

a chorus girl in a musical comedy during the years of World War I. Married for a time to the poet Max Hamer, she had one child. Much of her life, however, was spent in Paris and in travels on the Continent, an expatriation whose alienating implications she captured in, for instance, her portrait of the numbed and lonely heroine of *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).

According to one commentator, Rhys "had always kept 'a sort of diary,' but she didn't think seriously of writing until a time when she was desperate for money, which fortunately coincided with her 'discovery' by . . . Ford." Once she began to write, though, she quickly became a serious professional: throughout her years of wandering, she was producing her poignant yet coolly understated novels and tales, and when she returned to settle in England—chiefly in London and Cornwall—she continued to write, although her reputation fell into an eclipse for some years. After *Good Morning, Midnight* was broadcast in England in 1957, Rhys was "rediscovered," however, and the subsequent publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was defined as "a magnificent comeback."

Whether or not *Wide Sargasso Sea* was a "comeback," it continued and elaborated a mode of psychological analysis that Rhys had already pioneered in earlier works. In particular, it developed a technique of literary allusion hinted at in the title of *Good Morning, Midnight*—a line drawn from one of Emily Dickinson's poems ("Good Morning—Midnight— / I'm coming Home— / Day—got tired of Me—," no. 425), for *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a disturbing yet brilliantly revisionary retelling of the story of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Bertha Mason Rochester, the madwoman sequestered in Thornfield's attic. Describing Bertha's experience as a repressed daughter and an oppressed wife, Rhys continued the delineation of a landscape of female despair that she had begun in her earlier novels, but now she located that countryside of anguish more specifically in the context of the women's literary tradition. Acknowledging the affinity between the anxieties of her protagonists and the pain articulated by such precursors as Dickinson and Bronte, Rhys elaborated what Ford had called her "terrifying insight" into the lives of "underdogs"—forgotten women imprisoned by self or society in attics and rooming houses, rebellious women whose stories she recounted with sympathy and sensitivity. In *The Insect World*, for example, Rhys illuminates the physical and psychological suffering of the character called "the girl they left behind" during World War II—i.e., the female civilians "left behind" on the home front, where they endured the terror of nightly bombings and daily scarcities.

## The Insect World

Audrey began to read. Her book was called *Nothing So Blue*. It was set in the tropics. She started at the paragraph which described the habits of an insect called the jigger.<sup>1</sup>

Almost any book was better than life, Audrey thought. Or rather, life as she was living it. Of course, life would soon change, open out, become quite different. You couldn't go on if you didn't hope that, could you? But for the time being there was no doubt that it was pleasant to get away from it. And books could take her away.

She could give herself up to the written word as naturally as a good dancer to music or a fine swimmer to water. The only difficulty was that after finishing the last sentence she was left with a feeling at once hollow and uncomfortably full. Exactly like indigestion. It was perhaps for this reason that she never forgot that books were one thing and that life was another.

1. I.e., the chigger.

When it came to life Audrey was practical. She accepted all she was told to accept. And there had been quite a lot of it. She had been in London for the last five years but for one short holiday. There had been the big blitz, then the uneasy lull, then the little blitz, now the fly bombs.<sup>2</sup> But she still accepted all she was told to accept, tried to remember all she was told to remember. The trouble was that she could not always forget all she was told to forget. She could not forget, for instance, that on her next birthday she would be twenty-nine years of age. Not a Girl any longer. Not really. The war had already gobbled up several years and who knew how long it would go on. Audrey dreaded growing old. She disliked and avoided old people and thought with horror of herself as old. She had never told anyone her real and especial reason for loathing the war. She had never spoken of it—even to her friend Monica.

Monica, who was an optimist five years younger than Audrey, was sure that the war would end soon.

"People always think that wars will end soon. But they don't," said Audrey. "Why, one lasted for a hundred years. What about that?"

Monica said: "But that was centuries ago and quite different. Nothing to do with Now."

But Audrey wasn't at all sure that it was so very different.

"It's as if I'm twins," she had said to Monica one day in an attempt to explain herself. "Do you ever feel like that?" But it seemed that Monica never did feel like that or if she did she didn't want to talk about it.

Yet there it was. Only one of the twins accepted. The other felt lost, betrayed, forsaken, a wanderer in a very dark wood. The other told her that all she accepted so meekly was quite mad, potty. And here even books let her down, for no book—at least no book that Audrey had ever read—even hinted at this essential wrongness or pottiness.

Only yesterday, for instance, she had come across it in *Nothing So Blue*. *Nothing So Blue* belonged to her, for she often bought books—most of them Penguins, but some from second-hand shops. She always wrote her name on the fly-leaf and tried to blot out any signs of previous ownership. But this book had been very difficult. It had taken her more than an hour to rub out the pencil marks that had been found all through it. They began harmlessly, "Read and enjoyed by Charles Edwin Roofe in this Year of our Salvation MCMXLII,<sup>3</sup> which, being interpreted is Thank You Very Much," continued Blue? Rather pink, I think" and, throughout the whole of the book, the word "blue"—which of course often occurred—was underlined and in the margin there would be a question mark, a note of exclamation, or "Ha, ha." "Nauseating," he had written on the page which began "I looked her over and decided she would do." Then came the real love affair with the beautiful English girl who smelt of daffodils and Mr Roofe had relapsed into "Ha, ha—sez you!" But it was on page 166 that Audrey had a shock. He had written "Women are an unspeakable abomination" with such force that the pencil had driven through the paper. She had torn the page out and thrown it into the fireplace. Fancy that! There was no fire, of course, so she was able to pick it up, smooth it out and stick it back.

2. The Blitz, the German night bombing raids on London and other British cities, lasted from September 1940 to May 1941. In the "little blitz" of January to April 1944 were the heaviest bombing raids

since 1941. The "flying bombs" were the V-1 (and then V-2) rockets, which began to be used in June 1944.

3. I.e., 1942.

"Why should I spoil my book?" she had thought. All the same she felt terribly down for some reason. And yet, she told herself, "I bet if you met that man he would be awfully ordinary, just like everybody else." It was something about his small, neat, precise handwriting that made her think so. But it was always the most ordinary things that suddenly turned round and showed you another face, a terrifying face. That was the hidden horror, the horror everybody pretended did not exist, the horror that was responsible for all the other horrors.

The book was not so cheering, either. It was about damp, moist heat, birds that did not sing, flowers that had no scent. Then there was this horrible girl whom the hero simply had to make love to, though he didn't really want to, and when the lovely, cool English girl heard about it she turned him down.

The natives were surly. They always seemed to be jeering behind your back. And they were stupid. They believed everything they were told, so that they could be easily worked up against somebody. Then they became cruel—so horribly cruel, you wouldn't believe. . . .

And the insects. Not only the rats, snakes and poisonous spiders, scorpions, centipedes, millions of termites in their earth-colored nests from which branched out yards of elaborately built communication lines leading sometimes to a smaller nest, sometimes to an untouched part of the tree on which they were feeding, while sometimes they just petered out, empty. It was no use poking at a nest with a stick. It seemed vulnerable, but the insects would swarm, whitely horrible, to its defense, and would rebuild it in a night. The only thing was to smoke them out. Burn them alive—oh. And even then some would escape and at once start building somewhere else.

Finally, there were the minute crawling unseen things that got at you as you walked along harmlessly. Most horrible of all these was the Jigger.

Audrey stopped reading. She had a headache. Perhaps that was because she had not had anything to eat all day; unless you can count a cup of tea at eight in the morning as something to eat. But she did not often get a weekday off and when she did not a moment must be wasted. So from ten to two, regardless of sirens wailing, she went shopping in Oxford Street, and she skipped lunch. She bought stockings, a nightgown and a dress. It was buying the dress that had taken it out of her. The assistant had tried to sell her a print dress a size too big and, when she did not want it, had implied that it was unpatriotic to make so much fuss about what she wore. "But the colors are so glaring and it doesn't fit. It's much too short," Audrey said.

"You could easily let it down."

Audrey said: "But there's nothing to let down. I'd like to try on that dress over there."

"It's a very small size."

"Well, I'm thin enough," said Audrey defiantly. "How much thinner d'you want me to be?"

"But that's a dress for a girl," the assistant said.

And suddenly, what with the pain in her back and everything, Audrey had wanted to cry. She nearly said "I work just as hard as you," but she was too dignified.

"The gray one looks a pretty shape," she said. "Not so drear. Drear," she repeated, because that was a good word and if the assistant knew anything she would place her by it. But the woman, not at all impressed, stared over her head.

“The dresses on that rail aren’t your size. You can try one on if you like but it wouldn’t be any use. You could easily let down the print one,” she repeated maddeningly.

Audrey had felt like a wet rag after her defeat by the shop assistant, for she had ended by buying the print dress. It would not be enough to go and spruce up in the Ladies’ Room on the fifth floor—which would be milling full of Old Things—so she had gone home again, back to the flat she shared with Monica. There had not been time to eat anything, but she had put on the new dress and it looked even worse than it had looked in the shop. From the neck to the waist it was enormous, or shapeless. The skirt, on the other hand, was very short and skimpy and two buttons came off in her hand; she had to wait and sew them on again.

It had all made her very tired. And she would be late for tea at Roberta’s.

“I wish I lived here,” she thought when she came out of the Tube<sup>4</sup> station. But she often thought that when she went to a different part of London. “It’s nicer here,” she’d think, “I might be happier here.”

Her friend Roberta’s house was painted green and had a small garden. Audrey felt envious as she pressed the bell. And still more envious when Roberta came to the door wearing a flowered house coat, led the way into a pretty sitting-room and collapsed onto her sofa in a filmstar attitude. Audrey’s immediate thought was “What right has a woman got to be lolling about like that in wartime, even if she is going to have a baby?” But when she noticed Roberta’s deep-circled eyes, her huge, pathetic stomach, her spoilt hands, her broken nails, and realized that her house coat had been made out of a pair of old curtains (“not half so pretty as she was. Looks much older”) she said the usual things, warmly and sincerely.

But she hoped that, although it was nearly six by the silver clock, Roberta would offer her some tea and cake. Even a plain slice of bread—she could have wolfed that down.

“Why are you so late?” Roberta asked. “I suppose you’ve had tea,” and hurried on before Audrey could open her mouth. “Have a chocolate biscuit.”<sup>5</sup>

So Audrey ate a biscuit slowly. She felt she did not know Roberta well enough to say “I’m ravenous. I must have something to eat.” Besides that was the funny thing. The more ravenous you grew, the more impossible it became to say “I’m ravenous.”

“Is that a good book?” Roberta asked.

“I brought it to read on the Tube. It isn’t bad.”

Roberta flicked through the pages of *Nothing So Blue* without much interest. And she said “English people always mix up tropical places. My dear, I met a girl the other day who thought Moscow was the capital of India! Really, I think it’s dangerous to be as ignorant as that, don’t you?”

Roberta often talked about “English” people in that way. She had acquired the habit, Audrey thought, when she was out of England for two years before the war. She had lived for six months in New York. Then she had been to Miami, Trinidad, Bermuda—all those places—and no expense spared, or so she said. She had brought back all sorts of big ideas. Much too big. Gadgets for the kitchen. An extensive wardrobe. Expensive makeup. Having her hair and

4. The London underground (the city’s subway system).

5. Cookie.

nails looked after every week at the hairdresser's. There was no end to it. Anyway, there was one good thing about the war. It had taken all that right off. Right off.

"Read what he says about jiggers," Audrey said.

"My dear," said Roberta, "he *is* piling it on."

"Do you mean that there aren't such things as jiggers?"

"Of course there are such things," Roberta said, "but they're only sand fleas. It's better not to go barefoot if you're frightened of them."

She explained about jiggers. They had nasty ways—the man wasn't so far wrong. She talked about tropical insects for some time after that she seemed to remember them more vividly than anything else. Then she read out bits of *Nothing So Blue*, laughing at it.

"If you must read all the time, you needn't believe everything you read."

"I don't," said Audrey. "if you knew how little I really believe you'd be surprised. Perhaps he doesn't see it the way you do. It all depends on how people see things. If someone wanted to write a horrible book about London, couldn't he write a horrible book? I wish somebody would. I'd buy it."

"You dope!" said Roberta affectionately.

When the time came to go Audrey walked back to the Tube station in a daze, and in a daze sat in the train until a jerk of the brain warned her that she had passed Leicester Square and now had to change at King's Cross. She felt very bad when she got out, as if she could flop any minute. There were so many people pushing, you got bewildered.

She tried to think about Monica, about the end of the journey, above all about food—warm, lovely food—but something had happened inside her head and she couldn't concentrate. She kept remembering the termites. Termites running along one of the covered ways that peter out and lead to nothing. When she came to the escalator she hesitated, afraid to get on it. The people clinging to the sides looked very like large insects. No, they didn't *look* like large insects: they were insects.

She got onto the escalator and stood staidly on the right-hand side. No running up for her tonight. She pressed her arm against her side and felt the book. That started her thinking about jiggers again. Jiggers got in under your skin when you didn't know it and laid eggs inside you. Just walking along, as you might be walking along the street to a Tube station, you caught a jigger as easily as you bought a newspaper or turned on the radio. And there you were—infected—and not knowing a thing about it.

In front of her stood an elderly woman with dank hair and mean-looking clothes. It was funny how she hated women like that. It was funny how she hated most women anyway. Elderly women ought to stay at home. They oughtn't to walk about. Depressing people! Jutting out, that was what the woman was doing. Standing right in the middle, instead of in line. So that you could hardly blame the service girl, galloping up in a hurry, for giving her a good shove and saying under her breath "Oh get out of the way!" But she must have shoved too hard for the old thing tottered. She was going to fall. Audrey's heart jumped sickeningly into her mouth as she shut her eyes. She didn't want to see what it would look like, didn't want to hear the scream.

But no scream came and when Audrey opened her eyes she saw that the old woman had astonishingly saved herself. She had only stumbled down a couple of steps and clutched the rail again. She even managed to laugh and say "Now

I know where all the beef goes to!" Her face, though, was very white. So was Audrey's. Perhaps her heart kept turning over. So did Audrey's.

Even when she got out of the Tube the nightmare was not over. On the way home she had to walk up a little street which she hated and it was getting dark now. It was one of those streets which are nearly always empty. It had been badly blitzed and Audrey was sure that it was haunted. Weeds and wild-looking flowers were growing over the skeleton houses, over the piles of rubble. There were front doorsteps which looked as though they were hanging by a thread, and near one of them lived a black cat with green eyes. She liked cats but not this one, not this one. She was sure it wasn't a cat really.

Supposing the siren went? "If the siren goes when I'm in this street it'll mean that it's all U.P. with me." Supposing a man with a strange blank face and no eyebrows like that one who got into the Ladies at the cinema the other night and stood there grinning at them and nobody knew what to do so everybody pretended he wasn't there. Perhaps he was not there, either—supposing a man like that were to come up softly behind her, touch her shoulder, speak to her, she wouldn't be able to struggle, she would just lie down and die of fright, so much she hated that street. And she had to walk slowly because if she ran she would give whatever it was its opportunity and it would run after her. However, even walking slowly, it came to an end at last. Just round the corner in a placid ordinary street where all the damage had been tidied up was the third floor flat which she shared with Monica, also a typist in a government office.

The radio was on full tilt. The smell of cabbage drifted down the stairs. Monica, for once, was getting the meal ready. They ate out on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, in on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Audrey usually did the housework and cooking and Monica took charge of the ration books, stood in long queues to shop and lugged the laundry back and forwards every week because the van didn't call any longer.

"Hullo," said Monica.

Audrey answered her feebly, "Hullo."

Monica, a dark, pretty girl, put the food on the table and remarked at once, "You're a bit green in the face. Have you been drinking mock gin?"

"Oh, don't be funny. I haven't had much to eat today that's all."

After a few minutes Monica said impatiently, "Well why don't you eat then?"

"I think I've gone past it," said Audrey, fidgeting with the sausage and cabbage on her plate.

Monica began to read from the morning paper. She spoke loudly above the music on the radio.

"Have you seen this article about being a woman in Germany? It says they can't get any scent or eau-de-cologne or nail polish."

"Fancy that!" Audrey said. "Poor things!"

"It says the first thing Hitler stopped was nail polish. He began that way. I wonder why. He must have had a reason, mustn't he?"

"Why must he have had a reason?" said Audrey.

"Because," said Monica, "if they've got a girl thinking she isn't pretty, thinking she's shabby, they've got her where they want her, as a rule. And it might start with nail polish, see? And it says: 'All the old women and the middle-aged women look most terribly unhappy. They simply *slink* about,' it says."

"You surprise me," Audrey said. "Different in the Isle of Dogs, isn't it?"

She was fed up now and she wanted to be rude to somebody. "Oh *do* shut up," she said. "I'm not interested. Why should I have to cope with German women as well as all the women over here? What a nightmare!"

Monica opened her mouth to answer sharply; then shut it again. She was an even-tempered girl. She piled the plates onto a tray, took it into the kitchen and began to wash up.

As soon as she had gone Audrey turned off the radio and the light. Blissful sleep, lovely sleep, she never got enough of it. . . . On Sunday mornings, long after Monica was up, she would lie unconscious. A heavy sleeper, you might call her, except that her breathing was noiseless and shallow and that she lay so still, without tossing or turning. And then *She (who?) sent the gentle sleep from Heaven that slid into my soul. That slid into my soul. Sleep, Nature's sweet, something-or-the-other. The sleep that knits up the ravelled.*<sup>6</sup> . . .

It seemed that she had hardly shut her eyes when she was awake again. Monica was shaking her.

"What's the matter? Is it morning?" Audrey said. "What is it? What is it?"

"Oh, nothing at all," Monica said sarcastically. "You were only shrieking the place down."

"Was I?" Audrey said, interested. "What was I saying?"

"I don't know what you were saying and I don't care. But if you're trying to get us turned out, that's the way to do it. You know perfectly well that the woman downstairs is doing all she can to get us out because she says we are too noisy. You said something about jiggers. What are jiggers anyway?"

"It's slang for people in the Tube," Audrey answered glibly to her great surprise. "Didn't you know that?"

"Oh is it? No, I never heard that."

"The name comes from a tropical insect," Audrey said, "that gets in under your skin when you don't know it. It lays eggs and hatches them out and you don't know it. And there's another sort of tropical insect that lives in enormous cities. They have railways, Tubes, bridges, soldiers, wars, everything we have. And they have big cities, and smaller cities with roads going from one to another. Most of them are what they call workers. They never fly because they've lost their wings and they never make love either. They're just workers. Nobody quite knows how this is done, but they think it's the food. Other people say it's segregation. Don't you believe me?" she said, her voice rising. "Do you think I'm telling lies?"

"Of course I believe you," said Monica soothingly, "But I don't see why you should shout about it."

Audrey drew a deep breath. The corners of her mouth quivered. Then she said "Look I'm going to bed. I'm awfully tired. I'm going to take six aspirins and then go to bed. If the siren goes don't wake me up. Even if one of those things seems to be coming very close, don't wake me up. I don't want to be woken up whatever happens.

"Very well," Monica said. "All right, old girl."

6. Compare with the following: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), part 5: "She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven / That slid into my soul"; Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV* 3.1.5-6: "O sleep! O gentle

sleep! / Nature's soft nurse"; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 2.2.33-34: "Sleep that knits up the ravel'd sleeve of care."

Audrey rushed at her with clenched fists and began to shriek again. "Damn you, don't call me that. Damn your soul to everlasting hell *don't call me that. . . .*"

1976

## LOUISE BOGAN

1897-1970

"Women have no wilderness in them, / They are provident instead," wrote Louise Bogan in a famous poem entitled *Women*. Yet this scrupulous artist, who was from 1931 to 1969 the influential and fiercely independent poetry critic for *The New Yorker*, herself wrote poems that constituted rigorous and fearless explorations of an interior "wilderness," poems that—in the words of W. H. Auden, a fellow writer whom she much admired—"wrested beauty and truth out of dark places." Born in Livermore Falls, Maine, Bogan described herself as "the highly charged and neurotically inclined product of an extraordinary childhood and an unfortunate early marriage, into which last state I had rushed to escape the first." Her parents were genteelly impoverished and unhappily married, often separating for long periods, so that she later confessed that "I cannot bring myself to describe the horrors of the pre-1914 lower-middle-class life, in which they found themselves."

The family had moved to Boston in 1909, where the young Bogan entered Girls' Latin School and began to write poetry. In 1915, she enrolled as a freshman at Boston University, where two of her verses were printed in the literary magazine. But though she had been offered a scholarship to Radcliffe for the following year, she decided instead to marry Curt Alexander, a professional soldier, so that she could get away from the turmoil in her home. While living on an army base in the Panama Canal Zone, the couple had a daughter in 1917, but the marriage was indeed, in other ways, "unfortunate," and Bogan left her husband in 1919. The next year he died, and she received a small widow's pension, which enabled her to travel to Vienna in 1922, where she studied piano.

In 1923, after she had returned to New York, Bogan met Raymond Holden, a novelist and minor poet, whom she was to marry in 1925. Supporting herself at various odd jobs, she began seriously to write and publish; her work in this period included film criticism and poetry reviews as well as two well-received volumes of verse, *Body of This Death* (1923) and *Dark Summer* (1929). In 1931, just after she had begun her career as a poetry reviewer for *The New Yorker*, Bogan had the first of a series of nervous breakdowns that were to acquaint her with what Auden called "dark places." Recovering, she separated from Holden in 1934 and entered into a relationship with the poet Theodore Roethke, who became her lifelong friend and partisan. Her new collections appeared at regular intervals—*The Sleeping Fury* in 1937 and *Poems and New Poems* in 1941—and a growing number of prizes recognized the nature of her aesthetic achievement. After serving in 1945 as a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, she was awarded visiting professorships and literary residencies at several major institutions, including the University of Washington and Brandeis University. Her last book of verse, *The Blue Estuaries: Poems, 1923-1968*, appeared shortly before she resigned from her job as poetry reviewer for *The New Yorker* and a year before she died of a heart attack.

Throughout her successful and productive career, Bogan had remained an intensely private woman: she made few pronouncements on public events and, as the poem *Women* suggests, did not particularly identify herself as a feminist. Yet in a late essay on women poets she reminded her audience that "the word feminism