

DRAWING

SYBYLLA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DRAWING SYBYLLA

**THE REAL AND IMAGINED
LIVES OF AUSTRALIA'S
WRITING WOMEN**

ODETTE KELADA



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.



This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Copyright © 2017 by Odette Kelada

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Typeset in 11 pt Bembo by Lasertype
Printed by McPhersons Printing Group



‘I am given to something which a man never pardons in a woman. You will draw away as though I were a snake when you hear it.’ With this warning, Sybylla confesses to her rich and handsome suitor that she is given to writing stories and bound, therefore, on a brilliant career.

Imprimatur for Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career*,
Centenary Edition

Contents

Scene from a Writer's Festival	1
Lucy 1901	15
Between the Chapters...	32
Vera 1929	38
Between the Chapters...	56
Stella 1932	64
Between the Chapters...	87
Eve 1954	93
Between the Chapters...	118
Susanne 1979	125
The Last Word	154

Scene from a Writer's Festival

Sybil was bred in a light cave. A light cave is one with a hole in the roof. Pronouncements from the gods descended through this celestial skylight, littering the floor with divine detritus. She scrawled holy words on leaves and bark. But they were never hers. They always came from beyond or below. For this cave marked the entrance to the Underworld. All that was past and buried would lick the undersides of the leaves as they fell from her hand. In Ancient Greece, 'The Sybils' were mad mouthpieces babbling unintelligible insights, writing illegible poetry.

The woman onstage is named Sybil. Sybil Jones. Her skin does not have the pallor of a cavern dweller, though something in her stature bears the breeding of an oracle. But her biographic notes say she was born in Albury-Wodonga, far from the cave at Cumae, a world away from Hecate's lake. I stare at her through the glass of water in front of me. Behind her head, the audience swims in rows of liquid faces. If humans are seventy per cent water, is a crowd an ocean? Is that what is meant by a sea of people?

I pick up my pen and dribble ink onto the page. Flowers grow either side of the red margin. Monstrous petals with goblin face leer from the middle of them. At the lectern Sybil is speaking. I see the back of her hair from my position onstage. She looks like the stalk of one of my flowers, long body dripping into high, quirky heels – quirky as they are forties-style pumps, jarrah brown. With her chocolate stockings and long red skirt she is a warm wood fire. I can see her burning away in front of me, alight with passion for something. She catches me for a moment. Rare as it is at these events, I find myself listening.

'I think that woman goes out in the daytime! And I'll tell you why – privately – I've seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows!'

Out of every one? How many windows does this person have? The rest of us have only one or two at the most and some people are totally boarded up, not a rasp of daylight in them.

'I see her on the long road under the trees, creeping along, and when the carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!'

Creeping by daylight. My goblins love this. They laugh and the ink on my paper stirs. I feel this. All the time. Every minute. Even here in front of this big crowd I am creeping, skulking behind the shadow of my persona: writer, charming, lady...I cannot peel my eyes from the chocolate fire as she reads, red lips round.

'And though I always see her, she may be able to creep faster than I can turn! I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a wind.'

What was I just saying? Cloud shadows! This woman is reading my thoughts. It must be all her windows. Is that it? Is that how she can see everything? See into me? The volume Sybil is holding up is thick and old. There is dust in its pages. I can smell it! Most writers at these things read their own stuff. Isn't that the point? Why else would you bother to come? Perhaps she has gone off on a tangent. Perhaps she is referencing. Surely not one of the greats. No one references the greats when they're about to read their own work.

'If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.'

Patterns...The red skirt has patterns all up it. Swirls and vines. They could run all the way to her neck and make a necklace around the nape of brown skin. A blackberry vine to choke on. What does 'top pattern' mean anyway? And if there's a pattern under a pattern then wouldn't they all be one pattern? That's the point of patterns, isn't it? To fold under, interlace, come around...and all that. Sybil pauses. It is a dramatic pause, I think. Yes, she shuts the book with due gravitas.

'The Yellow Wallpaper,' she says, 'has inspired me to pursue many patterns. In my own life as well as on the page. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote this tale of claustrophobic confinement while confined herself to her sickbed. Except she wasn't sick. She had just given birth. We would call it postnatal depression and recommend fresh air, activity and a break from the stresses of motherhood. The rest cure prescribed to Charlotte by her doctor was, "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil

as long as you live.” From this madness comes *The Yellow Wallpaper*.’

Sybil turns and reaches for her water on the table. Her hand trembles a little as she raises the glass. Feet are still in the audience. Not too much shuffling. I look into the mass of faces. There they are. Hands on laps. Knees crossed. People bent like boxes, neatly packed. It is mostly women in the crowd at these things, so you would expect that. No men stretching out their legs, taking the space that is due to them. If a man wants to write a book, he goes out and buys a computer, considers relocating to New York. A woman goes out and takes classes, comes to listen to us lot rattle on. At least this is what one writer teacher friend told me. A lot of us writers teach more than we write. Got to eat. Got to feed our own babies.

How many of these women have children pulling at them with juice-sticky fingers? Does Sybil? I could see her baby, round as a bubble with dark eyes to lap you up. The baby gurgles as Sybil plays with her pens, brushes and pencils. This is in an artist’s fantasy. My baby doesn’t gurgle, she screams like a jackhammer in the night. Even now my head has trouble staying straight on my neck. I would give up many a fantasy to enjoy just one: to stretch out now on this yawning table. The hard wood may well be a four-poster bed to my wishful bones. I would curl up on it to the tones of this woman humming like a butterfly, press my head into the industrious notebook of the honorary gentleman to my right and rest. They say in the first months there is no such thing as rest. The body of a woman with a child is on high alert even when she is asleep. Perhaps this is why my mind is dribbling now. These faces, this echoing hall, even Sybil may be cloud shadows in a dream, far from the waking world.

The gentleman to my right snuffles his nose into his handkerchief. Sybil is speaking again. I pick up my pen and swing the ink in a swirl the shape of her skirt. My pen keeps drawing patterns: the outline of her head, the bend of her wrist as she holds the book. When I come to her jarrah shoes I pull the heels down into a long stem. She is standing, much like a flower, in the centre. Her hair is shoulder-length; the cinnamon waves just touch the collar of her shirt. I make it cascade the length of the page. It fans out like the petals. She is reading still about the woman with many windows, the one with the wallpaper.

'In this story, the narrator's husband has tried to find a "cure" for his wife's desire to write. Torn between pleasing her family and her need for self-expression, she falls prey to fantasising at great length about the colour and configuration of the wallpaper in her bedroom. At first repulsed by its ugliness, she becomes fascinated by its form. As she writes in her journal...' Sybil pauses again for that serious effect.

'It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.'

Commit suicide! A bit melodramatic for a curve. None of my curves appear desperate enough for such an act. I wonder if I can push them over the edge. As the woman reads on, I play with my drawing, sending my easygoing lines careering off the paper. Soon it looks like an explosion has happened right at the base of the stalk out of which Sybil blooms. I am getting excited when I remember I am in front of a crowd. I calm my pen and pretend to take notes in a more orderly

fashion. All the while I am making more petals out of her hair. Perhaps some strands could be a waterfall. I sketch in the vine pattern on her skirt and watch as they creep all the way up to her neck. The goblins either side in the margin are grotesque next to the centrepiece Sybil has become. Their eyes bulge out at her, white and deadly. It is as if they are strangled by the vines that have taken off all over the page. They really are as bad as weeds.

‘The plight of the woman in this tale is one that cries out against the stultifying oppression of the creative woman, the artist, sculptor, writer. Innumerable stories abound of women’s artistic lives cut off at their peak or not even allowed to blossom because their gender does not permit such basic freedom.’

Sybil’s pulse throbs against the skin of her throat. A drum banging. She might just start a revolution except when I look out to the crowd, they are blurred in a smudge of charcoal, eyes open, faces closed. I am willing to go along with her, though. She has drawn me in with her suicidal angles and her fervour. It has been a while since I’ve seen anyone raise a pulse let alone bang a drum.

‘It is in this fashion of imprisonment that the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* begins to see women move behind the front pattern of the wallpaper in her bedroom. As Gilman writes, “*The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.*”’

On the page in front of me, almost black now with my demented scribbling, the figure I have drawn of Sybil opens her eyes. I see the eyelids snap wide, a flash of white. At first I am startled. But then I realise my hand must have moved and drawn eyes when I wasn’t looking. Hands have that tendency to fiddle, don’t they?

'At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.'

I can see that. I can see how my vines dripping from the ceiling could be perceived as bars. After all, those vines do look like they are strangling the goblins and they do curl up the length of the page. There is no moonlight here, but when I bend my head to the side I can imagine they had grown like that all by themselves. The stalks of my vines in this case could well be bars. I begin to understand what Sybil meant by a top pattern and one underneath. There she is, the image of her I have drawn, staring at me now right through the vine leaves.

Impertinent of her to be so present on the paper! I check to be sure Sybil Jones is still standing onstage. Yes, she is there, humming away, reaching now for her water again. That's the effect of lines drawn close together like that. It achieves the same result that zebras' coats have in the African heat, making the distance shimmer. Disorients the predators. Sybil onstage is still speaking about women writers. I have always been called a 'woman writer'. In my uni days that was quite a thrill. But now, after all these years, you would think we could be 'writers' without the need to tailor the title to our bodies. But then again, you'd think a lot would have happened after all these years.

Byron, for instance, my jackhammer babe. All the relatives brought her pink blankies, nighties, dummies...I have been tempted to say, 'Byron told me she detests pink,' but as she cannot talk, I may have encountered some disbelief. They would have smiled and passed over it as one of my fancies. After all, I am exhausted, and if I did insist on

trying to keep working with a young child what more could be expected? I may be oversensitive. Perhaps the blue–pink thing is simply to tell babies apart so no one is embarrassed into mistaking my girl for a boy. Perhaps there is nothing sinister going on at all. I scribble at the goblins' faces.

Sybil's voice softens whenever she stops to read from *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It descends from the drum of her convictions to a whisper as if she has opened a secret passageway and is walking up it in a long silk gown. The hem rustles on the floorboards. She is describing the wallpaper now.

'Looked at in one way, each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes – a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens – go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.'

I see Byron waddle. At almost one, all her movements are a sort of waddle. Feet thumping in the air, hand pumping as she plays with the coloured balls above her bed. It is an odd thing, to look on something with so much love and in the same breath have to control oneself from running, screaming from the house. Ryan says it's normal. But he has regular hours. He does not get up in the night. He tries to, at least pretends to try, but his effort exhausts me more than doing it myself.

I love the way this Gilman woman paints the husband of the narrator. The husband is kind, caring and utterly useless. By his insistence on her resting without any stimulation he drives her mad. I can tell Sybil finds the depiction delicious. She rolls her tongue around each word when she delivers these bits.

'I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.'

Sybil's lips curl as she gloats over the next line and her eyebrows pinch at acute angles.

'But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself – before him at least, and that makes me very tired.'

Self-control. How does that song go '*...and I would sell my soul for total control*'? I do not run screaming from the house. As I do not run screaming from this hall. I do not do anything crazy. The only release is this pen in my hand jabbing at the paper in these strange lines that hint at delirium. I have never thought about women before me or women after me. I think of my mum, I suppose, and if she wanted to run screaming. I try to fathom what sort of release she had, if any. I can't come up with anything. She used to garden a lot, endlessly pruning, but isn't that a form of self-control? Cutting all those leaves, trimming those hedges into civilised shapes, no wild patches of grass or thorns. She was manicured, my mum, as much as her lawn.

These women in front of me are the definition of control. But I doubt them. I doubt they are as straight and under wraps as they appear. I stare into the audience. There is one woman, spine stiff against the back of her chair. She hasn't moved all night. She has nodded in all the right places. Even has a book of one of the authors – not mine – on her lap. Occasionally she notes something down on a pocket-sized pad held with her thumb on top of the book. I am sure she will be the first in line to get her book signed. Maybe that was her prime purpose in coming. To have the signature of a real live writer on her very own copy. Her shirt is buttoned right up and her jacket fits firmly around her waist.

I do not buy it for a minute. She dances naked to Arabic music with all the lights out. She makes blood pacts with wolves when the moon summons her. She sneaks into the pattern of the chintz curtains in her bedroom and straddles lovers over the curtain rail. All right, she may not use the curtain rail, but I would swear she has notebooks filled with journal entries or wisps of poems, delightful secrets, dangerous liaisons. Even if they never get to paper, I am sure they are bubbling beneath the brim of that box-cut fringe. I am sure all these women have to hang on tightly to their self-control. I am sure they write something, or would, if they dared. This here is a farce!

I hear the laughter. I look down. My fingers are covered with black ink. My pen has leaked. It has bled all over the page. Rivulets of ink have flooded my vineyards. From the midst of the chaos, Sybil's face emerges as an elfin creature from a forest. Her eyes are lit up. She is laughing at me! I glance up and the woman onstage is still speaking but her form has become ghostly. She moves but her gestures now seem like wisps of clouds. And it is not only her; the audience, the table, the walls, even the faces on either side of me are losing clarity.

As everything around wavers out of its solid shape, my drawing of the woman comes into focus. My Sybil on the page has more dimensions than the one standing by the lectern. In fact, all my scribbling has more life than the scene I had been living only moments before. My vine leaves are wet and thick, a lush jungle. If I put my hand out I am sure the leaves would move and my fingers would feel their cool rubber skins. Now the figure I have drawn peers out from the ropes of vines. She pauses in her laughter. It is that dramatic pause I know well by now.

‘Shall we see for ourselves?’ The creature on my page speaks. ‘Shall we step back and watch these women as they are watching us? Shall we step back a little in time so we get a good running jump onto the stage, into the moment we share now? Them watching you, the renowned writer, watching them?’

The creature on the paper waits for my answer. I am in an uncommon state for one in my profession. I am speechless. The Sybil on my paper trails a finger into the river of ink.

‘Shall I begin as all good, if predictable, beginnings do – with a birth?’ Raising her finger up to her lips, she licks the tip of it with her tongue. It leaves a thick black streak. Have all my lines and curves hypnotised me? For the moment there is nothing to do but look and listen. I am told that is a good occupation for a writer. In any case, I bet this creature knows how to tell a yarn. Every twist of her elbows, every arch of her eyebrows has a flourish to it. From her inky tongue to her necklace of blackberry vines, she has the flavour of a good storyteller. Animated by an audience, only needing one, it seems, to draw her in, she comes alive. Leaning clean out of the page, she widens her eyes, brushes a strand of cinnamon hair from her face and begins her tale.

‘Here it starts. A disc wrapped in skin that slips into my favourite lemon-strung places, the bell, the raven, the kingfisher, the snake, the egg, the feather – what drifts lightly falls hard. I fell hard on this earth, splitting a hundred feathers in my hair, breaking my nails and hitting the bottom of the seabed. Sand in my teeth, weeds in my ears, I stride onto the beach wailing for a warm towel, buttered toast and a cup of tea.’

As a writer I am used to characters jumping out of trains and off ledges to get my attention, but this creature is unlike

any vision I have had. How did she find me? I do not speak aloud but she reads my thoughts as if I had.

‘And so it begins. I am Sybylla. You were daydreaming, yes? Wondering about all those women at this festival of writers, sitting like boxes, neatly packed? As your thoughts started to open them, unwrap the possibilities, you drew me in. A wandering eye is catnip for a muse of my nature. I am descended from the Sybils themselves, a long line of women trapped in caves, destined for writing on decaying leaves. The holy men of Greece deemed their words too wise for mere women. Their voices must have come from the Gods! My oracular mothers were chained to telling others’ destinies while their own fate was fettered to a hole fit for a bear or lion.

‘And my mothers became bears and lions. I hear them growling, hissing in the dark, stalking the moon like cloud shadows in the wind. I, too, am destined to stalk like a shadow, free now from any cave, tower, attic, bell jar or other form of savage containment. I hunt for a wandering mind to hear the hissing for the storytelling it is. Now, let me see where you have drawn me.’

The figure on my paper closes her eyes and pauses for a moment as if listening for a barely audible sound.

‘Ah...the start of my travels, a hairless child. Shells on my fingers, shells on my toes, I will have music wherever I go. I have landed in a red country, red dirt, the land of girt by sea, a great island between Asia and the Arctic. Gold rays of a hot sun burns the eyes. Maybe it was the wet ink of all that newly minted gold that lispd me into being, who can tell? But my fingers are stained already and small as they are, the bones wriggle. They have a lot on their mind. Let me grab a page now; any page from the wallpaper will let us in...’

Sybylla reaches up from my paper, stretching so far into the air she leaves a black streak from which her body extends. She reaches all the way up to the lectern and tears a page from the leather-bound volume of *The Yellow Wallpaper* that her shadow, Sybil Jones, holds in her hand. Sybil continues talking to the crowd. She does not seem to hear the tearing of a leaf from her book. In fact, no one notices this creature rising out of the sketchpad in front of me. They do not see that both they and Sybil Jones are now transparent as light.

Falling back onto the paper before me, like a genie sucked into a bottle, Sybylla clicks her fingers. I snap to attention. The page she has snatched is spread in front of me. She points to the gaps between the black print.

‘There...those blotches of white between the words. If you look close you’ll see a morse code. A tapping, a resolute point of entry into a world, hidden but floating visibly when one chances to notice. What if I were the ultimate woman in white slipping from voice to voice, tracing paths with tentacles of observation and memory. Would you follow me?’

‘What if I presented you with a woman at a table, a kitchen table, elbows squashed between half-peeled potatoes and shelled peas. Carrot skins interfere with the slide of her knuckles across the page crumpled in front of her. She is hurrying as if she is missing a train, she is hurrying like she is catching something, a thread trailed always in front of her face, a carrot of thoughts. She is a horse, a greyhound, a rabbit led by the nose, pelting mindlessly down the road of ink.’

‘The path opens wide. She is a spot on it. Her face is pale. Her hair dark. There is a vacant look in her eyes. She is somewhere else. I follow her. She does not notice. I bump

into her. She mutters an apology. It is a reflex. She does not notice me. I slide into her, soft...a light chill on the back of the neck. She wraps her arms tighter around her.

She wears too much cloth for this heat. A dark dress, trimmed with brown ribbons. Underneath the skirt are layers of petticoats and a pair of drawers. A white collar hovers like a halo around the base of her throat. Together, we walk on.

‘We take a right turn off the path and there we are in the middle of bushland. There is dry grass reaching out on a baked flat plain. It is crispy. It crackles as we walk towards a house, snapping at our ankles. Can you see the house? Looming out of the landscape like a boil on the smooth slope of red skin? It sits in the shadow of a hill littered with melaleuca. Fence posts stick in the dirt around it like battered teeth. The lone spark for miles around is the tin roof, a silver dish holding the sun’s reflection. The girl waltzes along, through the fence, over the verandah, in the door, across the hallway. As we clatter up the stairs, I creep behind the pattern of her starched lace collar...’

Sybylla looks up at me. Her eyes glint like a spider web in the rain. She beckons, her finger pulling me to her as if we are connected by a thread...

Lucy 1901

The bush smelt so delicious today. The air burnt with eucalyptus and the birds were shrill and gargling, a big party in the trees and I wanted to join them. They get to be gaudy and fly wherever. In spite of the heat, I felt a shiver, as if a wind had struck up and snuck right into my bones. Mother will be so cross if I catch a chill. She's got her hands full as it is, or so she is forever saying.

'Lucy, I've got my hands full enough. Don't you go being idle there, devil's work, devil's work.'

We run around with our hands full so the devil won't come out and grab them. What a peculiar notion! Is he hiding in the bushes all the time? Awaiting empty hands? Mother professes to be awfully religious, God-fearing and all, but she's not. I've seen her glassy face in church and the things she says about people aren't Christian things. She's always got a sharp tongue for her kin as well, and it may be my imagining but it's always us girls who get the force of it while the boys run around free as the birds.