

EDUARDO GRUBER. *The Room of Mirrors*

LUCK AND CHANCE. An approach to the *Femme fatal-platonic loves* project

“Do not ask a philosopher about luck, they will not answer you, perhaps, however they will answer you if you ask them about something that we tend to identify it with: chance. They will give you the example of the plant pot that falls into your path. Aristoteles talked about chance, referring to it as an inscrutable part of human existence, relating it to relevant or accidental aspects that occur in our day-to-day lives.

However, chance is not as popular as luck. Good or bad luck is ever present in our day-to-day vocabulary, and it can often be used to explain our journeys in life or even to give opinions, without hesitation, about things that happen to *others*. Perhaps luck is somehow related to a type of personal assessment of our own existence, with the belief that the circumstances which have provoked this luck will have appeared as if gifted, contributing in this way to our happiness, or why not, our misfortune. Here the question lies in whether luck can be found in what one has, or in what one desires.

When looking for a way to explain this mystery, a link of the internet brought me to a page called “femme-fatal”, and on this page, I discovered the “Justice & Police Museum”, which was related to Sydney’s history. There I found images from the nineteen-twenties archives in a folder named “women prisoner”. There were dozens of police reports in which the faces of women of all ages, which had been photographed with a disturbing and heart-breaking clarity, were accompanied by a brief text, their police report, which told of their crime. These images sparked an interest within me, resulting in something that I like to define as a platonic love for each of them, and I felt compelled to tell their “other” story. Rather than just inventing a simple fictional story, I decided to imagine what their lives would have been like, if only they had come across some “good luck”. I did not want the single photographs taken of their faces at that exact moment to become the only evidence of their passage through the incredible anonymous experience that every single human being has contributed to in their journey through our history.

Femme fatale-platonic loves is a series of nine 180x150cm pieces produced on paper, using a mixture of techniques (watercolours, charcoal, graphite and collage). In this project, my work as an artist and my work as the “hidden” writer come together. Nine short stories accompany each of the pieces in an indivisible manner to create this complete display. When producing this collection, there were two factors that I decided not to modify in any way order to ensure that story was conceptually related to the germinal idea; the name and the photograph of each of their faces. Mary Harris, Eileen O’Connor, Jean Wilson, Alice Clarke, Dorothy Mort, Clara Randall, Phyllis Carmier “HUME”, Nellie Cassidy and Annie Gunderson, are my platonic loves and the protagonists of this work. When choosing which faces I was going to include, I looked at the way in which their faces inspired me, these tired faces, and in many cases sad faces, all gave off the impression that these were women who had been overcome by bad luck.”

Eduardo Gruber

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Alice Clarke

On the afternoon of the 27th of March, 1914, something casual and seemingly irrelevant occurred, nonetheless, this incident was paradoxically significant in Alice Clarke's humdrum life.

Alice was forty years old and she lived in her lower ground floor home in the outskirts of Sydney where she looked after her mother.

She was able to survive on her earnings from her modest job as a shop assistant in a haberdashery store; however, her days were spent in insufferable monotony, especially given that her social relationships were limited to occasional contact with the store's customers, doing nothing for her shyness which was principally caused by her physical condition.

Alice weighed more than one hundred kilos. When we draw our destiny, none of us can ignore the fact that one way or another, and with greater or lesser significance, luck, whether good or bad, will always be present.

That spring afternoon, and for no real reason in particular, Alice decided not to take her usual route home from work -heading down Hezlett Rd, before crossing onto Withers Rd, and turning right to take her straight home-, instead she decided to take a detour, and she found herself wandering down Markesfield Avenue, a street which at this time of the afternoon seemed to be deserted.

There, in the middle of that street, she came across a ramshackled paint workshop. She would have presumed that it was abandoned, if it weren't for a skeletal dog -who had been abandoned- tied to a rusty iron barrel with a filthy rope, who seemed to be asking for help rather than exercising his duties as a guard dog.

Alice was shocked to find herself standing in front of him, his big eyes looking at her inquisitively. She stuck her head through a glass-less window frame, and when no-one answered, her sensitive nature led her to do something that she could never imagined that she could do; she stroked the dog and when he began licking her, she untied him, and took him with her in a lucky "abduction".

From that very first encounter, she decided she would call him 'Blue', a name inspired by the specks of blue paint which were all over his coat and which made him look like an impossible breed of dog.

The animal's life changed, and for Alice, this was the first day of the rest of her new life. Over time, Alice became an active member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Australia.

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Annie Gunderson

Annie Gunderson is a fine example of one of those “incomprehensible” lives that, from time to time, stand out from each generation.

Annie’s good or bad luck was determined by chance occurrences in her own life and circumstances beyond her control.

Annie was the sister of Robert Gunderson who was three years older than her, and who worked as a mechanic and pilot for his friend Arthur Kingsford’s new company. This company, which owned one single light aircraft was involved in fumigation on an experimental basis.

Annie flew for the first time when she was 19 years old and she obtained her flying license in 1926 from the Royal Flying Corps.

Fourteen years later, while enlisted in a group of Australian aviators, she answered the RAF’s call for volunteer pilots from the Commonwealth countries.

She moved to London, and it was only when the shortage of RAF pilots meant that it was impossible for the RAF to take on the German Luftwaffe planes in the air battles along the English Channel, that Annie was finally accepted as a pilot for one of the Spitfire fighter planes.

She became known as “angel face” due to her childlike appearance, but she surprised everyone with her piloting skills, and her great intuition that she used to dominate space when taking on the German Messerschmitt.

At the end of the war, she received an award for her capital contribution to England’s defence thanks to the large number of enemy planes that she had brought down.

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Clara Randall

It was ten o'clock in the morning when Clara opened her eyes.

Although her bedroom was on the second floor, the persistent ringing of the hostel's doorbell had woken her up.

She was tired, as was common for her, but for once, she was able to recall an uninterrupted dream in front of the mirror she remembered that worrying last image in which numbers, insects and she coexisted, but she was accompanied by herself, it was as if she had a twin sister, although she knew that that was impossible.

She suddenly recalled that just a few days earlier, while she was resting after one of the rehearsals, she had met Alfred Fitch, a fan of the opera who had come to buy a ticket for the premiere, in the Empire Theatre's cafeteria.

Alfred was a psychoanalyst at the Darlington Lunatic Reception House, and she remembered that, as they had joked around, he had diagnosed her with dual personality, based on the simple fact that in just a few seconds she had gone from an apparent state of depression and discourtesy to forced laughter, almost for politeness sake, before ending the conversation by almost reaching a state of euphoria.

As she recalled this, she looked intently at the eyes, worriedly. Knocking at the door soon brought her back to reality; the hostel's owner had come with an urgent letter that had arrived just a few seconds earlier.

It was from the Empire Theatre, notifying her that she had to go to the rehearsals immediately.

Florence Melba, the soprano who was supposed to play the main role of Gilda in Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* that was to premiere just two days later had suddenly lost her voice.

Clara, who was employed as the soprano understudy, and who acted more or less as a sparring partner during rehearsals, had finally been granted an opportunity that would change, not just her usual expression of sadness, but her whole life.

On the opening night, Clara took the first big step towards drawing her destiny when she had the chance to repeat the *Caro Nome* aria, following the continued ovation of the ecstatic audience.

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Dorothy Mort

When she left for Sydney heading towards Melbourne on a train in which the slow passing of time seemed to be the least significant thing, her determination was clear.

In Melbourne, Dorothy was accepted as a passenger on the “Peking”, a merchant sailing ship that spent two months sailing the Indian Ocean, bordering the Cape of Good Hope, stopping over in Cape City, and crossing over to the Atlantic Ocean, before reaching its destination in the English port of Plymouth.

As it happens, twelve years prior to this, when she was still a child, she had headed to Australia with her family, in search of a better in life.

Once in England she headed to Glasgow by train, this train was much faster than the first one she had taken, nonetheless it still took her more than a day to arrive at her destination.

The first thing that she did when she arrived in Glasgow was buy a ticket to America, she then stayed in a real dump close to the port for three weeks until it was finally time to climb on board the “Castalia” alongside another 101 passengers.

After one week on board, they arrived at the port of New York.

When Dorothy stepped onto American soil, it was the first time in her life that she had had good luck.

Just three months before she had made the decision to leave Australia to pursue her dream: to become a successful fashion designer.

She was optimistic by nature, and although she had very limited experience working as a tailor, she had chosen to go to New York as she had heard people talking about this city being the place where dreams come true.

All of the bad luck that had shaped her simple life turned into good fortune when she was hired by the Majesty sewing shop in 6th Avenue. The fact that she spoke English, her mother tongue, gave her somewhat of an advantage over other emigrants.

It was there that her natural talent began to shine through, and over time she was assigned greater responsibilities. Just four years after she first arrived in New York she became known as the sophisticated “Dorothy Mort”, the artist behind the “dM” brand, and a haute couture designer who gradually became the fashion designer of choice for many women in New York’s high society, and the inspiration for many of the budding stars from the Hollywood studios.

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Eileen O'Connor

She had received the gift of a dress from her mother, who, without telling her, had made it for her using the material from the dress that she had married Bryan O'Connor in when she was seventeen years old.

Eileen had turned fourteen years old.

Her father had used his meagre savings to buy a worn down copy of *Alice in Wonderland* from a market, knowing that it would make his daughter happy, and hoping that it would alleviate what was sure to be a hard blow when they informed her of the decision they had made.

For Eileen, a lively young girl who was somewhat of a dreamer, and who was so in love with nature that she had even started a butterfly collection, this was the happiest day of her life.

Two days later they gave her the news: the next day they were leaving Ireland and heading to Australia to escape the misery, dreaming, like their daughter, of finding a trace of happiness.

The letter that her father had received a few weeks previously from a friend encouraging him, had determined that the destination of this trip to "the end of the world" would be Cairns, a small town located in the northeast of Australia. It seemed that this uninhabited area where they had apparently found gold and agriculture, in particular sugar cane, was going to be their future.

But in the letter that her father's friend had sent, he had sold it to them as being a luminous land, full of forests and that in particular it was a paradise for butterflies, where thousands of these would delight the pioneers of entomology.

They knew that if they spoke to their daughter enthusiastically about this new adventure, they would be able to alleviate her disappointment at having to abandon her limited world, which revolved exclusively around two other girls who, like her, were going to learn to read with Miss Murphy, so suddenly.

That afternoon while she wandered around the house feeling quite taken aback, she walked past her parents' bedroom where she saw a large suitcase lying open on the bed. This suitcase was filled with all you could possibly need to start a new life, and on top of a jacket, next to some old boots, she saw a large shiny dagger.

That night, she was unable to sleep with all that was troubling her. She was aware that it was the last day of one life and it would be the beginning of another, and as she tossed and turned, the images of the butterflies and the threatening dagger seemed to compete to be the protagonists of this good or bad luck that Eileen sensed would mark her destiny.

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Jean Wilson

How Jean Wilson arrived in Mexico from her Australian homeland is a mystery.

It is also not very clear how she came to meet the young Frida, although photos from this era seem to suggest that it was simply a chance encounter.

It has been suggested that it was Carmen Jaime who introduced them to each other.

Jean's persona was not unknown in the City of Mexico's intellectual and progressive circles, and every so often, she appeared at social gatherings or cultural events.

She spoke Spanish with some difficulty, but this did not stop her from taking part in debates with certain fervour, and her strong character and the certainty of her ideas led her to raise her tone on more than one occasion during her interventions.

These social gatherings were strongly connected to the "Cachuchas" group, a group that was made up almost exclusively by men, with Carmen Jaime and Frida Kahlo being the only female members. At just seventeen years of age, Frida had already developed a personality that most certainly did not go unnoticed.

It was at one of these meetings that Carmen introduced Frida to Jean, who was six years her senior.

Frida's open and provocative nature seemingly ignited Jean's passion, and their characters were not that different. Jean ended up writing a short yet passionate story with an abrupt ending, and full of thorns.

Within their group, the two of them walking hand in hand did not seem to attract attention.

There were two generalised opinions on this activity: those who presumed that a sentimental relationship must exist between the two of them, or the majority of the artists and intellectuals who believed that it was more than likely to be a type of performance. In those years, a new form of artistic expression had arrived from Europe, inspired by the actions which took place in Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, new forms which had reached Mexico's more artistically progressive society.

Their appearance at the inauguration of the new Banco de México headquarters holding hands, accompanied by their friends who were entering despite not having been invited, managed to unsettle the Mexican high society who attended, with president Plutarco Elías at the forefront.

That same year Frida suffered the accident that would mark her life; and nothing was heard of Jean again.

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Mary Harris

For Mathilde Von Kaulbach, Mary Harris' figure was perfect. She claimed that it was due to the character that the black lines that dominated her face gave her, and that was why she suggested to her husband, Max, that he paint her. She saw her as an expressionist woman, and she told her so, but Mary did not understand anything. Quappi, the affectionate name with which Max referred to his wife, had coincided with Mary in a nightclub in Baden-Baden where Mary was working as a waitress several years before she met Max. Following a small incident involving a bottle, Mary dressed Quappi's wound with a real gentleness, and that night was the beginning of a strange, sincere and fleeting friendship, despite them being from very different social classes. They did not see each other again until Mary moved permanently to Frankfurt after having left Sydney in 1922 on route to Europe, spending a few years firstly in Paris and later on in Baden-Baden. One autumn day in 1927, they met again at a party for beautiful people, the ironic name given to those people in society who met at nightclubs. The *Beautiful People* was also the name that Max had given to one of his pieces of work in which he depicted the elegance and sophistication of this society, but in a compressed and suppressive environment. Mary saw Quappi that night when she came to her table to serve her champagne. This casual reencounter rekindled that unusual friendship to the point that Quappi spontaneously invited her to her husband's studio the next day so that he could paint her. Beckmann, amidst laughter, politely refused. Given how in love he was with his wife, he apologised, explaining that she was his only "muse". Mary, who had found herself in a completely unfamiliar environment and disturbed by Max's comment felt embarrassed and she did not know what to say, and for a few seconds her eyes glazed over. Quappi, seeing her friend's face like this, did something out of the ordinary, not for Max who was aware of her generosity, but for Mary, who throughout her sorry life had never become accustomed to somebody showing her affection in this way; Quappi took off the necklace which she had worn in so many of the portraits that had been done of her and she placed it lovingly around Mary's neck.

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Nellie Cassidy

On the 6th of April, 1924, Max was born, Max was a baby with a premonitory face. Some people's personalities are defined in the very first moments of their life; Max is a good example of this. He was absolutely nothing like his mother, Nellie. Nellie never wished to reveal who his father was. As a single mother, she found herself struggling to swim against the tide in the extremely conservative and puritan city of Ballarat; a small city which at this time was thriving following the discovery of gold mines in the south of Australia. Given that she had inherited a small farm, and was able to earn some money from the sewing jobs that were given to her by the St Peter's Anglican Parish –the Anglican Church in the neighbourhood where she was born-, she was able to get by, and more remarkably, she managed to develop her personality as a reader. As bad luck would have it, Nellie's mother died while giving birth to her, nonetheless Nellie was lucky that before being left an orphan following her father's death, he had taught her to read. Thanks to his luck as a gold prospector, her father had been able to prosper in an era in which the majority of women and a lot of men were illiterate. St Peter's Church did not only offer her small sewing jobs but it also provided her with access to its exiguous library, a place where she was able to read books ranging from the *Book of Common Prayer* to *Popular Short Stories*. *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens was the first book that she finally managed to read at the age of twenty years. In 1924, when pregnant with Max, she bought her first book. It is unclear whether she bought it confused by the title or she chose it because it was written by a woman. Four years after Edith Wharton's novel "*The age of innocence*" was published: reading it made her aware of the existence of "another" unimaginable world.

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Phyllis Carmier “HUME”

Phyllis studied in Bristol until she was twenty years old.

At that age, she left her family home and abandoned her studies.

Jean, her best friend at Clifton College, had made the same choice as her, and so they both decided to go and live in London, in a flat that Jean’s aunt rented out on a room-to-room basis.

It was there that she met Franck Evans, who was three years older than her.

Franck was a young artist, and whilst he did not have a lot talent, he was a non-conformist and despite his young age, he was very intellectually gifted.

Two years later, she left for Paris with him, and at the age of twenty-five, she began to visit the most Avant-guard theatrical establishments.

She struck up friendship with Pierre Delsart and she moved to Zurich to be with him in 1915. There she met his close friends Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, before later being introduced to Tristan Tzara and Carl Jung. Thanks to her characteristic vitality, she was admitted de facto into the group that just one year later would meet near Hugo and Emmy’s Cabaret Voltaire, to sow the seed for what would end up being known as the “Dada movement”.

The Cabaret Voltaire had an exiguous life, lasting just six months, nonetheless, everything that happened during that period was fundamental for the history of art.

What did Phyllis do during those six months?

It is said that she parodied in “STUMM”, a tour de force performance that provided a fun and corrosive criticism of the militarism that had been implemented throughout Europe in the years following the end of the Great War.

In “STUMM” [mute in German] she performed through mimic improvisation.

There was no script, and according to the widespread comments made by her friends who attended the performance, it was presumed that Phyllis had opted to mime so that she would not have to talk.

She spoke English with a comical accent, even more so than that of the incipient French performer or the “mute” German.