give Bell a makeover, telling the sullen teen, 'I've got a few dresses that might fit you. Want to try them on? [...] It could be fun! We'd do your hair, even some make up if you promise not to tell your brother' (Carroll 2014). Here, Rebecca attempts to inculcate in Bell the correct method of performing culturally-appropriate femininity. Nevertheless, Bell resists, and her discomfort with the adult womanhood Rebecca embodies compels her to flee into the woods, escaping home and domesticity for the playground of the natural world. Once there, however, Bell discovers a deep cave, and within she finds Rebecca bent over a pool, speaking in gentle reassuring tones to an unseen presence. Her voice filled with

motherly affection, Rebecca coos, 'Are you looking forward to living with Mummy? I've been getting your new home all ready for you. My little ones ... Look how big you're getting down there! What good babies...!' (Carroll 2014). In stark contrast to her hushed maternal whispers, when Rebecca turns around, Bell sees that the counters, the boundaries, of Rebecca's facial features have lost their structural integrity, their wholeness (**Figure 5**). As she stares at Bell, Rebecca's features are consumed by



**Figure 5:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

cavernous gaps. From within each orifice – her eye sockets, nostrils and mouth – red worm-like creatures protrude like bizarre vegetation.

The image of Rebecca's true form is a bleed, an expansive, borderless panel that suggests excess and danger, and it is especially powerful when considered in the context of the story's visual style. 'The Nesting Place' is a somewhat visually unique tale. Whereas other stories in *Through the Woods* feature unframed panels set against black or dark backgrounds that enable the panels to bleed into and merge with this negative space, 'The Nesting Place' primarily features light-grey backgrounds, with panels regularly hemmed in by heavy black frames. As such, bleeds appear less frequently in this story and, for much of the narrative, the panels appear carefully sealed off from the gutters that separate them. Aside from a brief dream sequence that opens the story, the first bleed we encounter accompanies our introduction to Rebecca. This full-page panel lacks borders and so bleeds off the edge of page. However, the effect here is not disconcerting. Rather, the image, which is coloured in cream and pastel tones, presents Rebecca as an ethereal, almost angelic figure. Other bleeds appear intermittently throughout the story, but the bleed that accompanies our first glimpse of Rebecca appears intentionally constructed to contrast with the bleed featured in **Figure 5**. Here, Rebecca's image is uncanny and monstrous. Removed from the light, airy setting of the domestic space in which we first meet her, Rebecca is placed within the darkness of a remote cave. The image is largely gloomy, with an unsettling glow emanating from the nest of her monstrous children.

Obliterating the borders between inside and outside, human and inhuman, the red worms that emerge from her face extend beyond Rebecca's porous form, stretching towards the edge of the page and spilling over its perimeters. Again, in **Figure 5**, Carroll's use of the bleed underscores and exacerbates the horror of the image, as the worm-like appendages do not merely traverse the borders of Rebecca's suddenly diffuse form, but they also mass at the borders of the page and slip out beyond its confines. Similarly, the diegetic sound that accompanies the revelation of Rebecca's monstrous visage is rendered as a sibilate 'sscckkhh', which like the worms also extends beyond the edge of the page, undermining the boundaries that separate the narrative realm of the story from the reality inhabited by the reader. The image

here is one of gothic excess. Rebecca's monstrosity cannot be contained and strains outward beyond the edge of the comic page. This image appears to encapsulate Julia Round's previously quoted assertion that comics 'offer an *excess of style* as words, images, emanate, and other icons are presented as idiosyncratic hand-drawn devices, separating signifier and sign through their materiality' (Round 2014: 76, emphasis in original). The vision of Rebecca with her excessive corporeality, rendered in a grotesquely abundant form, combined with text, 'sscckkhh,' that stretches out across the page, interweaving with the slithering bodies of the worms, capitalises on the inherent hybridity of the comic form, and in doing so, expresses the disturbing indeterminacy of Rebecca's physical being.

Rebecca's body, it transpires, is merely a thin film, a delicate layer of skin that covers a supernatural entity, a sentient stream of worms and tentacles. The being that wears Rebecca's skin describes itself as a mother; the creatures occupying the titular nest in the cave are its children, and the being seeks a home, a new set of skin, for her children to inhabit. Here, Rebecca/the creature embodies motherhood as a form of monstrous, all-consuming biological excess. She plans to take Bell's skin as a home for her children, and as such, the maternal, as represented by Rebecca, is figured as an uncanny personification of the teenage Bell's anxieties about adult womanhood, pregnancy and motherhood. According to Julia Kristeva, the maternal represents the abject as much the viscosity of bodily fluids. Indeed, the maternal body reminds us that we, all of us, were once a part of that body, a body which represents the breakdown between Self (Me as an autonomous, independent subject) and Other (the body of the mother I was once a part of). Witnessing Rebecca's monstrosity disturbs Bell because her porous corporeality represents the abjection of the maternal body as well as that of mature femininity. Rebecca's viscosity reminds us that, in the words of Margrit Shildrick (1997: 34), 'The indeterminacy of body boundaries challenges that most fundamental dichotomy between self and other, unsettling ontological certainty and threatening to undermine the basis on which the knowing self establishes control'. Adolescent Bell, anxious and unwilling to cross the threshold into mature femininity, is horrified and repulsed by the corporeal excess that Rebecca embodies. Rebecca is womanhood and motherhood defined by the erosion of borders and

the deformation of physicality. She is a manifestation of Bell's fears about growing up and becoming a woman. These anxieties are literalised even more violently in the next full-page bleed following on from the revelation of Rebecca's true form. Continuing the visual motif seen in the previous image of Rebecca, this page also speaks to the essential hybridity of the comic form. The image features Bell engulfed by both the darkness of the cave and the blood-coloured worms. The voice of her brother, which occupies a speech bubble in the centre of the page, suggests that he is on his way to rescue her, but this bubble is obscured by Rebecca's worm appendages. Rebecca's hand, with its long fingers captured mid-metamorphosis into another set of worms, clasps itself around Bell's mouth. Text representing the diegetic 'sscckkhh' sound that emanates from the worms appears to merge with their red bodies, so that Bell appears to be drowning in a sea of infinite blackness and bloody redness. Without even reading to the tale's denouement, in which Bell is revealed to have been infected by the worm-like creatures, the expansive bleed on this page informs of us of her inevitable fate: she, too, will be swallowed up by the uncanny, seeping physicality of adult womanhood.

### **Femininity and Nature**

Across the seven tales that comprise *Through the Woods*, Carroll explores two central anxieties: the fragile boundary between civilisation and wilderness, and the disconcerting liminality that constitutes the experience of adolescent girlhood. In her rendition of the fears associated with such states of ontological fluidity, Carroll repeatedly employs bleeds to underscore the horror of boundary transgression and collapse. However, it is important to note that these core thematic concerns are not separate; rather, they are intimately connected and imbricated throughout the text. Indeed, in Carroll's work the porosity of nature, its capacity to overspill its perimeters and intrude upon civilisation reflects broader anxieties about the imagined leakiness of feminine corporeality. As such, the incursion of nature onto civilisation reflects the anxieties of the book's adolescent protagonists about the instability of an abject femininity.

Carroll's conflation of nature and femininity continues a long-standing rhetorical and philosophical tradition in which men are associated with culture,

intellect and the life of the mind, while women are linked to nature, the body and species propagation. In her 1974 essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', Sherry B Ortner (1974: 73) describes how the cultural association between women and reproduction has resulted in the development of a conceptual binary in which womanhood is tied to the natural, animal world. Conversely, men, who are viewed as less beholden to their biological processes, are free to create, to build and think (Ortner 1974: 75). Popular constructions of womanhood have therefore been enveloped within a Western philosophical schema in which the body is framed 'as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects' (Bordo 1993: 3). From Plato's view of the body as an 'an *epistemological* deceiver' (Bordo 1993: 3, emphasis in original) through to the Cartesian vision of the body as a limitation to be transcended (Bordo 1993: 4), corporeality, like nature, has been viewed as something to be overcome, conquered and disciplined. Moreover, as Susan Bordo (1993: 5) adumbrates, numerous feminist critics have demonstrated that this 'scheme is frequently gendered with woman cast in the role of body'. Consequently, 'In being somehow more fully embodied than men, women have been characterised simply as less able to rise above uncontrollable natural processes and passions and therefore disqualified from mature personhood' (Shildrick 1997: 26). In *Through the Woods*, the fears harboured by Carroll's teenage heroines about entering this corporeally uncontrollable state are expressed through a recurring motif in which an encroaching, insubordinate nature that threatens cultural space is conflated with images of these girls confronting or crossing the boundary between childhood and womanhood. Thus, in 'Our Neighbor's House', Beth's entry into adult femininity, signified by her encounter with the smiling man, is set against images of all-consuming, borderless nature, a vast landscape whose immensity cannot be contained by the book's pagination and bleeds off the edge of the text. Similarly, in 'The Nesting Place', Beth's encounter with monstrous motherhood takes place in an endless cavern, deep within a boundless wood.

The final story explored in this article is 'My Friend Janna', a tale which also interweaves themes of uncanny nature and the disconcerting liminality of adolescence. In

the first panels the story's narrator, Yvonne, describes her friendship with the eponymous Janna, recalling that

I've known Janna since we were children. We've always been the best of friends. She's like a sister really. Probably closer, given that I don't even get along with my OWN sister the way I do with Janna. We just have more in common. (Carroll 2014)

The narration evokes the intensity of adolescent friendships, while the positioning of the girls during the introductory sequences, the way in which Yvonne glances at Janna, also suggests a romantic component to their relationship. Like 'Our Neighbor's House', 'My Friend Janna' is set in the nineteenth century and centres around the experiences of teenage girls. In this case, the tale presents the girls, at least initially, as mischievous creatures who derive entertainment by holding ersatz séances. During these gatherings, or readings, Janna fakes spiritual possession in a spectacularly physical fashion: 'Sometimes Janna herself convulsed [...] Or she would shriek about hellfire licking her skin into strips, carving her up with a thousand burning tongues' (Carroll 2014). Janna's performances, their excessive physicality, reflect the manner in which nineteenth-century mediums, many of whom were young women, utilised possession to act out, liberating their voices and bodies in a way that obliterated the rigid gender roles of the Victorian period.

In the sequence where we first see Janna performing one of her readings (**Figure 6**), the girl's body convulses into a prone rigidity upon the ground, while at the bottom of the page we see Janna with her head tilted back, her form consumed by flames. On this page, Carroll again employs bleeds to accentuate the apparent horror of Janna's possession. Uncontained by panels or borders, the page is dominated by a heavy blackness that threatens to swallow Janna whole, engulfing her small body and leaking out beyond the diegetic borders of the text. Turning the page, however, we see that Janna's performance is just that – a performance. With the aid of Yvonne, who knocks on walls, wails and scratches, Janna fakes the séance. Presumably influenced by the nineteenth-century mediums Kate (aged 12)



**Figure 6:** Carroll, E (2014). *Through the Woods* (New York: Faber & Faber, n.pag.) © Emily Carroll.

and Margaret (14) Fox (Braude 2001: 10), who performed public séances with their older sister Leah, the girls view Janna's readings as an amusing diversion. The bleeds that threaten to engulf Janna during her séance can therefore be understood, retrospectively, as representing not the presence of a supernatural force, but rather the way in which Janna and Yvonne have transgressed their socially appointed roles and

stepped beyond the borders of strict nineteenth-century gender roles. Tellingly, in the pages before Janna's séance, Yvonne and Janna occupy more traditional panels, albeit without the empty space of the gutter to separate them. Nevertheless, the careful division of these pages into square and rectangular panels, suggests that the girls are hemmed in, stifled, and release only comes through the subversive act of 'possession'.

In an ironic turn of events, Janna is later actually possessed by an intangible entity. The spirit is a nubilous presence that manifests as a diaphanous white form. The spirit renders Janna quiet and distant; she withdraws into herself and loses interest in the liberating pleasures of the séance, before finally vanishing entirely. During her possession, Janna pulls away from Yvonne and refuses to play the childish games that had once been their primary source of joy. The story can therefore be construed as an exploration of the loss and alienation that attend the experience of growing up. At the same time, the fact that Janna has been possessed, invaded by some unknowable spirit, gestures towards the obliteration of boundaries that has so often been viewed as inherent to womanhood, a position historically constructed as more leaky and biologically unstable than manhood. Highlighting the ingrained cultural connection between femininity and nature, Janna's possession stems from a moment early in the story when the girls find a dead hare on the ground and Janna touches it, crossing the line that separates nature from culture:

Janna and I once saw a hare by the side of the road. Dead. Killed by foxes. There was blood at its mouth. Caking its fur. I'd been seized by the urge to touch it. But I hadn't, had I? Janna had. Janna it touched and I'd been too afraid. Too afraid, and of what? (Carroll 2014)

In brushing her hand against the dead hare, Janna crosses the border that separates culture/society from nature/the wilderness, but in doing so, she also swaps the mantle of childhood innocence for the instability of mature female embodiment. When Carroll draws the newly haunted Janna for the first time, the girl is once again presented on a black, borderless page. Here, the blackness that surrounded Janna

during her séances no longer *threatens* to consume her, it *does* consume her. The playful ambiguity of youth is transformed into a more sinister dissolution of bodily integrity. Her face is rendered in black ink, heavy shading stretches down her dimly-lit neck and chest. Her identity has been obliterated; the darkness engulfs her and bleeds uncontrollably off the edge of the page. More disconcerting, still, it is impossible to tell where Janna ends and the darkness begins. In this way, Carroll's artwork, the ubiquity of bleeds on her pages, visually underscores the manner in which 'the fecund female body reminds man of his debt to nature, and as such threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilised and uncivilised' (Ussher 2004: 81).

Originating with Janna's touching of the hare, the girl is pulled into a state where she no longer exerts control over her body, where its processes elude the commands of her consciousness. Moreover, the spirit that inhabits Janna renders her corporeally porous, its phantasmagoric form collapsing the divide between interior and exterior. The story ends with Janna apparently vanishing into the woods, while Yvonne appears newly possessed, either by the same spirit or the departed Janna. Again, a bleed is employed, and Yvonne's figure runs off the edge of the page. The trees above her not only form an arch above her head, suggesting that she has become a part of the wilderness, but they also bleed off the edge of the page. This final image thus suggests a oneness, or at least a continuity, of femininity and nature, as both the female body and the natural world resist containment.

## Conclusion

*Through the Woods* is a compilation of tales riven with anxieties about growing up and the unknown threats that await us beyond the safe, comfortable boundaries of childhood. Throughout the collection, Carroll imagines the immense, uncertain wilderness that her characters inhabit as an abject manifestation of the dangers of maturation, the dark space of the unknown. Likewise, these stories envision adult womanhood as an uncannily metamorphic state, an embodied experience defined by a porous, uncontainable corporeality. Gesturing towards the historical conflation of femininity and nature, Carroll repeatedly figures the gothicised landscape

of her imagined woodland as a mirror and an extension of embodied femininity. The wilderness in its excess and insurgent vastness reflects an abject threat to ontological categorisation akin to that associated with the female body. The abject, the threat of dissolution, pervades the tales in *Through the Woods*, and while the text engages thematically with the fragility of our existential boundaries, it also represents this threat artistically through the dissolution of the representational borders that should, conventionally, separate the text's discrete images. Throughout Carroll's book, images refuse containment, and the order represented by the structural forms of frames, borders and gutters dissolves into an inchoate seepage of pictorial categories. *Through the Woods* thus conceives of the bleed not merely as a spatio-temporal convention that enables an image to leak into the timeless space beyond the edge of the image, it is also a means through which abject border-crossings can be represented. As distinct images collapse, annihilating the existential categories that separate nature from culture, human from inhuman, adult from child, subject from object, Carroll's effectively employed bleeds illustrate the abject horror that pervades the text. Carroll thus brings to the fore the violent physicality implicit in the term bleed and utilises it to express her characters' fears of maturation, womanhood and the unknown.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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