Portrait with Still Life:

Re-imagining Silenced Women's Stories Through Historiographical Metafiction

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is made up of two separate components: a creative manuscript titled *Portrait with Still Life* and its accompanying exegesis. The project as a whole problematizes the links between life and fiction, examines the power of female artistic 'voice', in both imagery and text, and discusses the significance of this voice in re-imagining silenced women's stories. Furthermore, the intersection of image and text used throughout is central to the development of the overall structure of this thesis and its attempt to answer key questions: What is the potential of historiographical metafiction in creating awareness of the exclusion of women from official history and dominant narratives, particularly women who have been institutionalised or have transgressed societal norms? What is the possibility of female artistic endeavour, particularly artists who utilize disquiet and unease in their work, in highlighting the uniquely gendered experience of women in Western society? It further questions whether the use of imagery as a metafictional device in the creative manuscript can contribute to the analysis of subjectivity in historical writing and be used as a method to unearth silenced women's stories.

Portrait with Still Life is an experimental text that uses historiographical metafictional devices to highlight the gaps and omissions inherent in many women's lives. The novel blurs the boundaries between fiction, historical writing, memoir and biography in order to explore and re-imagine the lives of women – both past and present. The hybrid nature of the creative work as fictional autobiography is a significant aspect of this text and its aim to highlight the links between life and art, and that it is rooted in fact. The narrative recounts the story of Sarah, a contemporary Australian woman suffering from mental illness, her quest to discover the mystery of her ancestor Rebecca, and how this process allows her to not only write Rebecca's story but also come to terms with her own difficult past. The dream that Sarah harbours of finding connection with a haunting image of Rebecca, and the narrative she creates, is integral to her eventual freedom and recovery.

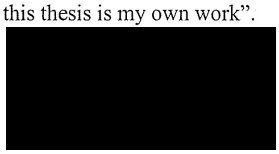
The exegesis discusses the work of a number of female writers and artists, particularly women who have used autobiographical and historiographical metafictional devices

in their work, and how they have influenced and informed the writing of the creative manuscript. It also explores the power of the artist's voice, both in image and text, and the importance of this voice in the recovery of hidden or silenced stories in order to attempt to answer the overarching questions outlined above. The use of my own personal story throughout each part of the exegesis further examines the links between life and artistic pursuit and its role in highlighting women's gendered experience in order to question, and eventually counter, its negative experience on many women in contemporary society.

STUDENT DECLARATION

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

"I, Lianne Broadbent, declare that the PhD thesis entitled Portrait With Still Life: Unreliable Narratives in Historiographical Metafiction is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work".

Signature 

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PORTRAIT WITH STILL LIFE

Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt. [1]

Rebecca Solnit

2006

THE REST CURE

I've married a cupboard of rubbish/I bed in a fish puddle.[2]

Sylvia Plath

The room is small and dark (the blinds are closed). There is a hole punched into the wall. I climb into the high bed and wait for sleep. I pull out the sheets and stretch out my legs.

They check on me every hour or so. Small torches in my face – tiny pinpricks on the back of my hand. To feign sleep is a risk worth taking.

I am a user of words but they will not help me here. The words I choose reveal too much.

Plath's words were used against her. I know this much, 'The crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue'.[3]

What happens to a person's words when they are dead? Glossed, edited and sanitised for consumption? Bitter Fame is what they call it. A suicide will need to be controlled. A woman should not leave her children.

The room is airless and the light reveals cracks in the ceiling. I can hear the sound of trolleys in the corridor. The wheels click in time with my heartbeat. It is morning.

I have not washed for days. They scrub at my skin and tsk under their tongues. I know they are waiting for me to speak. The toast is cold and flabby. I raise it to my mouth but cannot eat it. The breakfast tray is discarded – I am wasting. They urge me to drink the milk. *Mother's milk.* I take tiny sips from the glass throughout the morning and then empty it down the sink in the bathroom. The mirror in the bathroom exposes someone I used to recognise. Sexless, this person is dark on one side. Daylight creates a shadow across its face.

In the room they have taken away my books. I must not move too much; I must regain my flesh. The walls are painted a sickly yellow – I wish there was wallpaper for me to look at. From the room I can hear the others shuffling down the polished surface of the corridor. In the evening the machine buffs away the day's journeys – it hums and slides around my brain like the sound of faraway feedback.

2006
BEGINNINGS

I'm standing in line at the fish shop when I realise that something is not right. It is my memory. I remember getting up at five am to get the ten to six train. I remember opening up the shop and putting out the furniture. I remember making the morning muffins. It's all very clear. It's all clear because every day is the same. But something is missing. I have no future. I'm surprised nobody has noticed that I am dead.

I long for the days when I found solace in literature, the days when things appeared to be just starting, when dreams of future life were exciting. I want it to be like when Helen Garner starts *Monkey Grip*, 'It was early summer. And everything, as it always does, began to heave and change.'[4]

It wasn't as if I didn't already have somebody to love. No, that's not true. That was dead as well. And surely it wasn't love that was the problem; it was that big, wide empty space that I saw stretching out before me. The morning train ride took me towards the city, past the graveyard at Laburnum station where I always thought I should alight. That place reminded me of early childhood camping trips with my family in the 1970s – the wide sky full of stars and the flat, scrubby landscape. To wish to be with the earth is a desire not easily articulated – it was a sin to be thinking this way.

This encircling chasm had something to do with my obsession with the nineteenth century. Rimbaud and Verlaine had been taking up my thoughts. Walking killed Rimbaud; love killed Verlaine. Shelley and Byron destroyed the lives of Mary, Claire and Allegra. A generation earlier Mary Wollstonecraft was declared *a hyena in petticoats*. Wilde died for his love for Bosie. Baudelaire created his flowers of evil. This potted history seemed to have no way of stopping in my mind – did I have any chance to find the connections?

In his novel *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald wrote about Broad Street Station in London as being a gravesite, and how every cubic metre of earth held the skeletons of eight people. Archaeological sites can be made from the lines of trains, or at least in my

mind it seems logical. What could be hidden beneath the Belgrave line? I felt I could trace my life for the past two years on that line. I never stopped at Laburnum.

It had started in earnest five years before when I discovered the photograph of my great-great-great aunt Rebecca at a family reunion. It wasn't just the image of her that gripped me; it was the story of her suicide. Was it true that she drowned herself in the water tank on her farm when she was 36? Her seventh child would have only been a few months' old. I imagined the lines of madness reaching down through the generations – tendrils snaring developing brain cells. If Rebecca were living today, would she too be diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder? Byron is said to have been bipolar – but how can you retrospectively diagnose such a thing? In the nineteenth century you were just mad. I wondered about the rest of Rebecca's story and whether her suicide was based on fact. How can you know when nothing is written down? All I had was one photograph but I knew I wanted to write her story. For five years I gazed at her face, wrote nothing, but kept a conversation going in my head. The blank pages reminded me of my memory and condemned me for my tardiness. And then I turned 37.

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It was summer but I couldn't remember the last time I had seen the sun. My daily journeys took me west before the sun was up, and east at dusk. I hardly noticed I was living in perpetual darkness. I went to see a doctor.

Such kindness.

She looked at me with concern, calmed me and prescribed a course of anti-depressants because clearly I was depressed. I should not have been so surprised.

Later my business partners were incredulous.

'We thought you just hated being here.'

But that was true as well. I couldn't tell them that routine was killing me; for who can live without routine? I couldn't tell them about the deadness – life for them was one long party. *Drink this; it will make you feel better.* And it was true – I just wanted to feel better.

2006

SHUFFLING OFF

As a consequence of falling asleep on the train I end up in Belgrave. I feel as if I could walk off the end of the earth in that place, at the end of the line. Long muddy trails and lonely shops force me to turn around and go back to the beginning. It was because I couldn't sleep last night that I fell asleep on the train. It was that song, the one that kept trailing around my mind – keeping me awake:

'Marry me–I may be a lie'[5]

Eliot never has problems sleeping; he doesn't notice me lying awake beside him all night. On my bedside-table is the picture of Rebecca. I put on the light and look at her face. She is so serene, so Madonna-like. Yet she worked hard all her life and her body was a tireless vessel for offspring. She had seven children and only two died – something of a miracle at the time. What was it that killed those children I wonder? Would I be the person I am today if they had lived?

I am in the lounge room searching for a clock; I just need to know the time. *Wake up!* Eliot is behind me pushing me awake. When I am fully awake I fall in time to the music in my head:

Marry me–I may be a lie

In the morning, at 6am, I put one and a half tablets in my palm and swallow them. The voice in my head screamed, *I just wanna make you feel better!!*

I wake at 8am and Eliot tells me I have already taken my pills but I am not convinced. Surely I should remember taking them. Maybe he was thinking of yesterday, or the day before.

'I heard you shuffling around the kitchen, in the bag, the pill bag, you've already taken them.' Eliot is already dressed and has started the car.

I wake at 9am, go into the kitchen and put one and a half tablets in my palm. I weigh up the possible side effects – less if I double dose. I will know soon enough. I swallow the pills and think about how small things can have such a dramatic effect. It suits me, this kind of muffled discontent. Double dosing is just the next step to madness.

The day passes slowly and I feel as if I am slanting downwards – the long spiral before final expiration. I walk backwards down the street and am reminded of the lines in 'Prufrock', 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas'.[6]

There is beauty in darkness after all. I recite the lines of the poem in my head, accents on each step I take – steps taken carefully to avoid the cracks in the footpath (don't break your mother's back!). I see the street as one long line of text, driveways as paragraph breaks, nature strips as margins. And I am the cursor on a blank computer screen.

Suddenly it is dark – I have walked the day away. There are people holding me up, arms under my arms, pulling me from where I have landed. I thought I heard screaming, a woman screaming, but it is only the voices inside my head. There's a strange shuffling, a pain above my eye where the blood is dripping onto my dress, and then people looking at me as if I have done something wrong. *Do you know your name?* Too many people are talking all at once. *How did you get here? Where do you live?* Who is this woman they are talking to? I look up at the sky and see my body float away. And then there is nothing.

As a consequence of falling asleep on the train I have been placed in a quiet room with a view across a park. My arms are held tightly against the bed with scratchy straps. I remember the needles, two jabs in my leg, and then calmness. When they finally take off the straps around my wrists I lie as still as I can. *Do you know where you are?* I see fear in their eyes. *Can you tell me what day it is?* I lie as still as I can and try to remember to breathe.

How do you know when everything changed? Is it three years after the event, during the event, never? It wasn't as if I didn't want to change; it was just that it was so hard.

2006

SEX KILLS

It was when the doubts began. I was reading a short story by Beth Spencer and was arrested by the lines, 'A man has unsafe sex while his wife's away and a woman dies, what's new? They were calling it the AIDS movie. It was 1987. The end of the weekend fling'.[7]

I remember the movie Spencer refers to, that terrible schlocker *Fatal Attraction*, and I also remember that feeling of loss, and the anger at being born a generation too late. In 1987 I was eighteen – my life as an adult had only just begun, but there it was, that fear. I was angry. I refused to be careful (risky behaviour, self-sabotage).

How many men is too many? At the age of 37 I count down backwards in an attempt to remember, but it's no use, I can't remember them all (anyway, half of them are faceless, no doubt because at the time I was *blind*). 100, 150, 200, there's no way to know. Is it true that I am a slut? A woman who preys on men? Was that even possible?

In 1986 I had gone to London and Paris and had missed a whole uncomfortable Australian summer. At the National Gallery in London I viewed paintings by Seurat and Van Gogh; no meagre reproduction could compare to the sight of a *brushstroke* on canvas. At the Tate I experienced holy rapture in the Rothko Chapel. The tears wouldn't stop for fifteen minutes. It was the first time I had prayed since I was a child. At the Louvre in Paris the *Mona Lisa* was partially obscured by the milling crowds and thick, bullet proof glass. I stood on my toes to catch a glimpse and was disappointed at how small the painting was – how insignifant and far away. Light and shadow reflected off the glass, its necessary prison, and made it difficult to see anything with clarity. The most famous painting in the world had been stolen in 1911 and Pablo Picasso had been implicated in its theft (was this true? Did the theft create the painting's fame?). Back in Melbourne, in 1986, Picasso's painting *Weeping Woman* was stolen from the National Gallery of Victoria by a group calling themselves Australian Cultural Terrorists, held for ransom, and found two weeks later in a locker at Spencer Street Station. The identity of the thieves was never discovered.

In 1986 the London streets were punctuated with billboards declaring in mile-high letters that SEX KILLS. The Smiths had just released the album *The Queen is Dead*, 'And now I know how Joan of Arc felt'.[8]

Everywhere I went people recognised my accent and shouted, 'Kangaroo!' in my face (and how was I so pale? Visions of that burning Australian sun). When I had my hair cut the hairdresser declared she didn't want to go to Australia as she had seen enough of it on *Neighbours*. I bought fur-lined boots in order to regain the feeling in my feet. I read *Wuthering Heights* on the train to York, sneaking looks out at the unfurling landscape. I drank warm beer in a pub in Covent Garden where all the bartenders were Australian. I did not have a romance.

There are pangs of guilt, of course. That poor crazy boy I slept with, once, in 1988. He phoned me every day at the same time for three months, and gave me handwritten poems dedicated to my *ethereal beauty*, and other nauseating platitudes.

'Why don't you tell him you've got a boyfriend?'
'But I don't.'
'Just lie, you idiot.'

But what happened to him? I can't remember. I moved to another share house, changed my phone number, never saw him again. Years later I found the poems tucked into a book, *the butterfly has died*. Why did I keep such things?

In my late teens I began hitch-hiking for the thrill (it always surprised me how many men drove around at night – just driving, just looking). I stopped after a group of men locked me in a car and threatened to rape me. Later, I would always sit in the front passenger seat when taking a taxi.

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In 2006 I am 37. I am reading a story about a woman who avoids jury duty by declaring herself an anarchist, ' … I just don't feel I can sit in judgement on another

person'.[9] The judge explodes in rage and ejects her from the court. I smile at the woman's courage. I had spent a life-time of being a 'difficult woman'; it gave me pleasure to know I was not alone. But of course I had been married at 31, hadn't I? Eliot had taken me in hand, taken me to the Isle of Skye for a civil ceremony in the front living room of the local celebrant – children's toys littering the front lawn. There are two photos of the wedding – I am wearing a 1940s black velvet dress and Doc Martin boots. Eliot looks old enough to be my father, but then, he was, wasn't he? Nowadays the age gap is not so noticable. Why had we decided to get married on the other side of the world?

I hadn't even thought about it (how is is possible for two people to decide to be together for the rest of their lives? Forever is a very long time). And then the thought of a white wedding was so repulsive to me it seemed only logical to get it over and done with in a faraway place – no ties, no witnesses (but of course there had been witnesses, but we had never met them before, and would be unlikely to ever meet them again). Some of my friends thought it was *so romantic*, but my mother was upset, 'Why do you have to go away to get married? Aren't we good enough?'

My poor mother, 31 years of worry, and now this. Wasn't it enough that despite all those years of declaring marriage a bourgeois affectation (better dead than wed) I was giving in, even if I was doing it on the other side of the world?

After the ceremony the celebrant handed us the marriage certificate in an envelope addressed to Mr and Mrs Eliot Ryan. That bald assumption – did I have the right to be so angry?

The Isle of Skye often features in my dreams. The Northern Lights, the Scottish dream. I am alone standing on a hill in Dunvegan. It is 10pm and the light has just begun to fade. I am cutting my black wedding dress into strips with pinking shears, the velvet cloth soft beneath my hands. I cut a shape into the soggy turf and press the fabric into the ground. I lie on the ground and watch the Aurora Borealis fan out in majestic waves. It is summer. I am alone.

2006

ELIOT

When I met Eliot I was twenty and he had just turned forty. His sisters had surprised him on his birthday in the morning and woke us up. They looked mortified (how were they to know he had recently found a concubine?). We moved in together after only six months and I never wondered why he had been so eager for us to live together.

Eliot was the youngest of eight children. His oldest brother had already retired. In our first year together I was mistaken for his daughter more than once. At the funeral of Eliot's father one of the uncles he hadn't seen for years winked at me and said, 'There's your dad.' I bowed my head and smiled my best good girl smile. I realised later that they knew nothing about Eliot, and I knew even less.

Married twice, Eliot refused to talk at length about his wives, and even less about the child he had left as a baby. His first wife was a heroin addict and a dealer. He said he had been fed up with groups of men breaking down his door in the middle of the night brandishing guns and baseball bats. *Fair enough*, I thought.

There was one photograph of his first wedding – he only showed it to me after I had begged to see it for two days. There he was, skinny to the point of emaciation, with Carla on the steps of the Town Hall. They both wore white capes, no shoes, a cigarette burning between their fingers. The year was 1969 – the end of an era – and the beginning of my life.

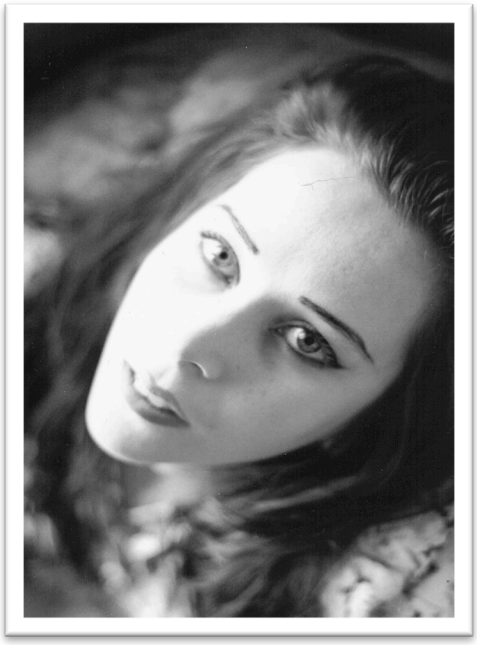
There was no evidence of the second wedding, or even photographs of his second wife. In fact there seemed to be no photographs at all of his life before me – the solitary wedding photograph seemed to be the only one. Was it is his *way* to let go of the past so easily? Was this something I could learn from him? It seemed strange to me, that careless renunciation of the past, as I had grown up with so many testaments to what had *been*, to how we had *looked*. It occurred to be that maybe the photographs *had* been taken, and then they had been taken away, or left behind, and that somewhere there was a box full of images of Eliot as a young man, as man reaching middle age – a man standing next to a wife or holding a baby. It seemed a

logical thought for in the first few years of our relationship he was constantly taking photographs of me – he was an artist and knew how to make me look my best (and I was young and youth easily creates a natural form of beauty).

As if he was making up for lost time Eliot used his camera in a combative fashion – wielding it as a form of punctuation in our lives – standing behind it and giving instructions … *just a bit to the right ... look up ... can you look at me ...* the camera clicking parts of my life, my face, my body, right onto the film. On weekends when the sun streamed through the windows on bright summer days, creating the perfect canvas for his art, Eliot would clear a space for me to lie or sit, and I would willingly oblige thinking that this was the highest form of compliment, this need of his to *snap me up*. Years later, when I looked at the photographs, all I could see was a young woman who was slightly uncomfortable in her position as the object of desire, the eyes revealing what I could not say at the time, something I would later say loudly and clearly – *enough*!

Sarah at 20

Sarah at 22



Sarah at 23

Do these photographs provide evidence of the woman I had been, or more ominously the woman I would become? At the time they were taken I had admired them for their artistic qualities – the composition, the lighting, the way they made me appear. Later I would understand them for what they really were: images of a young woman as seen through the eyes of a man (conventional flawless beauty with no signs of life). There is something missing behind those pleading eyes in all of the photographs – a blankness that tells the story of a disappearance. And I also realised that I was somehow complicit in these staged images – I wanted to be seen in this way. Who wouldn't wish to be a beautiful memory?

Eliot missed out on being drafted to Vietnam by the ballot – his number never came up. Of course he would have had contested pacifism as a caveat if it had ever come to that but the decision was taken out of his hands. He was always kind – a perpetual saver. I understood he chose women because of their need. And then when their need became too great he left. It took seventeen years for my need to become too great, and then he made it seem as if it was my idea to leave. On the day I left he drove away down the hill at 7am.

'I don't want to be here when you go.'

I took only what would fit into the back of a friend's car – the box of photographs, my books, records and clothes. I would buy a bed later. At the age of 37 I had ended up with almost nothing. When I looked at our house in the hills for the last time I felt no regret – that would come later.

2006
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

When I was a girl my mother told me that nothing was impossible. In a perverse way I took it literally and I just didn't believe her. I was resolute – no, it's not possible to live forever. Thoughts of mortality started early for me.

When I was eight I secretly searched my mother's room for signs of mystery. There were only stubs of old lipsticks in her bags and a 60s wig I never remembered her wearing. I couldn't imagine my mother as ever being glamorous – to me she had always been old.

For a child in the 1970s the future was not so certain. We had The Bomb to worry about (my mother had been a child of the 1940s in England – the bomb for her was plural and all too prevalent).

When it came time for me to become an adult, in the 1980s, The Bomb had been replaced by AIDS – the fear no less palpable. Peace marches were on the wane and we were scared of life itself. Bodies had become consumable items but we were urged not to use them.

The warnings on the white packet of pills I had been prescribed were quite clear that these too had the ability to kill. And not just from abuse. The effects would take at least two weeks to be felt; but the side effects would be instant. The list of side effects was long and ended with a disclaimer: *the side effects outlined above are not exhaustive*.

I spent two weeks in a state of numbness – not the apathy I had been feeling but an uncomfortable swelling that began at my tongue and travelled a path deep within. I was no longer irritated by loud noises – it seemed that nothing worried me at all. My mind was slower but my words tumbled out before I could assimilate them. Daily I painted pictures of other people's thoughts in my speech and witnessed looks of disbelief. Time, no longer linear and neatly parcelled, began to work in circles. The

journey on the train from Belgrave to the city seemed to take forever. And then one day the light was revealed. It was early autumn.

I was reminded, at that time, of the story of *The Little Mermaid*. In order to become a human the little mermaid lost the power of speech and every step she took was like walking on knives. She had taken the potion from the witch for her love of the Prince; but her handicaps rendered her powerless and her love remained unrequited. In the end she sacrificed herself for a man who was unaware of her gift. It struck me that this was not a story to tell children.

What puzzled me was that even though I had regained my speech it proved to be a serious handicap. And then my thoughts began a crazy dance of their own and in my heightened state of exaltation there seemed to be only one way through the tumult.

The medication, designed to help me cope with modern life, had given me a new sense of energy and purpose. Before, inertia had ruled my life, and if I did think of suicide it was too difficult for I lacked all desire, no care at all for action.

'Doctor's pills give you brand new ills …'[10]

The problem, then it seemed, was that I had become *proactive.* That double positive did not really reflect my sense of action, my sense of *being*. I began to doctor shop and built up a satisfying stockpile of sleeping pills – rectangular white packets that took up little space. I stopped drinking but then I couldn't sleep, so my statements contained a certain amount of truth, 'I can't sleep … I'm trying to stop drinking … I'm stressed … I'm …'

What was important was what I didn't tell those doctors – my only solace knowing I could snuff out my life in one easy gesture – like saying goodnight to your dearly beloved.

2006
FALLING DOWN IN THE STREET

The world is getting flatter/the sky is falling all around/but nothing is the matter/for I never cry in town.[11]

Tom Waits

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the main characters have two lives: one in the country, one in town. Mr Ernest Worthing, otherwise known as Jack, also has a past of which he has no knowledge. Travelling between town and country I too felt as if I had a double life, and a past that was pulling me closer to destruction. I didn't think it would be so hard to extricate myself from this bind.

Every night, after the hour-long train trip, I prepared dinner for Eliot and me. In English novels this was called supper. I would stand at the fridge, pulling out ingredients, seeing nothing but the calories, the sustenance. I saw nothing because I had started drinking at 4pm, then 2pm, then midday (that was OK surely, it was after*noon)*. I was adept at quick preparation, even if I could hardly see the food. Years as a cook in commercial kitchens made the slice of vegetables and meat precise – no trouble at all. Any slip with the knife would have to be deliberate.

I spent all day cooking food for strangers. In those days my dreams were suffused with images of endless orders and empty cool rooms. I emerged from the kitchen, at times, to see life going on around me. When I tossed hot pans into the sink I relished the hiss – the explosion. I was no longer immune to irritation. I wondered if my refusal to eat was tied up in sensory overload; or even disgust at the rich food I prepared every day for people who did not need the calories. Frippery was what came to mind. Everywhere you went people were eating – and demanding perfection.

Every day I saw the changes in my body, the way my clothes slipped across the hips I used to have, the stark bones straining to extricate themselves from my skin. I had attempted to change my mind with medication but I had reached a plateau and the numbness returned. Instead of food I ate pseudoephedrine and sucked at amphetamines – that wincing bitterness a salve for my emptiness. The drugs cleared

my head from the alcoholic excesses and allowed my body to function – until it finally collapsed.

Autumn was waning and I was late for the train. I hadn't noticed the receding light and as I ran, as best as I could, for the station in the darkening streets, I lost my footing. When my head struck the concrete I felt no pain. I lay on the street and continued banging that bruise, over and over, until blood obscured all sight. The screams I heard appeared to emanate from some far off position – the banshee inside me was revealed (step away from the mad woman).

The screaming continued inside the ambulance until two needles pierced the flesh of my thighs. *Hold her down. Stop her from moving.* Did I plan this loss of control? Did I feel better now I had gained some attention? Later, I wondered about that word *control*. Was it the body or the mind I wished to control? Either way I had failed both.

2006
WAKE UP

I lived in a house at the top of a hill with a sweeping view that began at Port Phillip Bay and ended at the Dandenongs. Owning the house seemed to be my greatest achievement to date. Every New Year's Eve my husband and I would stand on the balcony and watch the fireworks exploding all over the city. Eliot was afraid of New Year's Eve and was happiest when he could see me – my absence had been noted on many occasions. Eliot's past was forever catching up with me.

Autumn became winter and the days got shorter but the light within me continued to burn a slow and steady candle light glow. I thought it was this light that caused people to treat me differently. Eliot no longer had to pull me out of bed on the weekends to clean our immaculate house. His endearments of 'baby' and 'little one' no longer irked. I passed my time by fantasising about going back to University and counting the packets of sleeping pills I had accrued.

I allowed myself one small meal a day and became so thin I bought a pair of size eight jeans. If I caught sight of my reflection in shop windows I was disconcerted, but secretly pleased. I had thought the drinking was part of the problem, so I deleted that from my life as well. I was sure that I was now seeing clearly. I told everyone about my conversion. Happiness was achievable for all.

And then I started to forget if I had taken my pills and began to double dose. I blamed this on the early mornings and the repetition. Every day appeared the same – my actions performed by an automaton. It seemed that nothing had changed.

The mornings were the worst. Darkness crept over me as I went about the duties necessary to appear in public. I walked a stilted line and madness marched along with me – it was furtive and surly, and with insidious intent it took over.

Later, I read Janet Frame's autobiographical novel *Faces in the Water* and was struck by the way she described herself when she was released from the mental hospital and

lived with her sister. Her freedom did not last for she was trapped by a recurrence of her fear of herself. I had written down a quote in my notebook:

> I felt remote from the arrangements being made for me; as if I were lying on my death bed watching the invasion of my house and the disposal of my treasures and glimpsing through the half-open door into the adjoining room the waiting coffin – my final burrow milk-white web nest between two rocks.[12]

I too did not know my identity and saw myself as if from afar. They call this dissociation but I knew it was much more than that. How was it possible to continue living if this was what it was going to be like forever?

… and they lived happily ever after …

***

My house. My lovely house.

Eliot is lying on the couch. I want to warn him of his precarious position – don't lean too far back.

He turns as I say, 'I'm going to bed.'

'Sweet dreams, Baby.'

He doesn't see me. I can hear the television.

I'm all right. I know what I have to do.

I am wearing a black velvet dress with a collar of plastic pearls. I have only just been able to fit into it – the dress was made for a child of thirteen.

I take the pills in my fist and shove them into my mouth. The crunch is satisfying.

2006
AND THEN A PLANK IN REASON BROKE

I am not a mother.

Do not confuse this with regret, or even unrequited desire. To love and to be repelled reminds you of your mortality.

I am a woman who is not a mother but I have known what it is to love. Love can strangle you from the inside. Love can make you kill.

To lose the ability to love is like losing a beloved first born. Or so I imagine. Imagination has always been a curse and a salvation for me. In Brian Castro's novel *Birds of Passage* the narrator uses his imagination to bridge the gap between reality and fiction, just as he bridges the gap between Asia and Australia. We are left wondering. Castro's character Seamus (or was it Lo Shan?) was warned about this place, about his imagination, and to not let his reason collapse:

> The imagination had a secret way through the border. 'Stay away from strong imagination,' the doctor once told me. The imagination always forced me to act. Once that happened, reason collapsed as easily as unstrung chicken wire.[13]

I am not a woman. I am not barren.

Could I be that woman so full of grief it has left her broken and sprawled on the street? I carried around my identity, as most people do, neatly packed into a wallet. My bag had left my hand and skidded across the wet concrete. The items of my past were exposed, scuttling across the hard surface (was there yellow fog that night? Eliot is on my mind once again).

Kind people collected my things – put me back together again.

In the ambulance they dug at my fingernails and I flinched with pain. They looked into my eyes with tiny lights. They asked me questions but the screaming did not stop.

How can I tell them that this is not me – I am not this woman? Two pricks in a fleshy place – fast acting obliteration. Unconsciousness used as a balm for all that is not good. If I could see into that sleeping mind would it be residing in a sunny day in the bland 1970s – before the deluge? Light footsteps to check I am sleeping; a mother's cool hand. But that never happened. My memory is not unreliable – it cravenly pulls me to a much murkier place.

In hospitals time is used for medication and food. In Emergency the lights never dim. I wake to the sound of coughing and retching. Deep guttural retching – someone is dying. *Kicking the bucket.* A curtain separates me on all sides. I am on a trolley – a bed. Beds in hospital are not meant to be comfortable. I raise my hand to my head. There is a deep gash above my eye held together by a suture. A drip has been inserted into the back of my hand and taped down with white gauze. A deep bruise around the entry hole travels across the thin skin. I was always a bruiser. Shoes squeak on the shiny surface of the floor. Shadows pass across the thin curtains. The retching begins again.

I wonder if the rain has stopped.

I am not supposed to be here. I dare not take out the drip for fear of the blood.

A young man pulls the curtain to one side and closes it behind him. He asks me how I am feeling. Is he a doctor? To me he looks about eighteen. The sound of the retching makes him wince.

'You can go as soon as you talk to the counsellor. Can someone pick you up?'

I think of Eliot at home eating a bag of lollies and watching the television (what time is it anyway? Maybe he is in bed sleeping).

'My husband.' But I know Eliot would have been drinking and unable to drive.

I leave the hospital. It is 5am. Cars sweep past me in the rain. As I walk the cold wind cools the heat of the wound on my head. At the station I wait for the first train.

2006
A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING

There is a difference between clinics for the depressed and clinics for the sick. The clinics for the depressed are full of tasteful pictures and expensive furniture. The sick have to contend with plastic chairs and peeling paint. Of course you have to pay for the surroundings. The doctors are different as well. My doctor is large and carefully manicured. She exudes privilege. She has just finished telling me about her new diet and how she has lost ten kilos by cutting out cake. This is my first visit so I am telling her about my achievements and how they have never added up to anything much. Even suicide was a failure.

'What was it that made you finally decide to do it?' I can't see her eyes; she is bent over her notebook.

'Vodka.' I'm lying. Vodka was the reason I was not successful. I didn't realise it would save me. Excess had been my downfall – too much alcohol, too many pills – my body had purged all danger. I was always telling people I had the constitution of a horse. Think about what I had done to my body over the years. This strength could be seen as a good thing – I was not so sure.

'How long have you been trying to leave your husband?' I suppose she thinks she has hit the nail on the head.

'I first tried fifteen years ago.' She writes in her notebook and looks up at me. It can't possibly be a surprise.

'But I couldn't do it. He needs me.' She puts down her pen, 'So how do you think I can help you?'

'My husband wants me to get a psychiatric evaluation. He told me to come here.'

'The evaluation will not be cheap, but I can subsidise some of it.'

‘How much do you think?’

‘I can give you a flat rate of $1500, you pay no more, and we can look at memory and cognitive function as well. You will be lucky if your brain hasn’t been damaged.’

I think of all of the years of study, all those words, all those books, all that knowledge. And then I remember that I have to write everything down, all meetings, all the things people say to me. I just thought it was the alcohol that created those blanks. It can’t be my brain – it can’t be.

Then it’s the usual questions about my family, my childhood, my adolescence. How many times have I been through this? I feel like I want to have it all written down beforehand, and hand over the story for reading later. The past is not a comfortable place to be. I also carefully gloss and edit my indiscretions; the ones I find too hard to face. It’s too easy to apportion blame – it’s my life after all. Give yourself up, that what they say at AA, you are not to blame, and when you take away that sense of guilt you will become well again. But I cannot believe in a higher being – surely that is just the easy way out. I also failed at those twelve-step programs.

At the end of the hour my story has been reduced to the markings on the doctor’s notebook. She sighs and says, ‘Well, you seem to be an intelligent, hardworking person, but you’ve really managed to stuff up your life.’ I’m surprised at her bluntness but I am used to sledgehammer tactics. It smarts but I will wear it.

The sessions continue for a month on a weekly basis. One week I have a cap attached to my scalp and enter answers to various questions on a computer. Another week I answer yes or no to a set of 596 questions. How can you answer yes or no to a question like: *I believe all men are unfaithful?* I certainly don’t believe that, I *know* that is true. Or: *When I see someone I know when walking down the street I will cross to the other side to avoid them?* Surely that one would depend on who the person is. I try to answer the questions without thinking too much about them. First response – Pavlovian reaction.

At the end of the month my doctor takes me into her office for the final evaluation.

'Your cognitive and comprehension skills are in the higher than average scale. Perception skills very high. Your memory is above average. There appears to be no damage at all to your brain, in fact I would say you show signs of very high intelligence. And then the psychological test came back with the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. No surprises there.'

So it has come to this, I now have a diagnosis. I leave her office dazed and confused. What does it mean to be Borderline? Will the diagnosis give me guidance – purchase? I doubt I have the ability to make sense of such things.

I don't go back to the doctor. It's not just the money – I realise I just don't like her. Is that too a symptom of being Borderline? It seems I have difficulty with relationships. I am cold and calculating and somewhat narcissistic. Now I am not just the 'other'; I have a diagnosis to prove it.

When I tell my sister Freya about the diagnosis she urges me to get a second opinion. My big sister; she knows about these things. She works with Borderline cases – she doesn't see how I fit the mould. I can't tell her that there are things she doesn't know about me – things I have told no one. Everyone has a secret life; mine is overflowing.

'No, I've had enough Freya. What does it matter anyway? I can live with being Borderline … I think.' And then she says, 'It's a death sentence.'

I haven't told her about the suicide attempt. I really don't like thinking about it, that failure. It's enough that Eliot is monitoring my every move even more than usual. When I get home from the doctor I tell Eliot that I'm not going back to see her, and remind him I have a concert to go to that night.

'You can't go.'

'What?'

‘You can’t go, I won’t let you.’

I stay home that night and start drinking again. Between drinks I sing along to an old song,

> When all’s forgiven
> Still every fault’s my own
> I will take my turn
> To fight the bullfight.[14]

2006
KANGAROO ISLAND

> The appearance of Kangaroo Island, as we coasted along, was far from inviting; it was a very bold sandy red rocky shore, and hilly, with no appearance of verdure – nothing but a burnt-up brown barren land, with here and there a thicket of umbrage. To us any land was pleasing: but generally speaking, the farming gentry "pulled long faces."[15]
>
> W.H.Leigh 1839

How do you know when love dies? It was during the trip to Kangaroo Island that I realised Eliot and I no longer liked each other.

Eliot, as always, drove the car with certainty and restraint. The car had been a sore point for quite a while. Why did he need to upgrade every two years? He spent more time on research for the next car than for anything else in his life. His search for perfection was endless. Cars, like mobile phones, had become disposable, interchangeable.

Were we like those people in 1836 that had expected riches and lush landscapes from their new land? They had been *humbugged*. I had read about it in historical texts. They had been promised land to cultivate, new houses to inhabit, riches and good food. What they faced in 1836 was a hard and heartless land, tents and bark huts, high prices for rank meat and inedible biscuits – but the tail of the wallaby was extremely good in soup. Apparently the only happy person was the wine proprietor. The Promised Land turned out to be a dud (the fleas were enormous – the snakes rampant). Even the natives had been taken by force from elsewhere. The Aborigines knew Kangaroo Island as the 'Isle of the Dead' – they knew well enough to stay away if they could help it.

How many holidays had Eliot and I spent together? I had never travelled alone. The trip to Kangaroo Island was supposed to settle me – to give me something to look forward to and connect me to *place*. It was where the Australian connection of my

story had begun. Maybe if I walked on that soil I would be able to feel *something*. Would Rebecca appear to me in a dream on that island? (I had her picture in a silver locket around my neck.)

But the dreams did not come – just carnage on the side of the roads and the strain of hours of silence and dry heat.

The cut above my eye had almost healed, my face a mottled yellow and light blue where the bruising had abated. I covered the bruise daily with makeup and hoped nobody noticed. We met few people on Kangaroo Island – the ferry had been full. Where had all the people gone? I imagined they were like some kind of intrepid Victorian explorers and had disappeared into the hinterland – never to be seen again. Was this what I was doing? Driving along the scrubby roads of Kangaroo Island, with a man who was becoming a stranger, on some sort of unlikely pilgrimage? I realised then that I had been disappearing for years.

getting smaller every day …

We stopped at Kingscote Museum and I spent two hours talking to the attendant. We were the only visitors. The attendant told me there was some proof that the Australian Aborigines had lived on Kangaroo Island some 10,000 years ago – before the ocean had separated it from the mainland. She told me there was quite a bit of mixed blood in the KI 'natives'; however, this had always been a sore point in the population – better to claim Italian background, or even New Zealand Maori – to be part 'abo' was seen as somehow dirty and very low indeed. It was only in the last ten years that some people were discovering and celebrating their Aboriginal backgrounds. But then the ancestors of these people had been stolen from the mainland and Tasmania – none were true KI Aborigines. There was a story that the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigine had died on Kangaroo Island, a few years after Truganini. Could this be true, I wondered, and what would it change if it were? Does the definition of genocide stand within the ruling race? The attempted watering down of the blood of the Aborigines that started in the nineteenth century had created the problem of the half-caste. Best to get rid of all the poisonous blood – *stamp it out*. Do we know better now or are we just some offshoot of Social Darwinism?

Could I be so bold as to compare my story with those people from so long ago – people who left behind everything to start again in a strange country halfway across the world? What did Rebecca have to do with me?

I didn't find traces of Rebecca on Kangaroo Island, but I found a tiny grave under a tree by the side of the road. A small white cross made from timber with a name, Sarah. I realised that Sarah is a common name, but it raised my hackles just the same. She was twelve years old, a young woman. I imagined her dressed in white muslin like an extra in a Peter Weir film, and then felt foolish. Was my search for Rebecca's story just another manifestation of romantic urges? Did I have the right to unearth her?

On the ferry back to the mainland we strained at the balustrades to catch a glimpse of the sharks. There were many sweeping along with the ship. I imagined it would have been treacherous in the nineteenth century to escape from Kangaroo Island, even in a boat, and impossible to survive if you swam.

SPIDER

I Who Want Not To Be[16]

When I was a child I would calculate the age I would be in the year 2000 but I could not imagine myself as a thirty-one-year old woman. It seemed impossible, to me, that I would ever reach that great age or that I would ever be a wife or a mother. My mother would laugh at my childish ways and say with a certainty I found annoying, 'You will change your mind when you get older. You don't want to end up a lonely old woman, do you?'

In the year 2000, after the wedding in Dunvegan, Eliot and I spent a week in London and visited the newly opened Tate Modern Gallery. As we crossed the River Thames and walked towards that bleak, imposing structure, I remembered Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its concluding line: 'The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.'[17] It was a lovely summer's day, the river was not dark, but I could not escape from the memory of that story and its sense of foreboding.

As Eliot and I walked up the stairs of the gallery and into the foyer the light that streamed through the glassed in ceiling blinded me for a second. The large expanses of that reclaimed power station spoke of the industrial past and created an understanding of the weight that history can hold – of its pull, its expression of the importance of place.

As we walked beneath the large bronze sculpture *Maman* by Louise Bourgeois we were forced to crane our necks to take in its height, to see the giant spider in all its grotesque detail. Entranced, I stood right in the middle of the spindly legs, looked up as far as my neck would allow and noticed that below the body of the spider, thirty feet in the air, a sack of eggs was visible. I shuddered at the thought of all those baby spiders and quickly walked away from under its spell. How had the artist done it, I wondered, how had she made me feel like such a child? Was it fear? Was it the sculpture's gigantic size? Whatever it was it was certainly not a comfortable feeling. Later, I read that Bourgeois had created *Maman* as an ode to her mother, but to me

this did not explain the fear I had experienced on that day. Surely mothers should not be so terrifying.

In an attempt to make up for 'running away' to get married in Scotland I wrote long letters home to my parents and my sister. In each place we visited I bought postcards and sent them dutifully with one sentence messages:

> Here in Inverness we stayed in a B-and-B called 'Witch Way' and had a second 'pagan' marriage ceremony in which our legs were tied together with a rope and we jumped over the witch's broom!
>
> Dunvegan is a very small town on the Isle of Skye and the lady who owns the B-and-B we stayed in was delighted to be asked to be a witness at the wedding.
>
> London is not how I remembered it, very unpleasant and the people look awfully stressed, but the Tate Modern was amazing but I don't think you would like the art Mum, it's all very ugly and quite disturbing.
>
> We visited your old stomping ground in Camden Town, Mum – it's all boutiques and wine bars now, I imagine you wouldn't recognise it.

The postcard I chose from the Tate Modern Gallery to send to my parents depicted the painting *Nocturne Blue and Silver – Cremorne Lights* by James Whistler, a study of the Thames in blurry blues and luminous yellows. The river, in this scene, appears tranquil and benign with the lights of the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens faint in the distance. I knew my mother would find the painting beautiful – just as I knew she would find the contemporary pieces in the gallery distasteful, even shocking. As Eliot and I took the escalators in the Tate Modern to the levels housing a myriad of art from the twentieth century I imagined how my mother would react to the sculptures, paintings and installations. 'I wouldn't want that on my wall, would you?' 'That can't be art, surely, it's like a slap in the face!' It reminded me of the times, as a teenager, when I would appear from the bathroom and the look of dismay on my mother's face. 'Make-up is supposed to enhance your features dear, not stand out like that …'

Looking back I assumed she meant that make-up is not supposed to be *seen*, but it was the only way I knew how to be noticed (and then I was leaving the house looking like that and disappearing from the family).

As a memento of our visit to the gallery I bought an exhibition pamphlet with a photograph of *Maman* on the cover. The photograph must have been taken on a busy day at the gallery as a large group of people are gathered beneath the giant spider as if they are insects congregating beneath a monstrous termite mound. Next to the picture was a short statement by the artist: 'A work of art doesn't have to be explained … If you do not have any feeling about this I cannot explain it to you, I have failed.'

Just before we left the gallery I stopped and turned to take one last look at the sculpture. From a short distance it appeared somewhat less threatening, but as we walked back across the River Thames I continued to feel its hypnotic pull as if it was stealthily following us both, ready to pounce.

2007
TIME CAPSULE

It was running for the tram that had started it. I didn't know it was possible to have an Ecstasy flashback. Something had slipped out of its usual place and connected with a neuron spark at the base of my brain – something akin to receiving the light.

The trip to the city was a delight I had never expected to have again. People were staring at me as if I was freak, but that was pretty normal. I had tried hard to dress demurely but it hadn't worked out that way. All of my clothes were too loose these days – they just didn't seem to sit right on my body. My body was revolting (this was to be expected; I was no longer young).

In the foyer of the theatre I paced, the thick carpet dulling the sound of my steps. I had always chosen sensible shoes as I knew I should always be ready for a quick getaway. I couldn't be sure but the Regent Theatre appeared to be unnaturally beautiful and I wondered if other people were being sucked in by its transcendence. I looked for signs in their faces, in their body language, but as usual nothing seemed to stand out. Everyone was dressed in black and I found this concerning, and then I remembered that this was Melbourne and nothing to worry about (I had chosen to wear a red scarf. Was this subversive?).

During the concert – a famous man alone at a piano and a not so famous man alone with a violin – I felt wave after wave of admiration for their audacious, self-referential wanderings. The music played around my brain until I could clearly see into their primal urges. I knew then that they were both playing those cold and distant instruments solely for me. It was an insight both profound and disturbing.

The famous man sang a line from a song I knew from long ago, 'Sonny's burning/ like some bright erotic star'.[18]

It reminded me of a dream I had had a week ago. The back of my head had developed a hole and a faceless man was fucking me in that hole – banging me in the head. *Fucked in the head.* I had heard it before.

It wasn't fair that my dreams were so vivid. I didn't even write them down, but they were still disconcertingly memorable. I tried not to read too much into the dreams, but the images were so plainly symbolic it was hard not to: A bucket of penises. Where did *that* come from? Packing and packing bags and bags with clothes (baggage? I had a lot of that). A penis sizzling on a barbeque like an overdone beef sausage. Now, come on, that was way too obvious. All that reading had left me a psychic wreck (some would say psychotic but who's to quibble about a couple of letters in a word?).

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

After the concert I went to a bar where I hoped I might bump into someone I knew. In Melbourne crossed paths were a constant threat. I supposed I looked all right but I couldn't be sure because every time I looked into my pocket mirror all I could see were my enlarged pupils. *I tried to tell them not to cut the drugs with acid, if I wanted acid I would have asked for acid*, I thought each time I snapped the mirror shut – each time I reapplied lipstick to my dry lips. Was I mumbling audibly? First sign of madness some would say.

The bar was peeling in a studied way. Designer grunge. The people in the bar had an unsophisticated sophistication. They probably read too much as well. I imagined the man sitting next to me at the bar carried a small volume of *Leaves of Grass* around with him for comfort, and then realised that this was highly fanciful. Or maybe just a fantasy. What did men fantasise about? Nipples and crotch-less panties? All night bong sessions listening to *The Velvet Underground*? Come off it – that was years ago. I was getting old and out of touch. Huxley had written about *pneumatic women*. I had never been one of those. That was probably due to all the reading as well. The drugs did help, of course, but I was afraid I was getting to the end of my serotonin supplies – there was only so much a brain could take. Once again my body was revolting.

The drinks were going down too well. My hands warmed large sexy glasses of chardonnay – gone before I could savour them. Drugs made it easier to keep drinking without falling off your stool. *A drug is a drug is a drug*. What complete bullshit; they were all different. There was a time when I had thought the drugs were doing me

good, that they had opened my eyes. This was also complete bullshit – a sensibility leftover from some far off idealistic decade. Nowadays I topped up for sanity's sake. Thank God I didn't have to work as a waitress anymore, the shaking was getting out of control (even black clothes can show red wine stains).

In my youth I had taken to hitchhiking for the thrill. That wasn't quite true – it was a necessity, or so I had told myself. Once a man had showed me photos of his collection of his hand-made leather sex aids. At the time I had thought it was funny. I still had a lot of reading to do. Or maybe it was because my brain wasn't fully formed. Much later a doctor informed me of arrested development. Emotional development stops at the age of the first drink or drug. By my reckoning I was still 13 years old. Adolescence wasn't something I liked to dwell on.

If I were to open a time capsule from that age what would I find? This was something a well-meaning doctor had told me to do not so long ago. A cocktail umbrella? Glitter and scratch-and-smell stickers? Political cartoons cut out of *The Age*? Theatre tickets from the MTC? *As You Like It* was a favourite. Strips of black and white photos from booths at the station of half-formed faces – girls too young to be wearing so much lipstick? What would that show but a slightly more than privileged childhood and the self-obsession of teenagers that hadn't changed in decades? The doctor told me I was self-censoring. I didn't believe him.

But there was a photo I had found recently tucked into the back of a long forgotten notebook at the bottom of an old satchel I had used at school. On the back of the photo was written in my unformed hand, *Luke and Brett: 1983, Nth Melbourne.* The twins. Of course I hadn't forgotten about them but it gave me a jolt just the same. I hadn't forgotten their beauty either but I had thought it was just an idealised memory of teenage infatuation. But there they were, not exactly beautiful, but strangely compelling and sure of the power of their presence. Brett looked stoned, his eyes receding beneath his dark eyebrows – Luke was smiling in an almost coquettish manner. Saliva flooded my mouth as I looked at the photo. The mantra of the 80s had been *Choose Life*. I knew then I had chosen sex, and then I also knew that sex kills.

It was getting late and the people in the bar were thinning out. These days the only men who tried to pick me up were so obviously desperate it made me want to laugh. The week before a man had actually asked me: 'Do you come here often?' Walking clichés were the norm in my life now. I assumed it was my problem with projection. I talked too loudly – I said things that were on my mind without thinking – I had an *opinion*. Once, when I had been married, I had made the mistake of pointing out that when sportsmen celebrate and spray champagne over the crowd that what they were doing was ejaculating all over them. My husband had turned to me in rage and shouted, 'They're just celebrating! You read too much!' What was it about telling the truth that people hate so much, I wondered as I ordered another glass of wine. But then, of course, I knew from my reading that there was no Truth, God was dead and texts had become txts and were never worth saving.

Still, I had my memories, I thought. I had a stack of photos that I kept meaning to put into albums – just like families did. My husband had taken hundreds of photos of me until I turned 25 – faces, bodies, and landscapes of my body – portraits of the artist as a young woman. I had taken them all when I left. I left the wide screen television, the leather couches, the appliances he was always buying. Stainless steel marks too easily. We had spent nearly a generation buying and selling those houses. Onwards and upwards.

My husband's eyes were behind those photos; plotting and planning composition; moulding my planes and angles; lighting from behind. It was true the photos told a story, but it was a story that stopped at the first fading of youth and was told in a language of desire and loss. My husband had often reminded me that I would soon be wearing the first signs of age. Where was I at 28, at 32, at 35?

When I left my husband gave me a pair of jade earrings. They went with my eyes, or so he said. To remind me of how sad he was. But I also remembered those stinging words: *You ruined any chance for me to be a father …*

I had lost one of the earrings in the warm Pacific Ocean on a calm and peaceful day.

At closing time the bar staff turned on the fluorescent lights and began placing stools on benches. In the stark white light I glanced at my reflection in my pocket mirror. My eyes, no longer dilated, stared back at me. All that reading had caused a short sightedness that made it difficult to focus on the distance. I finished my drink, collected my things, and went into the street.

DEVILS MARBLES

In 1974 the world was full of mysteries and strange revelations. We lived on an island continent far away from the rest of the world. To a five-year-old child this island appeared to be the whole world. In 1974 my mother is holding my hand as we sit on uncomfortable plastic chairs as we wait for a connecting flight from Darwin to Alice Springs. We are waiting at the tip of Australia for a plane to take us to the Red Centre. Did I imagine, in my childish way, that we were dangling dangerously close to the edge of this continent? I clearly remember the feeling of sticky plastic beneath my legs and the closeness of my mother's dry hands. I remember the humidity and the rain streaking across the airport's windows. How could it have been so hot and so wet at the same time? Darwin in 1974 is close to near destruction – Cyclone Tracy will leave its mark in five months' time on Christmas Day – but my mother and I are merely transients on our way home from spending six months in England. In London I had watched television for the first time in my life – my five-year-old mind reeling at the colour and motion. 'Top of the Pops' was my favourite show, all that glitter and dazzle encouraged me to sing along to The Carpenters and ABBA and many other gorgeous men and women wearing white and silver. At home, in the house near Tennant Creek, we had two records: the musical version of Peer Gynt and a full-length album of Dylan Thomas reciting his poetry. The radio transmitted one station – a provincial version of high culture with 'Blue Hills' the only story, in fifteen-minute segments, available for the population of the 'outback'. In England it was another world – a world of fabulous spectacle and variety.

In 1974, after our six-month visit to her sisters, Ivy and Eileen, in London, did my mother regret returning to her outback home? I remember her telling me of her decision to emigrate to Australia from England, in the late 1950s, as part of a cunning plan to live somewhere close to the ocean. That she ended up living in a mining settlement seven miles out of Tennant Creek, a small town in the middle of Australia, seemed to me to be cruelly ironic, or even obscene. How many families were there on that settlement then? I only remember tiny details and blurry associations: the General Store where I once bought a packet of Imperial Leather talcum powder for my mother's birthday; the small stones and rocks our leathery feet kicked out of the way; the sharp spinifex that poked into your skin; the large expanses of bush we called our

backyard (but don't go beyond the hump, or past the old VW wreck near the creek, and never stay out past the *dying of the light*). Those early memories still retain, for me, a certain feeling of safety and wellbeing, as I had never known anything else except the red earth and the scrubby landscape. But there were other more uncomfortable memories. How could I forget the long seven miles to Tennant Creek hospital in the back seat of the Ford Falcon 500, lungs straining to catch a breath, the red earth seeping into each air pocket and squeezing them dry? How could I forget waking up in the hospital in the humidity tent that had drenched the sheets with condensation and the blurry outline of a departing nurse I could see through the semi-transparent plastic? It seemed I loved the earth but I was allergic to it.

Can I say for certain these memories are true, or even accurate? I do not remember leaving that mining settlement at the end of 1974 and travelling southwards to our new home in Melbourne. The brown family car we affectionately called 'Lizzie' was packed, I was relegated, as usual, to the middle of the backseat between my brother and my sister, and the road travelled forward in a straight line, right through to South Australia and beyond. In those days there were no seatbelts for people in the backseat – was there some danger that the car may roll on the soft earth by the side of the road? This fear relives itself in my mind as a vague memory. Or was it something I had been told over the years?

In the late 1970s, in the safe suburbs of Melbourne, there were bikes, roller-skates and skateboards that travelled safely over smooth bitumen. I spent hours sitting in tree branches in the park at the top of the hill and dreamed of being a child explorer back in the 'old country'. Our feet became soft and lost the memory of the harsh soil and pointy rocks – and we rushed home in the evening to watch 'Countdown' and 'Doctor Who' on the second-hand black and white television.

Sometimes, on a Saturday night, my parents would set up the projector and white screen for the family slide show. Here our past life in the Northern Territory would be projected in sharp relief – the 1960s and early 70s articulated as a series of bizarre but pleasing images. Who were these three children of varying heights standing next to a trail of tall termite mounds snaking off into the distance? Who was that chubby toddler wearing the netting around her head to combat the incessant flies? Did we

really play in the mud after the daily deluge? These glossy, highly coloured photographs spoke of a faraway land of long, flat expanses and strange natural wonders. Did we really visit the Devils Marbles, those curious boulders like some giant's plaything, and stand next to them to be 'snapped' in a testament to our existence? Sometimes I felt like I wanted to delve into my parents' minds to extract the 'real' memory.

There were the photographs in hardback albums from my parents' earlier life. I would pore over these albums, carefully turning the pages and read the neatly written inscriptions in white pencil beneath each image. *London, John and Margaret 1956. Oxford, Jenny and Milly 1957.* I recognised my parents' youthful faces but, to me, they still seemed like aliens. The black and white photographs finished somewhere around the early 1960s when my parents had been married in Melbourne. In one of the wedding photographs my mother looks out from the passenger seat of a white car, her face bright with expectation and joy. Underneath the photograph my mother has written in her old fashioned cursive script: *December 1962*, *I was obviously happy to be taken off the hook here!* I wondered, then, when I looked at that photograph, if my mother's dream of living by the ocean had been part of that ecstatic expression.

2008

SAFE ROOMS

Tragedy follows tragedy. At first the feeling is one of overwhelming despair. No one could possibly experience these things and survive. How can we sit here and listen to these stories and leave the same people? I want to get up and run from such emanations of desolation. Valium helps to keep me in my seat.

We are a motley group from a nearby detox. First timers are given a key ring – a form of remembrance to go with the tools for unlocking your recovery. This is the beginning of the way forward. It seems you have to go back, to make amends, in order to secure a future.

If you continue as you are you will surely die.

Of course they mean you will die soon, or before you are ready, or you will think you are ready before the Universe really wants you for fertilizer.

My greatest fear is leaving things untended. Who will sort through my things – my papers, my piles of journals going back 25 years? I would not wish that job on anybody.

In the rooms there is a lot of talk about being *clean*. Two weeks clean (applause). Two months clean (applause). Ten years clean (amazement – after ten years is there anything left to talk about?). At one year clean there is a cake. One candle is easy to blow out.

Cleanliness worn as a badge of honour. If you fall from this state, and become one of the great unwashed, there should be no shame. As we are told, we are not to blame; we must ask for forgiveness from a being greater than ourselves, we must give ourselves up to the Universe. We must get down on our knees and pray. We have a disease; it is out of our control. These mixed messages confuse me at first, and then I understand that the wisdom imparted in the Big Book is as flawed as any religious text. Our greatest sin was in our creation. Birth is the ultimate degradation.

Some of the rooms are large and full of people. It does not pass my notice that churches are often used for this purpose. There is a gathering outside before the doors are open and it could be any church service anywhere, except that there are far too many young people. Greetings and groups – salutations and cheek kissing. The general atmosphere is one of happiness – that is until it is time for people to stand up and recite their story. Where did all that time go? All those years, all that money, all those lives? *I pissed it all up against a wall.*

A young woman takes the stand and explains she is a sex worker. Afterwards I hear a man talking quietly to her, how she should not reveal this part of her life. It is for her own safety, he explains, you can't tell who is in the gathering, what motives men have for attending these meetings. Save it for the women's group, he says, or just don't mention it, no one needs to know about these things. In a place so full of humiliating revelations it appears there is room for silence.

We return to the detox and discuss what we have learnt. I look at all the faces of the people so anxious to become better. Most of us are optimistic about our chances. Valium can give you a false sense of security. Most of us will return to those meetings, those safe rooms, for two months, for two weeks, for two days, and then it begins again. I carry round my key ring like a talisman of good fortune, and then lose it, or misplace it – *nothing is an accident*.

2008
LADY JANE

How many detoxes does it take to make you better? When you become an old hand you can easily pick the novices. *Is this your first time? Why? Will I need to come back?*

The screening process is arduous and, at times, humiliating. Two hours of strenuous interview, just to make sure you are really in need of help. How much is too much? How much does it take to become an addict?

A plan is needed – a plan for when you leave the six nights in a safe house to cleanse the body – to be *clean*. We are told constantly that the detox is only the beginning – it cannot and it will not solve your problem. You will pass through the withdrawal process with benzodiazepines to stem the pain, sweat and tremors. You will be locked in from the outside for six nights, but you can leave at any time. But if you leave there is no coming back – not until it is time for you to apply again, and this time there will be more questions.

It is my fifth detox and I no longer feel humiliated with my return. How long did I last this time? Each time it gets shorter. Six months, three months, three weeks, two days. The first time I am given huge doses of benzos to start and the first two days slip into each other – a fug of impairment. Medication is given four times a day: a test for sweat and tremor, questions about where I am, what day it is, how I am feeling. Five little white pills, four, three, two then nothing for the last two days. We are encouraged not to smoke, but everyone does. They have taken away the chairs and tables outside so we have to sit on the concrete to smoke, or stand in desolate groups neg-raving. On day three I begin to notice the people around me.

It took Phil by surprise that when he suddenly stopped drinking two bottles of scotch a day he had a huge seizure and nearly died. He has been asked to remove his cap with the VB insignia. This also surprises him. Phil has been drinking for 25 years but has never considered it to be a problem.

‘I’ve never missed a day’s work.’

Phil doesn’t shake so much as vibrate.

Jane is a mother of three grown up children and works as a nurse. She lives in a large house with a gardener and smears lipstick on her cheeks in round circles. The benzos have given her a new sense of sexual energy and she leaves her door open when she changes. Some of the men have started calling her Lady Jane and snigger at her as she passes by with her pearls and neat bob.

Every morning we are taken to the local pool for compulsory swimming. The pool is shallow but each morning Jane dives in. We all scream at her, DON’T DIVE! And she looks up in amazement and says, ‘I *always* dive into pools.’

‘But you will break your neck!’

She smiles, ‘Well, we wouldn’t want that.’ And goes on swimming.

Jane’s plan is to go straight back to work, straight back to lunching with the ladies from her neighbourhood. I ask her if she has considered rehab and she says, ‘That’s for junkies, isn’t it?’ She has not told her family about the detox and I wonder how she came to think of it in the beginning.

With my question comes another realisation. It is time for me to consider rehab, only not quite yet. I need to go back to work, I know I can get better without help, I know that this time I can do it.

But there it is – that warning: *Beware of the Craven Mind Shaft.*

2009 – The Farm

CHANGING GEAR

We are travelling fast – faster than I have ever seen my sister drive. Her narrow hands are grasping the steering wheel in an alarming way. I can see that parts of her hands are turning white. We are late and we are lost. When we missed that turnoff and the road stretched far away ahead of us there seemed to be no return, a long line of unending road. And then another turnoff led us into some sort of imaginary land – surely this couldn't still be Melbourne? The names had no meaning in that place. We stopped at a shop and asked for directions. We were so far off course it seemed unbelievable. I thought I knew where we were going.

I want to tell my sister to slow down, that it doesn't matter if we are late, but I know it does matter, and I have never told my sister what to do. The Community call me on my mobile at the moment we enter the dirt road with the half hidden sign. I laugh at my sister's anxious face,

'They asked me if I had busted! God! We're only half an hour late!'

At the gate we are met by two women who ask Freya if she has any contraband on her and then look briefly into her handbag. I can see she is shaking; she is not used to being treated in this way. I think back to how many times I have been searched, how many times my things have been taken away from me.

At the office Freya signs a form stating that she is not a drug user, nor has ever been. We are given a cup of insipid instant coffee and the two women explain to Freya what will happen to me, how long before I can call her, how long before she can visit, what is expected of me. Once again I am reduced to a long list – but is it really me they are talking about? It is now my sister starts crying. I wonder if she is crying for the loss of my body – I am only an hour's drive away. I decide it must be for the loss of my soul. Or maybe it is because she is giving away her control of me. Or maybe this is what love really is.

Outside, Freya backs her car away from where I am standing with my two large striped laundry bags. We had spent the morning shopping for warm practical clothing: jeans, gumboots, rainwear – things I have never owned. The packing had taken ten minutes. What would I need? I didn't know – I've never known. Six of everything, Freya told me: six pairs of socks, six pairs of underpants, six tops, six bras. I would have been happier if it hadn't been six – I wondered why it hadn't been seven. I had chosen an armload of books from my dirty flat. The books were the only heavy part of my luggage.

The car is gone and I am left with the two women, Mary and Elizabeth. At the office they take my wallet, phone and medication and put it into a plastic bag with my name on a sticker. They count my money and put it into a separate bag. I sign two forms that give The Community the rights to my Centerlink payments and they tell me I can see the accountant during the week to finalise anything else. Mary lets me carry both of my bags and takes me to House One. Brick Veneer. Just like home.

Mary unpacks my bags and writes down everything in a notebook. Don't bother counting anything, I feel like telling her, my sister has already done that. Mary seems interested in my books, and then falters as she takes out my tarot cards.

'I'm sorry Sarah … going have to take these. We've had problems with these, beautiful though, aren't they?' She puts them aside. *No magic here then*, I think.

And then there is the photograph of Rebecca in its little frame.

‘Who’s this? Your grandmother?’

I take the picture from her hands and place it on the bedside table. For a second I think she is going to confiscate that as well.

‘Let’s just say she is an ancestor of mine. I believe she is, or have been told she is. ’ Rebecca stares at me from within her frame.

‘She’s pretty, in a kind of sad way.’ I think that Mary is right and that she is also fishing for more information. *Don’t ask*, I think, *just don’t ask*.

Mary turns both the bags inside out and shakes them. I was careful this time and made sure they were clean. Brand new – no signs of life here. She gives me two pillows, sheets and a doona and tells me that most people do their washing on Saturdays. As she leans over me she looks up and says,

'I can smell alcohol. You've had a drink today?'

I haven't had a drink or anything else for ten days and feel that she should know this. Maybe my clothing is steeped in it. Maybe she has a vivid imagination. I shake my head.

'Still, need to give you a breathalyser, just in case …'

We walk back to the office and Mary chatters to me like I am an old friend.

'Everyone's gone to the snow, pity you missed out on it; they'll be back this arvo. The place is so strange when it's empty, you know, quiet, it's not normally quiet! At first you may find it hard to live with 40 people, but you soon get used to it.'

As I am walking with her I wonder where my strength came from to come to this place. Was it the idea of living on a farm? All those animals, all those plants. I hadn't thought about all those people. Right now it is perfect – a quiet outpost of a Melbourne suburb, a small farm surrounded by trees they call the forest.

I am left to myself for the afternoon. *Just don't go past the fences.* It will be the last time I am truly alone for six months.

2009 – The Farm

COMMITMENT

In the first two weeks in The Community your status is clearly one of transience. There are so many rules you have a 'buddy' to take you through them. Boundaries are hardly metaphorical in this place. Cardinal Rules are the easiest to remember, as are the consequences. *Do not cross the cattle grid: Instant Discharge.* My buddy is Neva, she's an old hand – she's been in The Community for two months. Neva's blue eyes are clouded by responsibility (or is it Seroquel? it's hard to tell). No contact with the outside world for ten days, and then you must book the first phone call. If you forget to book the call, or forget the exact time and day it's just too bad. This is the first step towards independence.

For two weeks I practise my speech for the commitment ceremony. Once again there are rules to adhere to. No pontificating it seems. *That's not how we do it here.* It's not the writing and delivery that's important – just winging it will do. But remember to be prepared, and answer all the questions in the right order.

It's an intimidating idea to be 'committed', and not just because the idea resides in responsibility – it's the word itself. A straightjacket is what comes to mind (or maybe Joseph Beuy's *Felt Suit*).

It all came out in the commitment ceremony. My life recounted as a series of small indecencies that eventually became catastrophe.

- My childhood – simple and unremarkable.
- The bland 70s. Adolescence – difficult and confusing.
- The Black 80s, as I liked to call that decade, as if it was a set in an Edgar Allen Poe story.
- The promise of adulthood frightening.

- Arrested development – still that fourteen-year-old smoking joints in St. Kilda with my disreputable friends.
- Marriage. All too much too soon.
- Madness. The ambulance bills were beginning to pile up.
- Divorce.

(Only madness could disrupt a full-time adult life of accumulation that took a single day to sort between the necessary and the pompous. Why did I ever think that things could make up a life?)

I had never felt I had fulfilled the idea of responsibility so necessary for functioning in society. Why did I fail to mention employment? Did I think I could get away with just being a writer? When will I have children? Now I was forty people had stopped asking. I had only married Eliot because it was something to do.

Of course I told them all about my slide into drug addiction (a drug is a drug is a drug). Wasn't that the reason for my self-imprisonment? I was surrounded by them – addicts – but now they were addicted to being *better.* Just like a carefully constructed text I had ticked the boxes – how much information could I give them after all?

Each week we are required to fill one page about how we are *travelling.* I imagine that I will have to stop mid-sentence when I get to the end of the page. It's all a matter of thinking ahead. At week two I insert a horoscope reading into my diary, and mention it briefly in my weekly update. I cite one section directly, with the understanding that I didn't actually write the words:

A discovery will help you take hold of the tiller of your life and steer your ship away from stormy waters, towards the shores of fertile lands.

Those cloying metaphors seemed to suit the jargon they spouted at every opportunity. And it indicated a certain amount of positive travel. Did it augur well for me then? So

much of what was in that pamphlet seemed to talk directly to me, about me, and yes, I wanted to believe it.

2009 – The Farm.
GRAND FINAL

At night I think about Australia in all its glory. We are allowed to watch television until 10pm on weeknights, apart from Wednesdays when a light from a television is enough to send a House to the stockade. This is a necessary part of the induction program – the knowledge of what constitutes contraband: chocolate, plunger coffee, rambunctious behaviour, a list not left in its proper place, too much naked skin, jam on porridge, dust.

At night I sometimes read Fitzgerald and find him wanting. In my youth *Tender is the Night* was one of my favourite books. I have brought it with me for succour, but upon re-reading I wonder about the way Fitzgerald represented women. Was it because of the age? *The Lost Generation* – The Great War changed them, the men. The women were left to accommodate the new generation – the weary lost souls, the disenchantment – *he was a shell of his former self*.

At night I read and watch the television with one eye. Annie nods off. Leah dances by herself in her room. Vanessa makes toast. Karen writes letters to her estranged daughter. Adelaide fantasises about shooting ice. There is unity in our solitude.

It is late September – that time of joyous anticipation of a weapon-less war (young men bursting with life, their flesh pushing out their shorts).

At Morning Meeting The Community discuss the Grand Final. There are promises of meat on the barbeque – rows of sausages and chunks of steak – and of course there will be banners and streamers (appropriate colours) and someone is going to bake a cake (with sugar). There is a suitable silence around what will be missing – *like a pub with no beer*. Volunteers are required for the cleaning and cooking. No one is going to miss this opportunity. I put my hand up for the cleaning but know I will not be there – I find this meagre subterfuge somehow satisfying. Should I write my name in the Awareness Book now or later?

On the weekend before Grand Final Day the art room is invaded by people looking for jars of paint and butcher's paper. I sit in my usual spot working on my contraband pack of tarot cards. Anthony has almost completed his self-portrait – a crucifixion of sorts, with angel's wings. Anthony has become used to my presence and no longer hides his equipment. He keeps up a steady conversation with himself in his head. Andy, Thanh, Vanessa and Adelaide jostle past me with their rolls of paper and cheap paintbrushes. Andy looks down at my work and asks, 'Who you going for?'

I fiddle with my pen before answering,

'I am Sweden.'

Andy's face is red in the afternoon light.

'What? Sweden?'

Anthony looks up from his painting and says, 'She means she is neutral.'

I wonder if Anthony is a partner this time – maybe he is Switzerland.

Andy knocks at his temple with his fingers and sniggers, 'Light's on, no-one home.'

I can see varicose veins on the backs of Andy's knees.

At dusk the art room is strewn with scraps of paper, open jars of paint and dried out brushes. Anthony stomps around cleaning up the mess. I leave for the relative quiet of the recreation hall where Neva and Chris are carrying out a dispirited game of ping pong.

There is no 'I' in team.

On the afternoon of the last Saturday in September I consider time and the nature of the tides. Time is only a concept, I concede to myself, as if this will exonerate me from its magnetic tug. This time of year, and the soaring hollowed out cry of the

crowd I would often hear from a distance, reminds me of my other life – my café in Richmond, the streets that suddenly became barren at the toll of 2pm, the detritus from The Game, men pissing in the streets, the staggered lurch towards gravity.

At The Farm it is also quiet. Is that a siren I can hear in the distance?

I am alone in House One reading *The Outsider*. This idiosyncrasy of mine is not entirely deliberate, nor is it without guile. It had only occurred to me that morning that I had not read Camus's book for over twenty years, and it was amongst the books I had hurriedly taken from my flat before I came to The Farm. The first paragraph had always seemed so clever to me, so memorable:

> *Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says*: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy. *Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.*[19]

It seems to me, that unlike Fitzgerald, Camus was not concerned with beauty, and that he managed to compress the threat of terror, the realisation of the seed of evil within us all, the alien, and the corrupt, in such a way as to make it comprehensible, but in no way palatable. And he did it with such economy, such duplicity.

> *Mother died today*

The words reverberate around my head until the sound of people returning from the barbeque remind me of my place, and of the time. I slip *The Outsider* under my pillow and join my housemates in the kitchen. It is my turn to cook dinner but I know no one will be hungry.

2009 – The Farm
VISITS

On Mondays the people from The Detox in town come to The Farm for a visit. They arrive in a small white bus in a swirl of techno music. Their faces are full of anticipation; there have been promises of meat on the barbeque (they don't care what sort), coffee and sugar. For some of them it has been ten days of herbal tea, vegetarian food and threats of discharge if found eating toast or cereal outside of breakfast hours. They imagine The Farm as existing in a kind of idyllic pastoral landscape where you are allowed to walk outside the buildings without a chaperone. The idea of luxury can take many forms.

For some of the people at The Detox this visit will cement their decision in committing to the rehab program – for the next step in their recovery. For some of them the outside world is still a threat and they long to be part of a family (one that doesn't come home at night with accusations of infidelity, or worse).

Before lunch they are taken on a tour and introduced to the members of The Community. House One is the first stop – a showcase of regularity and order. As they pass through the house they will leave a trail of mud and grains of gravel on the carpet. This is predicted and understood as acceptable – on Mondays this is not a reason for incurring a 'house awareness'. On Mondays the daily inspection is just a formality.

They visit the vegie patch, the chicken coop, the dam with its ducks and geese, Daisy the cow, and the goats who are due to give birth very soon. They are told about the garlic patch – the only cash crop – and the use of permaculture in all aspects of food production. This idyll will not be broken by capitalism. They step into the doorway of the shed where the machinery lies idle with the promise of manly power. This could all be yours, they are told, and you will gain skills in all areas of a working farm. They circumnavigate the portable classrooms and wend their way back to the recreation hall, and then the dining area where lunch preparations are underway. Today there will be sausages and lamb chops – and tomato sauce. They can smell the

meat cooking; for many this is an uncomfortable reminder of Christmas and the heat of an Australian summer.

They line up for coffee, shovel spoons of fine powder into small ceramic cups, and wait patiently to be given plates. The line shuffles forward. They have been warned about the effects of the caffeine: irritability, disordered thinking, cravings. Still, most will return for seconds.

On weekends the residents who have completed the commitment ceremony are allowed visits from suitable relatives or friends (no past drug or alcohol use, no time in prison). At Wednesday meeting they announce the upcoming visit and submit a plan. Strangers on site must be accounted for. There is always a bag search at the gate before they are permitted to pass.

It took a month for my sister Freya to visit. At least she knew how to navigate the roads this time. Freya brought pastries and plunger coffee that were taken off her at the gate and placed in the office to be collected when she left. *Contraband*. I thought that Freya imagined she was going to a *morning tea with the girls*. My unkind thoughts often disturb me.

I waited outside the office for signs of Freya's car. I saw my sister's dark hair as she climbed from the car and held out the supermarket bag for Mary to search. I smiled to myself as I noticed the way my sister kept brushing the hair from her eyes – a nervous mannerism we had both inherited from our mother. In the distance Freya's figure looked slight, insubstantial. I realised then how much I missed my family (but hadn't I always thought that 'family' should have been a four-letter word?). Freya, the overachieving older sister, the goody-two-shoes – my school days marred by the constant refrain: 'Oh, you're Freya's little sister!' I remembered with pain my five-year-old self searching for the consolation of my sister's hand in the schoolyard and the fear of the long day stretching before me without the comfort of my mother.

In House One Freya apologised for her lack of gifts, her hands spread out in frustration, 'How was I to know? Cakes? Coffee? You can't have coffee?'

‘We can have coffee but it’s the instant type, and it’s rationed, so is sugar, you get used to it.’ I wink, ‘There have been *incidents*, with plunger coffee.’

Or so I had heard – I imagined a scrappy fight, arms flailing, black liquid splattering the walls.

Freya stayed for an hour and talked about her three children (sport, exams, first jobs), and how our parents are *so glad you have decided to do something about your life*. I pictured my elderly parents in their modest house in the country, my mother’s incessant pots of tea, the sounds of Radio National in the background. I remembered with a wince the way my mother had grabbed my hand once, and asked with a plaintive plea, ‘You smoked pot, once, didn’t you, and you’re OK?’

On the way to Freya’s car I took her through the vegie garden to show her the spring onions and beetroots I had planted the day before. There they were, my offspring, waiting for the waters of spring to give them life. The day before, when I was digging in the soil, I remembered the lines from a song by Laura Viers – a song from the life I had left behind,

> Gonna dig a coal mine, climb down deep inside
> where my shadow’s got one place to go
> one place to hide …[20]

2009 – The Farm

ART THERAPY

There's about twenty of us in the class. Well, it can't really be called a class because it's therapy, but Janine is taking art therapy and seems like a teacher and treats us like we are eight so people start behaving as if they are eight.

Art therapy has been all about *shame* for the last month so it's nice to be starting on a new topic. There was a lot of smudgy charcoal when it came to *shame*. Janine is convinced shame is an emotion – I'm not so sure. Most people hate art therapy because they think they can't draw. It seems they are ashamed of their scribbling.

This week we have been instructed to bring along a couple of photographs of ourselves as a younger person or someone in our family. Most people have forgotten – this is what happens in classes. Annie says she doesn't have any photos – I imagine she burnt them in a funeral pyre. Janine looks worried and starts handing out magazines. The people in the magazines are beautiful, of course, except for the fat ones, and then they usually become thin at some stage.

I have Rebecca as a youngish woman, and myself as a teenager. Both my photos are old in different ways. The 1860s, the 1980s, it seems the same to me.

Because I can draw, people in art therapy envy me. I tell them that art therapy isn't about how well you can draw, that it's about how well you can tell a story. No one believes me.

Andy and Thahn are throwing bits of paper at each other. Janine separates them.

I wonder how long it takes for people to become adults again after their arrested development.

Take your photograph and imagine, if you can, how you feel about it. Is there a way you can put that feeling into a drawing? Take your time and really examine the image, really examine the feeling.

Most of us look down at our image. I take Rebecca and prop her up against a jar. I have looked at her for so long now her face makes no sense. All I can see are her hands. Those white, elongated tools. In my mind I scratch out the details, loopy dark marks, I don't want to see her eyes. I want to concentrate on the *chiaroscuro*, a term I recalled from my art school days – black and white and almost no shades of grey. I take my time with the drawing, as Janine has suggested. Other people have lost interest long ago and have started fidgeting and crumpling up paper. Then they start moaning again about how they can't draw, and how it's unfair, and then Janine reminds them that there is no instant gratification *in this place*. No one wants to work hard at futility.

It's not how I imagine it would be, my drawing of Rebecca. To me she appears to be disappearing into her heavy, black dress. The story I have told has not been successful. I know the story cannot be told with a drawing.

I put the drawing into my notebook before anyone can see it and pretend that my aim was to render my young face in clear tones of light and shade, this easy slide into psycho babble. It is a stereotypical image of 80s glamour, 80s needs, 80s desire. I had it all. I remember that stereotype was a certain kind of typography term, a word that has been sequestered and manipulated to fit another ideal. No one is called Gay anymore. I notice I have not included any background in the image and my younger self is surrounded by a great deal of space. Someone once told me she couldn't imagine me with parents. I wondered how she knew so much about me.

2009 – The Farm
MEETINGS

At The Farm there are two meetings a day and on Wednesdays, which is Community Day, it's pretty much one long meeting. On Saturdays, after morning meeting we are free until Sunday evening, where The Community gathers to see how many people have busted on weekend leave. It takes three months before anyone is granted weekend leave, and even then it can be problematic.

Wednesdays are when 'housekeeping' gets done and grievances heard. No work just long sighs and protracted backbiting. Since Wednesdays are Community Days girls wear skirts and make-up, and one house organises community dinner. On Wednesdays meetings begin after breakfast and, at times, go on until lunch, when a break is allowed, and then we get right back into it until the issue has been settled.

We will sit here until the person who stole the fish owns up.

We fidget and shift in our seats. I imagine that someone in the room had the desire to feed the many with one piece of frozen flake, but like alchemy had lost the art and cannot face the frowning throng.

At first I took my notebook into meetings and whiled away the time by doodling. Mary soon put a stop to that.

'What is it you are writing?'

'I'm not writing, I'm drawing.'

'I don't think that's appropriate in a meeting.'

I imagine she thinks I would have trouble walking and chewing gum at the same time. I put away my notebook and save it for the art room.

On Wednesdays we are not allowed back to the houses until 9pm. After dinner one of the houses organises The Community 'fun' – charades, singing, or musical chairs. Lack of enthusiasm during community fun is rewarded with an 'awareness'. The names of people who have an awareness are read out at Wednesday meeting and the Awareness Committee decides on a punishment. This is usually an essay of one page in length to be read out the following Wednesday. Accruing three awarenesses is rewarded with a closed meeting called *the kangaroo court*.

One Wednesday, after reading out his one page essay on tolerance, Anthony tells The Community he has feelings for Neva. Romantic feelings. Neva plays with her hair. Chris turns in his seat to face Anthony, who is looking down at his essay,

'Not again Anthony. This kind of thing needs to be nipped, you know, in the bud, as they say. Can't you keep your mind on why you're here? I think you need to write another essay on why The Farm is not a place for romantic liaisons. Neva, what's your response?'

Neva's face is red. She shrugs and spreads her hands out in front of her.

'Um, I like Anthony, but …'

Anthony and Neva will now be watched closely by everyone. I imagine that Anthony will take out his frustrations in the art room – deep gashes on the canvas, red paint and thick charcoal.

When Wednesdays are over we go back to our houses exhausted. I rub the day's words from my face, as I do every night, but Wednesday's story is stubborn and creates a welt between my eyes.

2009 – The Farm

ENABLER

Strange a woman will try to save what a man will try to drown.[21]

Tom Waits

The dreams began in earnest on the first week at The Farm. It could have been that I was surrounded by nicotine and it had seeped through my pores. I lived amongst forty people who were all heavy smokers. Nicotine can often create a chaotic vividness in dreams and they were so intense I often woke up in a state of shock.

I dreamt I fell asleep on the train and woke up in Belgrave – at the end of the line. When I got off the train, my bag heavy and straining at my shoulder, I thought I was still dreaming until I realised I was lost. In the distance I could just make out a sign with the words 'Laburnum Cemetery' but as hard as I tried I could make no headway, I kept getting further and further away. The light faded and the sign disappeared from view. I reached into my bag and pulled out tendrils of ripped black cloth. The cloth flew out of my hands – caught up in a sudden eddy of spinifex and autumn leaves – and trailed off into the sky.

I dreamt I crossed the cattle grid where I saw a rusty sign with tall black letters that spelled out 'Saver, Enabler or User? Sarah Lies'. I kept walking until the road petered out into a dusty trail and I was beside a small creek, the wreck of an old VW resting on its banks. I could hear my mother calling me and I was reminded of the warning not to stay out after the fading of the light.

I dreamt I extracted my teeth one by one with pliers and buried them in the vegetable patch, beneath the beetroots and spring onions.

I dreamt that I was alone in the Hall of Mirrors. I am a stark figure against azure brightness and lustre. The patina is peeling from the walls and the silver is crumbling from the surface of the mirrors. I see myself reflected in the mirrors from many different angles but my face is obscured – all I can make out is a black outline of my shape. I have become a sharp piece of cardboard, inflexible and brittle.

I dreamt that I am outside the house at Rebecca's farm in Cherry Gardens looking through the kitchen window when I see Rebecca kneading dough on the kitchen bench. She looks up from her work, brushes the hair from her eyes and waves at me. She mouths the words, 'It's nearly done,' and goes back to working the dough. When I woke I wondered who I was in that dream. Had Rebecca recognised me? Did she have a picture of me on her dressing table?

In my dreams I had forgotten how to remember the art of forgetting. In my dreams I had become exactly what I knew I was going to be. When I left my dreams I woke to a room I shared with Annie who slept in a Seroquel coma.

In my waking life I tried to find meaning in books, in words that resonated with the disjointed nature of my mind – words that could point to a greater understanding of my own precarious positon.

At The Farm my own words had dried up.

2009 – The Farm

IDEALS

On Wednesdays women are encouraged to wear skirts (not too short) and put a bit of effort into their appearance. Make-up often brightened things up. It had been a long time since I had bothered with make-up – the effort involved was just too much. And my face was no longer the canvas it had once been. Middle-aged skin has a way of repelling cosmetics. I would sometimes attempt a slick of lipstick but it always looked odd and reminded me that my lips were receding. And to think I had once modelled myself on the flapper – cupid bows and arched eyebrows. And where had the cheekbones gone? *All flesh* is *as grass*.

All this talk of brightness and effort made me wonder what beauty meant. What it meant to *have* beauty. I thought of how this possession would inevitably end in loss – would the memory, like the memory of hope, be enough?

The women I admired did not necessarily possess conventional beauty; some of them looked hard or worn, but I saw a certain beauty in their flaws. Why did this not translate to myself? Why could I not see beyond my own face? I could put myself amongst them, but surely this was an indication of fraudulent behaviour – or delusions of grandeur at least. My role models' faces and bodies had gone long ago; some had lived to old age, some had died young, yet their memory endured with the words and works they had created. The images of their corporeal selves could in no way explain their legacy. Those images spoke of a time vaguely remembered – now studied and dissected for meaning. Modernism has made way for the *post*. Can we put words into the mouths of the dead?

Colette and Jean Rhys did not consider themselves feminists but wrote elegant and complicated prose that challenged the accepted position of women in early twentieth century society. Virginia Woolf wrote *Orlando*, a 'biography' of a cross dresser based on her lover Vita Sackville West. Louise Bourgeois created unsettling installations and gigantic bronze spiders. Georgia O'Keeffe celebrated the vulva in her paintings. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* long before the second wave of feminism. Sylvia Plath's poetry resonated with a new generation of women. A collage of their

collected works would be interesting, I thought, but I knew I would have to settle for a collage of their faces – pure thought, an act of remembering.

During work hours the costume required is one of practicality. Feeding the animals, working in the garden, running the machinery can all be dirty work. Jeans and loose tops are ubiquitous – as are sturdy gumboots. On hot days shorts are often worn, but I have never owned a pair of shorts, not even when I was a child. Women are discouraged from wearing black or any clothing with images that glorify death (tattoos are just too bad, but covered up if possible). Men are discouraged from wearing anything linked to the army and violence. Discouragement is often translated as a demand for the clothing to be changed.

On the day I wore my day-of-the-dead t-shirt Chris came up behind me and asked, 'What's this then?' pointing to the skull on the back.

'A skull, of course.'

'Bit negative don't you think?'

'Actually, the Mexicans have a really great way of thinking about death. They celebrate it every year, and invite the dead back. One day I'll go there.'

Of course I meant I would go to Mexico. He looked at me and smiled but I could tell he wasn't convinced. Maybe he had seen too much death. Working with people like me often had that effect.

2009 – The Farm
WEEKEND LEAVE

At The Farm there is safety in isolation. Without the possibility of walking past a bar or a dealer or a hot spot or a friend with a stash the chance of busting is nil. You may lie awake at night thinking about a Bloody Mary, a needle or a line of coke but the only chance for self-medication is with a prescription. The prospect of going out into the real world is both exciting and frightening. Weekend leave is a must to prove your progress is on track. If you bust on weekend leave you must tell The Community. Urine tests will pick up marijuana or heroin after two days but traces of alcohol will dissipate in twelve hours. At the thought of busting you must ring The Community for support. If you find the stash you left at your mother's house you must ring The Community and destroy it. If you do bust on weekend leave you are grounded for six weeks before you can go on leave again, and then you are grilled by the Bust Committee when you return. The whole community turns out for the show.

It takes three months before you can apply for weekend leave. The application process is long and complicated. There are many forms to fill in – many steps to take. There is a training session on form filling – I liked to refer to it as the *Certificate In Bloody Complicated Form Processing.* One of the workers, Mary, Janine, Wendy or Chris, takes the session, always a small group of newbies – or *fresh meat* as they are sometimes called – handing out paper and pens, drawing large diagrams on the white board.

Timing is very important. You must be prepared. You are expected to have a finished leave application and plan to be read out at Wednesday meeting – any changes to the leave plan will need to be finalised by Friday. Days on leave are broken up into time slots and places to visit. The expectation is for attendance at least two AA or NA meetings. Plans for a junk food fest is frowned upon. Going to a concert is a sticking point. Museums and art galleries are considered relatively safe. Unfortunately there appears to be nowhere in the real world where alcohol is not readily available. You just have to do your best at *stepping away* from the bottle shop, supermarket, pub, café, restaurant or bar on your travels. Even going to see a film is fraught with

difficulty. You will also have to shield your eyes from strategically placed billboards. After a while you won't even notice them.

Visiting hot spots is out of the question. Visiting friends who you used with in the past is strictly forbidden. This makes it difficult to find sufficient people to visit. In some cases there is no one. Even your parents may be a risk (Enablers). You must understand your triggers. For some people that can be the real world. This makes weekend leave so very troubling.

Of course there's AA or NA. Surely those rooms are safe. And then there's always cake at the meetings. But then you have to watch out for chicanery from people who wish to take advantage of your weaknesses. If you are a woman do not mention you work in the sex industry. If you are a woman be careful of men.

After a while I began to understand why Anthony never took weekend leave. His weakness was his strength; but his strength was always working against him. When we met in the art room he would stop what he was doing and I would try for conversation. Talking about the weather would not do. Even strangers will talk about the weather.

2009 – The Farm

A DAY IN A LIFE

Living backwards means only/ I must suffer everything twice.[22]

Margaret Atwood

After I had straightened my bed, smoothing over any imperfections, I stuffed any leftover clothing and bits and pieces in the closet and closed the door. Annie was shuffling about the room – it would take her a long time to really wake up. I walked through the house to the kitchen. I was always the first to make breakfast and enjoyed the silence I had for fifteen minutes. I sat at the table, sipping coffee, and looked out across at the alpaca I could see in the distance, its neck and head bobbing up and down in unison with the herd of cows. I wondered if the alpaca was treated as family despite its obvious difference. A peacock was once again tapping furiously at its reflection in the large lounge room window. One day it will break that glass, I thought, and that would be the end of such a futile attempt to wrench the beautiful feathers from itself.

At 7.30 Ross came through the side door with bread and milk. No need to knock as a locked door at The Farm was considered a lack of trust. I wondered why they had bothered installing the locks at all; but there they were – all unused. I cleaned my mug and polished the kitchen bench. I had kitchen-cleaning duties this week. At 7.45 I pulled on my shoes outside the back door and crunched my way through the gravel to the common room for medication time. I stood in line and watched as people rubbed their eyes, or fidgeted, some with pyjamas dragging around their ankles – an indication of a certain kind of lateness. This morning Tamara was rocking back and forth on her haunches and pulling at her hair. Tamara was usually given a wide berth in line, or even allowed to go first. She had the look of a wild rabbit caught in a car's headlights most of the time. Phil was dispensing the medication, 'Number?' I noticed Phil was looking carefully at my arms. I had been taken aside before because of the red marks. I pulled my sleeves down and swallowed two pills and showed Phil my empty palms.

I went back to the house, took my shoes off at the door, and made sure there were no marks on the carpet or any items lying on couches, benches or the coffee table. The other members of the house were finishing breakfast, or cleaning skirting boards and the big mirror near the front door. At 8.00 we all made our way to the quadrangle for morning recreation. During netball I stayed as far back as I could without being obvious. I touched the ball twice.

At 8.30 we all went back to our houses to change. At 8.35 the bell rang and we all emerged from our houses like zombies from a B-grade movie and congregated in the common room for morning meeting where we would discuss the day's events and talk about how we were *travelling*. Everyone was so *self-aware* it set my teeth on edge. This morning Neva was excited about the goslings that had hatched and was going on about how they were 'so cute, so fluffy, so … *cute*.' She sat there sighing, clasping her hands in her lap as if she was holding one of those goslings. Her affirmation for the day was to be *kind* to herself. I tried not to look at her face – it reminded me of a sad horse, a cowering beast of burden.

It was Andy's turn before Neva had really finished, but no one seemed to notice. Today Andy was going to *let little Andy out to play*. I couldn't imagine little Andy. To me, he would always be that raging bull walking around the place as if he owned it. I avoided his path as much as possible. Andy's fat legs were like sides of beef. I could spot them fifty metres away.

It took half an hour to get round all the residents and as usual Anthony was last. To me there was something of a caged tiger about Anthony – a tiger ready to bite off the hand that tried to free it. Today Anthony read out his plan for weekend leave. He would be staying at his mother's house. Mary interrupted him, 'Do you think that's a good idea Anthony? Will she be prepared to make it safe for you?' He shrugged and went on. He was going to take a walk along the Yarra that ends up at the Children's Farm at the Abbotsford Convent. Mary looked at him intently and smiled before saying, 'You do know there's a bar at the Convent now? Will that be good place to go?' Anthony shrugged again and went on with his plan, outlining at what time each day he would phone The Farm, the people he was going to be with, how long things

would take. When Anthony finished he looked at Mary and gave her one of his tired smiles.

After morning meeting I changed my shoes for gumboots and went to work in the vegetable garden with the other residents still in the 'grounding phase'. No smoking, no going back to the house during work hours, no sitting around. There was always something to do – even weeding was important. I walked past the small dam where the geese and ducks lived. The newly hatched goslings were in a line following their mother. Geese were surprisingly violent, I thought, as two geese came towards me barking through their beaks, pecking at my ankles. I noticed a lone gosling in the middle of the dam. It looked so sad floating aimlessly on the water, its head hanging forlornly. Neva walked up, stood beside me and looked across to the lonely gosling. She clasped her hands together and said, 'We've got to do something, the poor little thing will die.' There were tears rolling down Neva's cheeks, but the tears only annoyed me and reminded me of how long it had been since I had really cried.

'We can't do anything Neva. It would probably die even if we try to save it.'

I spent the morning planting spring onions, stabbing the earth with my trowel, making hollows in the soil for new life. All around me people were kneeling in the dark earth or digging with shovels preparing beds for sustaining crops. It would be another three months before some of the plants would be mature, although the asparagus was already poking up succulent green spears, and little curly lettuces were expanding quickly. I had planted some of those lettuces and there was a certain satisfaction in their success, but I had always imagined I would leave my mark in a way less prosaic. Anthony came over to me with the daily comment sheet. I took the pencil and wrote *depressed*. Normally my comments were a bit silly, stuff about the weeds screaming as I pulled them out of the soil, or some obscure reference to T.S. Eliot – *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe*? Why was middle age such a scary thought? Anthony took the comment sheet and went on to the next person.

During lunch I was called to Mary's office. I tried to work out what it was about Mary's face I disliked so much. It had something to do with the way she smiled all the time. Mary shifted in her seat, closed her folder and said, 'I've been reading the

comment sheet, depressed; now that's not good. We take these things seriously here, so … ' *can't I be left alone*? I thought. Why must everything be *analysed*?

'It's this place, I don't know if I should be here.'

'Everyone goes through this Sarah, if you are thinking of leaving, and I think you are, take some time off, take the afternoon, write down the pros and cons, think about why you are here, you've only been here two months, you need to give it time. The Farm is here for you, it's not a prison.'

How many times had I heard it? The Farm is not a prison; you can leave at any time. You just have to remember that if you leave you can't come back. Simple.

'As I said, take the rest of the day off, sit down somewhere quiet and do some writing.'

I felt like I was playing truant from school. I imagined I was in the movie of my life in the starring role. Was that narcissistic? I chose a spot with a clear view of the five houses and the common room. I imagined Mary looking at me through a telescope from her office, her constant smile waning as she strained to focus on my image. A peacock came nosing around and started spreading out his tail until I could clearly see his bum dilating. The peacock danced around in circles shaking his Day-Glo feathers as if in a private courtship with me. I shooed him away. The peacocks were so beautiful, you loved them at first – and then they just became annoying. In the distance I could see Andy driving around on the ride-on mower. I rolled a cigarette and began to write. *People surround me, but I am alone. And I am bored.* I thought for a while and then put down my pen. No, there was something more, it was fear – fear that this was what it was going to be like for the rest of my life. Could I keep up this role – this pseudo-life?

At 1.00pm the workday was over and we all stood in line to give the twice-weekly urine sample. At first it had been embarrassing to piss in a cup with a worker watching; but I had got used to it, and had mastered the art of being neat – no spillage, no red cheeks. Once the plastic cups had been bagged, duly named and signed, it was

time for lunch. Plates of food were placed on the tables – large servings of something soul giving and nourishing. Jugs of cordial took centre place on each table, but I hated the sweet liquid, it reminded me too much of school camps and sticky childhood. In my other life, the only sweetness I had allowed myself was wine – as I thought about this I felt a pang of grief not unlike a yearning for a lost love. I couldn't finish the whole plate of food and was chastised for waste. Gluttony was acceptable at The Farm. Food was health giving; it had the ability to give back the love for life.

That afternoon the gosling died. They fished its little body from the dam and fed it to the chooks. Neva cried all through afternoon meeting and refused to speak. Andy told Neva to *get a grip*. Anthony read out an amendment to his leave plan. He had decided he wasn't going to take weekend leave – again. Tamara gave a staccato rendition of her day in the garden, and then finally, breathed. Mary tried to lighten the mood by becoming cross and reminding everyone of the barbeque planned for the next night. I found it perplexing that so many people were looking forward to the barbeque – I didn't see the point if there was no alcohol (just like having a party with different coloured cordial – make sure you don't mix your drinks). What was Australia without sport and alcohol? Somehow the connection never seemed to apply to me.

At 4pm we were allowed to go home and spend half an hour in silent contemplation. Most people formed small groups, talked loudly and made toast and ate it with thick smears of jam or peanut butter. I retreated into my room where Annie was already asleep and took out my journal. What I had written that afternoon didn't seem very substantial. I began a new page with the heading: **Drinking**. I thought that if I started to record the beginnings maybe I could see a conclusion. I thought that maybe I should start thinking of my life not as a film but a book. I had written a novel in my early twenties – I still had the manuscript somewhere. What was it I remembered most about that time? No, the feeling had gone – I was no longer that person. The page remained blank, just that accusing title – I could finish it later, maybe on the weekend. Before I left at 4.30 for the Wednesday night Group I made sure Annie was still breathing. Annie's absence would be noted, and no doubt she would be woken and dragged from bed for Group was compulsory. They can wake her up, I thought as I left the house. I didn't have the heart.

DRINKING

At the age of twelve I fantasised about being Sebastian from Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. Should I have been reading such things at such a young age? Nothing could stop me. At thirteen I read five Graham Greene novels and wished myself a life in the tropics sipping on gin and tonics. I saw these sad, burnt out cases as possessing the life I wished to have. I wished myself away from the blindingly mediocre life I had in the suburbs of Melbourne – there was no mystery in Balwyn in the early 1980s. The summers in the 80s seemed to be so much hotter. In my mind, at that time, I am a stick figure leaving a long shadow on Whitehorse Road – with the soles of my shoes sticking to the tarmac.

I had my first drink at church when I was eleven. Can I blame confirmation on this insidious introduction? Can I blame anything? But it was only a sip! The chalice was wiped for the next eager mouth and I was left to wander back and kneel at my pew. I did not wear white but the blue outfit my mother had made. I touched the synthetic cloth tentatively – it too was banal. I could still taste the wafer that had dissolved on my tongue. *The body of Christ*. How could this be so? Do words mean what they say?

Even then my faith was on the wane. Later, when I assisted the priest, I would watch as he sculled the consecrated wine and how his face was twisted with disgust (I had poured too much wine over the silver disc during the consecration ritual; my clumsiness had ruined his morning). Well, don't drink it, I thought – but it had to be done.

This clumsiness followed me for the rest of my life; I always poured too much wine into my glass. I was fascinated by the way it sang and made me buzz. Did I believe it had the power to absolve me?

2009 – The Farm

WEEKENDS

On my first day The Community confiscated my Rider-Waite tarot cards; I had only thrown them into my bag at the last minute, but this theft rankled against my idea of righteousness. They gave me a pack of the official Varuna Serenity Cards but this didn't seem to be a fair exchange – affirmations were just not my thing at all. I had spent years attempting to eradicate useless adverbs, adjectives and clichés in my writing – those cards with their pitiful and colourful exhortations on becoming a better person could only affirm my professionalism. I didn't think it was possible to learn to 'just be'; I probably needed to know who I was first.

In my mind there were other ways for self-affirmation, ones less loaded with individualism. The weekends were the time for introspection and socialising. I felt like doing neither (funny how those two things seemed to split each other apart). Dichotomies loomed large in the literature.

On the weekends after cleaning the house, which included wiping the skirting boards and washing the windows inside and out, and the general inspection had been carried out (no dust, nothing left on the furniture, no signs of individual items, all things put away, but I discovered no-one looked into the closets so I just stuffed everything in there and closed the door, all neat, nothing out of place, but definitely *in the closet*), we were free to do what we wanted until evening meeting on Sunday. Well, it's not true that we were free to do exactly what we wanted for that was most certainly forbidden.

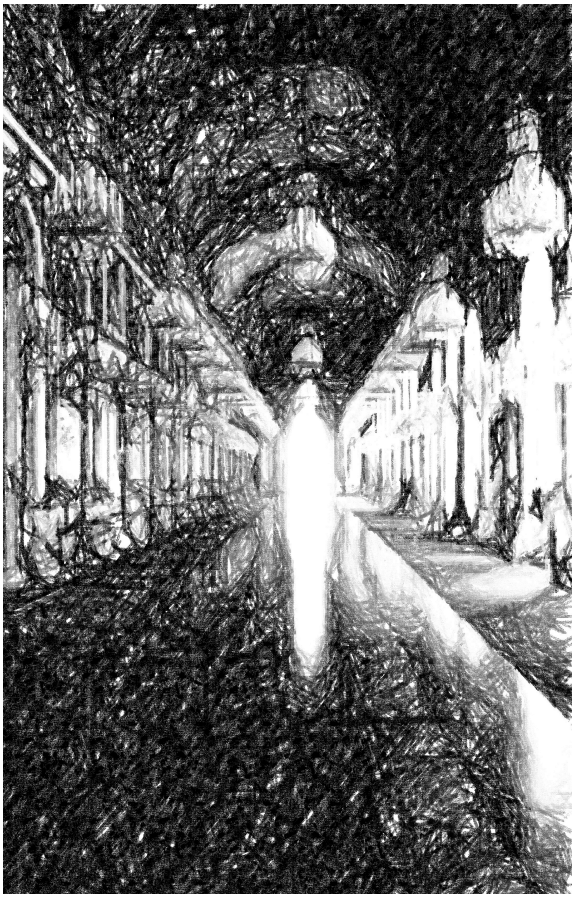
I spent the weekends in the art room, a place just like the one at my primary school in the 70s, an authentic relic as if it was transported there just for me and my memories of childhood. The art room was usually empty, except for Anthony, at times, who seemed to find my presence a nuisance. When I walked into the room he would quickly pack up his brushes and hide them in a cupboard. It's not as if I couldn't see him doing it – but it was an unspoken rule between us – you have invaded my space, these are mine and not to be shared. I gathered that Anthony thought of himself as an

artist – he certainly had the artistic temperament: prickly, too good-looking, lacking in backbone. Anthony walked around with a small dark cloud following him as he went from house to house, looking for someone to complain to. After six months at The Community he had yet to secure a weekend leave – self sabotage high on his list of achievements.

I too found myself good at self-sabotage – that excruciating inner voice that cannot be silenced. It took me a while to understand the difference between a 'quiet mind' and one that has been silenced.

In the art room on the first weekend I took out the pack of serenity cards and began to meticulously cover them with coloured paper, and then over the next five weeks began transforming them into tarot cards. I cut out images from magazines and created a set of eccentric but recognisably contraband material. No one interrupted this creative pursuit – not even Anthony. After a while it played on my mind, this clever procrastination. I should have been using my time in a more productive way; what I really needed to do was start writing Rebecca's story.

For the next two weekends I played around with the idea of The Hall of Mirrors with an old unused canvas I found resting against the wall. The drawing I had made of the Hall of Mirrors seemed to be good place to start:



I took out Anthony's stash of paints and began a version of what I remembered from a holiday Eliot and I had taken to Europe. For the three months it had taken us to drive through Western Europe I had felt more alone than any other time in my life. I was 25. I was no longer young but I was not old enough to understand the warnings – a silence that could not be filled.

The painting took up the next two weekends, but there was something wrong with it. Who was that woman in the hijab? Perhaps she was a ghost – maybe she was a prediction.

2009 – The Farm

WORK

Birth, School, Work, Death[23]

In a society where work defines a person it is of no consequence when used as a form of introduction. I am (insert occupation). Likewise it is of no consequence that women of a certain age are asked how many children they have (are men? Probably only by women). When you can no longer work do you lose yourself? Does childlessness signify a lack?

Work at The Farm is divided into hierarchies: grounding, exploring, finalising (what comes at the end is freedom, of course, but we could look at it like retirement). It takes months to pass the grounding stage so we scrabbled in the earth, our fingers tilling the soil of our explorations until we were seen as capable of more responsible activities.

At The Farm work can be seen as a kind of schooling. We are required to go back to the beginning to see if we can learn to work again, not the way we used to, for that was certainly what brought us to this place. No illegal activities; work should be useful to society; it should not suck out its energy. Even if you had a legitimate job on the 'outside' you are not permitted to indulge that profession on The Farm. They call it getting outside your comfort zone as if there was a chance of being comfortable in a place like that. The thought of comfort was only for the truly institutionalised. Since I had failed in acquiring either a career or children there wasn't much they could take away from me (do we count freedom? I was not in prison).

I arrived at The Farm in spring and the planting had just begun. Across the vegetable garden tiny lettuces were beginning their blossoming – little green edible flowers. I knelt in the earth and planted small shoots of spring onions and fledgling beetroots. I wondered at the time if I would see these vegetables mature and savour them in salads. Wendy called us her 'garden cherubs' and taught us about permaculture – a mixture of folklore and science. The earth, in the language of permaculture, was seen as the nurturer – we were mere facilitators in the process of creation. The people in this equation were seen as part of the sum of all of its parts – and in the end what will

be created is synergy. But could this synergy be possible with broken human beings living in a microcosm of a wasteful Western society? Once again dichotomies loomed large in the literature.

2009 – The Farm
SHOPPING AND COOKING

At The Farm each person contributes their Centrelink payments to cover accommodation and food. Basics like bread and milk are delivered daily, sugar and coffee are doled out every week to each house in big jars, and anything else we want has to be bought on shopping day. Each house is given a list from the supermarket with prices and spaces to be filled in. Each week the members of every house meet to put together a list with the expectation of spending within a budget of twenty dollars per person. This is much harder than it sounds.

House One is all female. I have been here for two months and am looking forward to moving to House Two where things seem to be a bit friendlier. But I have to earn my stripes – my awarenesses are stacking up. I imagine the difficulty six women have in making decisions about what to buy is because for most of us shopping is a far off memory. Annie becomes agitated when faced with the list; I wonder if she ever learnt to read. Karen takes over, wielding the calculator. Leah grumbles about the quality of the fish. Vanessa makes sure we remember to order vegemite. I've seen the way she spreads it on toast – thick, black nauseating smears. We eye each other across the table. I know what they are thinking: someone here is a pig.

The other difficulty is deciding on what we are going to cook for the week. A roster is stuck to the fridge, one person to cook each night except for Wednesdays. The Farm stipulates we cook three vegetarian meals per week, and a roster inspection is undertaken every Saturday. If the roster hasn't been done, or is not visible, the house receives an awareness. Leah doesn't eat meat and complains that we don't cook enough fish.

'But Leah, fish is so expensive.'

'It's the only protein I get!'

Leah is lean and very fit. She runs in the forest every morning. She is keen on health – fifteen years on the street using heroin helps her remember the frailty of the body.

This standoff goes on for two hours at least and I am tempted to rip the list from Karen's hands and take off with it. The calculator looks enticingly like a weapon. Annie starts shaking, Vanessa gets up to make some toast and we all depart to some far off room leaving Karen to finish the calculations. At least that's better than raised voices and slamming doors.

The shopping is delivered on Friday mornings and placed in boxes in the common room. The boxes are marked with the number of the houses – inevitably some underhanded swapping goes on. This pilfering will have to be dealt with at the meeting on Wednesday.

I imagine I will get used to the routine eventually – I may even begin to enjoy it and treat it like an exercise in the fine art of living – but the difficulties I have with the endless rules and the warring personalities surrounding me continue to remind me of my position. I am no longer the adult I thought I was.

On one Saturday, after I had washed the windows, vacuumed the carpet, wiped the skirting boards and finished writing up the meal roster, I walked back to the office to wait for my parents to arrive. I had given them clear instructions … *it's a difficult place to find … don't bring any sweet food – absolutely no chocolate or coffee … try to get here on time …* and I imagined my mother diligently writing it all down in her old-fashioned curly script.

They arrived in their new bright red sports car (when had they decided on something so incongruous? Surely it had to be a mistake!). My mother waved at me as my father drove around in circles looking for a place to park, her face tight with fatigue. When they finally emerged from the car I noticed with alarm that my mother leaned heavily on a walking stick, something I had never seen her use before.

'What's this?'

'Oh well, it keeps me from falling over!' and she laughed and stuck it out in front of her as if she was wielding a sword.

On the walk to House One my mother looked around her and said with enthusiasm, 'It's not so bad is it? It's rather nice.' I imagined she was expecting barbed wire fences and armed sentries.

'Yes Mum, it's very nice, but not so great if you have to live here.'

We sat on the balcony, looked out across to where the forest began, and talked about family matters. In England my Uncle Alfred had died after falling out of bed.

'You remember Uncle Alfred?'

'Of course I remember him.'

'He always had a soft spot for you. You were such a lovely child, so quiet. Remember he used to call you 'Stone Face' and 'Mouse'?'

At that moment I wondered if my mother remembered the endless battles between us ... *I'm not wearing it ... I'm not a baby* ... and the way she had grabbed me with both hands and screamed, 'I will not have you lie to me! How can you look me in the eye and say that!'

'I remember he used to sneak peas onto my plate and say I had to eat them all.' We laughed together at that faraway memory.

At the end of their visit, just before they backed their ridiculous car out of the car park and waved goodbye, my mother looked at me sadly and said, 'I thought you could do anything, you know, I always told you that.'

'I know Mum, I will always remember you telling me that, but you know, it's not over yet.'

2009 – The Farm

CHANGE

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –[24]
Emily Dickinson

After three months at The Farm I had become used to waking to the sound of the peacocks. I always thought it sounded like a woman screaming. This had been disconcerting at first. The peacocks shat on the landings of the houses; a white and brownish sludge that needed to be scrubbed away each morning. I felt sorry for the peahens that were constantly running from the attentions of the males. It occurred to me that the peahens had seen too much colour in their lives. Beautiful men were tricky.

It was time for me to think about applying for weekend leave. I considered my options. A weekend by myself in the city was appealing but too expensive. There were hostels and backpackers but I didn't relish the idea of sharing a space. I could stay at my sister's place but once again the thought of spending time with family was too much to contemplate. I could stay with Eliot and endure the silence of familiarity and the pain of lost desire. The letters Eliot had sent me were level headed and sparse and indicated a certain amount of blame. *Is it working?* I put off the application for another week.

Each week we were required to write a page – no more, no less – on our progress. I attempted to link this page with the biography of Rebecca I was supposed to be writing but I ended up just writing about myself:

Week Twelve

> Give me a child until ~~he~~ she is seven and I will give you the ~~man~~ woman. At the age of seven I would lie awake at night and fantasise about going to the kitchen to get a knife and stab myself in the stomach. I hoarded uneaten food in my bedroom cupboard and watched as the mould grew. I worried about the decomposing food. When ~~will~~ would I be found out? I created two imaginary

friends, both boys, who were suddenly taken away by their father who had a grey beard and hair just like Colonel Sanders (or was it Freud?). I would bang my head against walls railing against my mother. I ripped the heads off my dolls and made unholy coffins for them out of cardboard boxes. In a rage I took a pair of dressmakers scissors and snipped a piece out of every item of clothing in my mother's closet. I stole my mother's jewellery and hid each item carefully in the garden. I ~~spend~~ spent hours by myself up a tree in the park pretending to be the Captain of a Great Ship on its journey from the Motherland to the barren wastes of Australia.

At the age of fourteen I drank the un-consecrated wine from the vestry when the priest had left the room looking for his holy vestments. I would sneak out of my room at night and take the tram to St.Kilda where I would get lost in a dark, adult world (was anyone amused at my childish behaviour?). I took photographs of myself wearing blood red lipstick and black eyeliner. I did not look like my mother.

At the age of eighteen I lived in a large share house that had wallpaper on the ceiling, romantic attic bedrooms and a resident ghost I liked to call Bertha. At night the house seemed to sway in the wind as I would lie awake listening for signs of life. To me, Bertha seemed angry to be imprisoned in that place and I would wish a better life for her elsewhere. Sometimes all the doors downstairs would bang all night. No one else seemed to hear it.

Can I change? Is it working?

What all this had to do with my progress I did not know, but the life I was living on The Farm didn't seem all that interesting – nothing to write about. Was I allowed to be so revealing about myself? (surely that was the point, but it seemed to me that I shouldn't be writing about the *past*, for that was definitely *over*). What I needed to do was write a story. Maybe a rundown of the daily grind at The Farm would prove interesting after all. Maybe I could make it interesting. I would call it 'A Day in a Life' and sing along to the song in my head as I went.

2009 – The Farm

WRITING

After three months at The Farm I am still in House One. Vanessa has moved on to House Two and has been replaced by Adelaide. Tall, and famed for her beauty, Adelaide gives Andy back rubs in the lounge room until we point out to her that it's not really appropriate. She looks startled. I tell her she is being coquettish, but she doesn't understand the meaning and Andy says he's never heard of such a word. Andy holds sway. I can feel Andy's eyes all over me.

On the weekends I continue to retreat into the art room with my notebook, a hardcover sketchpad with blank pages that has travelled with me for three years. The blank pages make it easy to combine images with quotes and snippets of writing – ideas from my reading that I find interesting or strange. In it I have inserted photographs, images ripped out of magazines, little flowers and leaves I have found on my walks and fine art postcards I have collected over the years – all reminders of a past life. I take my notebook and extract some of the things I have collected, those images from another time. When I look at them what I see is a ghost. What I am searching for is inspiration and as I flip through the pages I notice a page where I have stuck a number of train station booth photographs of me taken in 1986, and under them a quote from Barthes: 'All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death.'[25] The quote makes me smile, after all this is the age of the 'selfie' – but the sight of the portraits of my young face gives me a pang, a feeling not unlike grief. That young woman, to me, looks so self-assured and strong but I can't help wondering where she has gone. (I have also noticed that I have started thinking about myself in third person –*at the time the picture was taken she was seventeen and about to take a plane to London*.)

I wonder what Rebecca would have thought about the vanity of the twenty-first century. We spend so much time snapping up the present we forget to live it. In the notebook is a scrap of writing I began as an exercise. I do not remember writing it but there it is – almost a soliloquy from another time:

My life is a box full of dirt: or The Burrow – 2006

> What began as vanity wrapped in gold foil, all bows and bouquets, has finished finally as a pile of thin paper, ripped into tiny pieces, each piece smaller than the other. There are people who surround me and ask constantly if I know what I am doing, all this delving into the darkness, the darkness of who I am. At one stage I thought I had made some progress, there appeared a dim light in the distance – but it turned out to be only the torchlight from some far off coalminer. A saw-like noise begins in my mind, distracting and sharp around the edges, it takes my thoughts from the dirt for a time, but the grit is beneath my nails and painfully rasps the further I go. When I close my eyes I see tombstones all in a row, uniform and pleasing in a restful kind of way. But without the sun my dreams can only be about greyness – not even black pervades this twilight. I take cues from another time, another world, from a place where things were definite and not so circumspect. Do I hear the words 'get with the times'? Do I dare disturb the Universe?[26]
>
> Now at the nadir of my despair I find solace only in my isolation. It takes all I have to remain in this state. I do not expect help from any quarter. All who used to surround me have been annexed to some far off ~~quarter~~ place. This is not something I could have foreseen. Many

have attempted to come near, but the wall I have been slowly building around myself is becoming strong and hardy, there is nothing brittle about my sanctity. Once, long ago, it was said to me that Jesus Saves and Blessed are the Meek, only now do I know the truth. So where do I go from here? All the signs point downwards – I can hear the earth calling.

I feel like I want to scratch that part of my life out and get rid of those unsightly words. I think that poetry could be the answer. Eliot comes to mind – why did it take me so long to leave him? My pen slides along the paper; it is like drawing.

PAGAN WEDDING

In Dunvegan
we jumped the rope
around both legs
which meant we
would never be
apart.

This
Ritual.

This
Rite.

An expression
of all that
is good.

An oracle observed
my ambivalence,
something I
could not see.

Beware of your
thoughts,
he said,
the oracle
with dragons winding
around his wrists

Beware of the
Craven

Mind shaft.

Am I being truthful? It is my story but I am unable to connect the myriad parts. Will poetry suffice for painful truths? Others have used poetry to prise open difficult worlds. Brian Castro wrote:

> Which of us has not brocaded the same tale? Who cannot admire the sheer daring of the confidence? I know that he knows that I know nothing of this is truthful. Truth is not the seduction and sceptics can never know the wondrous pearling around that grain, above all, the swirl of narrative within these oyster-worlds, the narrow narcosis of escape and the swinish nosing back.[27]

Will my words be able to make up for what has been lost?

2009 – The Farm
ESSAYS

> **Essay** (F *essai* 'attempt') A composition, usually in prose (Pope's *Moral Essays* in verse are an exception), which may be of only a few hundred words (like Bacon's *Essays*) or of book length (like Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and which discusses, formally or informally, a topic or a variety of topics. It is one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms.[28]

At the end of each week I fill in the weekly report. This is called an essay and is prescribed to be of *one page – no more no less*. I have spent a great deal of my adult life writing essays but they never looked like this. We are given two pages stapled together; one page that is blank for the weekly essay and one page printed with a list of everyone's names – all the people currently at The Farm. Next to these names is a space for a *neatly* written phrase that describes that person, *in your own words*. Each week I rack my brain to find a different description (am I allowed to be honest?). The weekly essay is designed to be a record of how we are travelling. I imagine suitcases, train tickets, packed lunches and catalogues from art galleries. But in this place you must not cross the cattle grid. The finished pages are placed in a box next to the recreation hall, to be read by a worker. I often yearn to receive a grade for my efforts, or any feedback at all, but none is forthcoming; once they are in the box they disappear forever.

At The Farm behaviour that is degrading, insulting, threatening or rude is rewarded with the compulsory writing of an essay. One page for a slight misdemeanour, two pages for a graver offence. This essay is to be read out to The Community at meetings.

At morning meeting Thahn reads out his essay, *one page – no more, no less*. He is young, barely twenty, so he writes about himself, 'I became a big fish in a small pond very quickly, I had girlfriends, they were all beautiful, and we lived in hotels, five star hotels, until the money ran out, and then they were after me, and it couldn't go on …'

We were all waiting for the meaning. Wasn't his essay supposed to be about *respecting women*? Chris interrupts Thahn just before he gets to the end, just when his mouth is about to form the words, *women have always been important to me* …

'What? What is this?' Chris points to the piece of paper in Thahn's hand.

'My essay, the essay I had to write.'

'Yes, yes, but what is it supposed to be *about*?'

'I had to write an essay on … on, the importance of women …'

'So, so, you wrote an essay about yourself?' Chris enunciates the words carefully, spits them out.

Thahn looks down at his essay and shrugs, 'I … I thought that …'

'Write it again. This is crap. Write another essay.'

Later, I talk to Thahn who is confused and upset.

'They want you to write an essay to see if you have *learned* anything, it's not supposed to be an autobiography. It's not supposed to be George Orwell.'

'But I did, I did learn, I know how important women are.'

'You're confusing the main idea; you were supposed to write about respect. How you show respect to women.'

Not the way you go around treating them like shit and *mouthing off,* I think.

I can see that at The Farm writing has become a form of punishment – a penance. They also call any form of writing an *essay*. No wonder people have become confused, I think, and remember my boxes of essays from all those years at

university, all those literary escapades. I remember that essay also means 'attempt'. *Do not attempt this at home.*

I have been at The Farm for four months but I have failed to start the biography of Rebecca. There have been many false starts, essays that begin with the words –

> She was born on Kangaroo Island, Australia's third largest island, in 183 –
>
> Her first memory is one of flight –
>
> She was the last child of six children, the only one born in Australia –
>
> At the age of 36 Rebecca gave birth to her seventh child. Later that year she drowned herself in the water tank on her husband's farm in Cherry Hills, South Australia –

The problem, it seems to me, is that I am unsure of what I am actually trying to write. I know I want to write about Rebecca's life, and to strip away that 150 years of silence, yet there is a nagging doubt hanging over me. In that connection I have made with the image of my ancestor, the one photograph I have of Rebecca, confusion exists. Is it possible for me to extricate myself from the story? After all, it's not supposed to be an autobiography. It's supposed to be a biography – factual, true. Do I have the right to make it all up? Surely that would be fiction.

The photograph of Rebecca can only tell me so much – I don't even know how old she was when it was taken. I imagine she was a young woman in her twenties, but even that is not clear. Her face is partially hidden in shadows and her expression is impassive – I wonder what she was thinking as she waited for the photographer to get ready. She appears to be wearing black and this could mean she was in mourning. It seems likely that in the mid nineteenth century photographs would only have been taken at important moments in a person's life. I wonder if the photograph could have been taken after her father's funeral, but if that was the case where is her mother and her siblings?

I take out my notebook and start a new page. An essay would not be right for this story so I try to imagine what Rebecca would tell me about that time if I asked her to write me a letter:

Rebecca Braddock
Cherry Gardens
South Australia
1872

Dear Sarah,

It has been a week since my father's funeral. It is not easy to lose a parent but it is to be expected and I know he will go on living in my memory. To lose a child, it seems to me, is not something so easily understood. I have five healthy children but I have lost a child and that seems to be so much harder to bear than sending off the man who gave me life. And what of my mother Ellen? Is she unhappy to be left in this way? I cannot tell for she continues with life as if nothing has happened – packing her things, tending to the chores, reminding me of my duty to my family. My mother will now be my constant companion and will share my house that is full of young life. Maybe this will bring us closer for I feel I know nothing about her life, or her thoughts.

We have just returned from Adelaide where we visited my eldest brother and his wife and family. My mother insisted we have the photographs taken in the studio in town. It is strange to see myself in this way – a flat image on a piece of card. Mother is not happy with her photograph and has hidden it away in the case she keeps for her precious objects. When I asked her about it she just said, 'It does not describe me so very well.' I imagine she feels it makes her look old. She is often disappointed with things. Perhaps I have been her greatest disappointment. I am not sure why I think this way, just that I have always found her difficult to please, and it could be seen that we are often at odds with each other. She tells me I am not very good at taking advice, but what I think she really means is that I am not very good at taking orders.

> These things will need to be addressed if we are to live together with any sense of harmony.
>
> My husband William often complains of my mother's stern voice and ways and this forces me to understand why I must keep so silent. Reticence and secrecy, it seems, are the only means in which a woman can live without fear of reproach.
>
> And I have some happy news. With death comes life. I have buried my father but once again I will be bringing another life to this world. I have not told anyone, and I'm sure that nobody has noticed yet; however, I am sure that this new baby will change everything. I look forward to this new life with all my heart. Surely this will be the transformation I am looking for.
>
> With love,
>
> Rebecca.

As I write I can hear Rebecca's voice as if it is guiding my pen on the page. When I finish I wonder if this is just another one of my fanciful notions – that Rebecca is talking to me from somewhere out in the ether. I feel pleased I have made some kind of start but I know it is not enough so I put away my notebook and concentrate on the weekly essay. I want to write a good introduction:

> This week marks a four-month hiatus. There is something in the way. I have to concede that it is myself. *Everywhere you go, there you are*.

2009 – The Farm

EXODUS

I grow old … I grow old …
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.[29]
T.S. Eliot

I left it to the last moment to tell them I was leaving. It seemed strange that over the last six months of learning new living skills my resolve appeared to be on the wane. I feared for the state of my convictions. They call it brainwashing don't they? The people there would call it questioning firmly held beliefs – as if this is a good thing.

That morning I took my packed bags to Mary's office and explained to her my reasons for leaving. Losing my identity didn't seem to be enough for her so I claimed I needed to get back to working, which was true enough. I knew the novel was not going to get written if I stayed at The Farm. The look of disappointment on her face made no impression on me, I had seen it too many times already. It was my failure after all, but she didn't seem to understand the importance of my writing. I needed to write; at The Farm all I could do was think and my thoughts had become scattered – caught up in other people's desires for my future. Mary reminded me, while she was filling out the discharge forms, that I had failed to achieve the aims set out at the 'commitment ceremony' five months before. This, it seemed, was her major area of concern.

What had happened the day before – the standoff between Andy and Chris – was still on my mind. Were threats of violence enough reason to cement my decision? The threat was sounded out loud and clear, not just some idle talk in the recreation hall. No *neg-raving*. That's what they always told us – no detailed discussion about drug use, about prostitution, rape, abuse – but that was what it was all about – or so I thought. Threats of violence equal instant discharge but not before the interrogation.

A fence of trees surrounded the outer edges of The Farm that delineated acceptable wandering. The day before I had taken a walk to the edge of the forest. Boundaries were everywhere in that place. Don't isolate. Don't become too attached to one person. No sexual relations but use the condoms in the bathrooms if you have to. No

threats of violence, however small. No lighting of fires on the property. Tinder dry leaves spark easily. Do not cross the cattle grid. Instant discharge. No return. When you leave this place you can never come back. To leave this place denotes recovery or something worse – a realisation of failure. Don't leave before your time, and know when that time has come.

I felt like I could have stayed there forever. A flattening out of all feeling drove me away. Did I really believe that?

I packed my bags and cleaned out my half of the room I shared with Annie. I stripped the bed and put the sheets in the washing machine. Someone else would have to hang them on the line. I left the books I had read, my bags were already too heavy for me to carry easily, and gave my Doc Martin boots to Karen. The boots were never comfortable and gave me blisters. I vacuumed the carpet beside my bed and found the earring I had lost on the first week at The Farm. Eliot had given me the earrings – jade and silver. A pale green like my eyes, or so he said. I had always imagined my eyes as hazel. Was I ever really that green-eyed beauty he wanted to put away in a heart-shaped box? You couldn't say I was a beauty anymore; not with what I had done to myself.

Mary drove me to the station and handed me my remaining medication, my phone and wallet and the forms I would need for transfer of income rights. The Farm would no longer be in control of my meagre savings – I would be free to spend as I wished but I would no longer have a safe bed. This compromise a small liberation at what could be seen as a conclusion – I preferred to see it as a beginning.

2009
PORTRAIT OF A LADY

The train was full of people travelling to the city for what I assumed to be recreational reasons. There were many loud, competing conversations full of joyful laughter and most people were wearing casual clothing – brightly coloured t-shirts and sandals. It hadn't occurred to me that it was the weekend and it took me a while to realise that indeed the sun was warm, or that is was summer at all. I felt hot in my jeans and unduly hampered by the large bags taking up the space around me. The bags were difficult to manage and I wondered why I had packed so much.

At Flinders Street Station I found a phone box, my notebook with important numbers at the bottom of one of the bags, and called my sister.

'Can you pick me up? I'm in the city. I can't carry the bags, they're too heavy.'

Freya sounded startled. Why hadn't I warned her? When had I left The Farm? What was I going to do now?

I sat on one of the bags, waited for Freya and watched the stream of people who passed me by. Everyone seemed to walk as if they had somewhere to go.

The drive to my flat brought with it an uneasy feeling of release. I knew the streets, they looked familiar – surely I could navigate these places on my own. Freya looked different. Was there something she wasn't telling me?

My flat looked the same – only somehow smaller, older. A layer of dust after six months was to be expected but I was not ready for the disorder and the obvious lack of care. Had I really lived in this way?

We unpacked the bags together and Freya carefully folded my clothing and put each item neatly into the bedside drawers. I placed the books onto the shelf where the gaps revealed my absence and wiped away the offending dust. Freya fussed around in the kitchen, found some old tea bags (when had I bought those? I didn't drink tea) and we

sat on the tiny balcony that overlooked the car park. The taste of the black tea, acrid with tannin that sucked all moisture from the mouth, reminded me of a poem, 'I smile, of course,/ And go on drinking tea'.[30]

Once again Eliot was on my mind.

When Freya left, promising to return with some bread, coffee and milk – the things I would need to sustain my life – I began the slow process of shaping my flat into some sort of order. I wiped away the dust of six months, rearranged my books into genre, stripped the bed of its dirty linen, bundled the sheets into a pile and stuffed them in the cupboard.

In the lounge room, on the small mantelpiece above the gas heater, I placed the framed photograph of Rebecca next to the crystal ball my parents had given me for my twenty-first birthday. The crystal ball, a beautiful sphere of clear glass, was one of the only mementoes of my past life that had survived the many moves and houses. The fear of it slipping from my hand and shattering on a hard surface was very real for the clumsiness that had followed me from place to place seemed to be getting worse with every year. The photograph of Rebecca looked lonely all by itself so I searched through the box of photographs I had of myself, the ones I had always planned to put into an album, and chose the only one that seemed to offer me any form of recognition. It surprised me that I was thinking in this way. The photograph showed a blonde girl of about ten smiling straight into the camera. To me, there appeared to be an aura of hope and strength behind that smile, and it seemed fitting that this image should be taken out of its box and given a prominent place on the mantelpiece next to Rebecca. As I stood back and gazed at the tableau I had created I wondered how it was possible I could see myself in this relic from the 1970s when I couldn't recognise myself each time I looked into the mirror. Why was it that the other photographs, the ones Eliot had taken, only reminded me of what I had lost? Was it possible I could detect a resemblance between the image of Rebecca and the school photograph of myself? Just like every time I looked into the crystal ball, searching for some kind of sign, I knew I was stretching the possibilities of reality. I wondered how long this desire would continue – this desire I had for these pictures to bring us both back to life.

When Freya returned, after she had prepared a simple meal of soup and toast, we began to clean the kitchen as best as we could. I had always planned to buy the right equipment: a mop, a broom, a vacuum cleaner, but all I had was a small brush and pan and a few dirty tea-towels. As we scrubbed the kitchen floor Freya talked about what was best for the foreseeable future, with the constant interjections of ‘that can’t be right’, ‘no, I’m sure that’s not right’, while all the time I was thinking about lying down somewhere very dark and becoming lost in a long and languorous sleep. The bed would need to be made. I didn’t have the energy.

That night, when I was finally alone, I lit a tea-light candle and placed it next to the two portraits on the mantelpiece. The candlelight flickered around the curves of the crystal ball and for a second I imagined I saw a shadowy figure in the dense glass but it was only the distorted reflection of a part of Rebecca's face. I washed my face, stretched out on the unmade mattress and waited for sleep. Did I imagine that Rebecca would appear to me in a dream and tell me her deepest secrets?

There were no revelations that night, just a troubled sleep and fragments of dreams that kept coming back to me throughout the morning: the slamming of a door and a shout, the constant ringing of a doorbell. I opened the door but there was nobody there. I ran up the stairs to the laundry on the first floor and found a man hiding behind the door, waiting. When I turned on the light he looked me in the eye and said: 'Are you alright?' The sound of someone walking on gravel. A whisper in my ear: 'Do you live here?'

In the morning I took out my notebook, and in a way to dispel the night's wanderings, began to read the last entry, just beneath the letter from Rebecca:

> This week marks a four-month hiatus. There is something in the way. I have to concede that it is myself. *Everywhere you go, there you are*.

As I read that last entry I wondered why it had concerned me that I was getting in the way of writing about Rebecca (or was I getting in the way of my recovery?). Surely there was a commonality between us I had failed to acknowledge – and that connection had helped me get through the last two months at The Farm – and, eventually, to leave.

I began a new page and started to write what I thought of as a soliloquy. The voice of Rebecca was easy for me to imagine:

Still Life

> If I am secretive it is just as well for no one should know what I have been thinking. I should have recovered well by now for it has been two weeks –

William has already started preparations for the reaping, my mother is looking after the younger children, my niece Hattie has taken over the baking and other domestic duties – but all I can do is lie in this bed and think of everything that has been taken away from me. I cannot eat and when the doctor visits he is very stern with his remonstrations. How can this be? How can I watch the life going on around me when all I want to do is to disappear? Is it that I am afraid of growing old like my mother?

I tell them that all is well and I feel much recovered. I make promises to rise in the morning and eat something sustaining. I make promises to myself to begin a better life – to be of some use and not such a burden. But every morning it is the same – I cannot face the brightness of the morning sun.

For two weeks I have been having the same dream. I am making the daily bread – my hands are covered with flour and my hair is falling into my eyes. As I knead the dough I look up and see my youngest child, Mary Elizabeth, waving at me from the kitchen window. Her face is clear and young and she mouths the words, 'When will breakfast be ready?' and I reply, 'It's nearly done,' and then she is gone.

When I had finished writing I took the dirty sheets out of the closet and stuffed them into one of the empty laundry bags. I quickly took the steps up to the laundry on the first floor and turned on the light. There was nobody there.

2010

DEAD END

> A room. A nice room. A beautiful room. A beautiful room with bath. A very beautiful room with bath. A bedroom and sitting room with bath. Up to the dizzy heights of the suite. Two bedrooms, sitting room, bath and vestibule.[31]
>
> Jean Rhys

I travel daily between work and my room in my sister's house. I imagine my life this far as not so much concentric, but as a downward spiral into some sort of archaism. I always thought I was practiced in the art of 'still life' or even an extended adolescence – not so much a journey as convalescence – but now, instead of coming full circle, I feel as if I have missed a step and have hurdled over myself into no-thing (am I thinking too much again?).

Unlike time, the list of my places of residence goes in a backwards motion: a husband and a house with a view of the mountains; alone in a box-like flat with a tiny balcony; a room shared with a narcoleptic woman; a room in my sister's house. It makes me think of a line from 'The Glass Essay' by Anne Carson, 'Well there are many ways of being held prisoner', and those gloomy Sundays I spent as a child with lunch heavy in my stomach and the warbling sounds I vaguely knew as *Opera* on the radio. Anne Carson describes herself, in the poem, as a woman who thinks she has lost the ability to love, or at least has been destroyed by love, and is fed up with her mother's ambivalence, and the way she just keeps on *living*,

> … my mother said to me recently.
>
> Why hold onto all that? And I said,
> Where can I put it down?
> She shifted to a question about airports.[32]

It was a poem I had read while at university. It had made me sweat with envy at the writer's voice, at the way it had forced a stream of tears to mark the copy paper – tears I quickly hid from shame. In the poem the writer's sanctum was exposed – a

revelation of obsession and loss of control over the mind. I wondered then, as I turned the pages, if I would ever be able to risk such boldness myself.

I have a room but it is not my own. When I returned to the world, after the six months at The Farm, my meagre savings had dwindled and my flat was no longer affordable (and I was no longer safe, the front door hanging off its hinges, broken in two by angry feet). I packed my books and clothes, gave away the tired appliances – one bar fridge with a broken freezer door, one television I bought to watch movies, one antiquated stereo, one set of B&O speakers that had fallen off the back of a truck in the 1980s – left the small dining table and frayed second-hand lounge chair on the street outside my flat, before taking my futon and bookshelves in several carloads to my sister's house. The grubby carpet betrayed my presence – I didn't have the energy to get it cleaned.

Daily I ride my bike to the hospital, dispense the food I have been trained to heat, stop at various pubs on my way home, and listen to the life going on around me. Twice a week I bleach and wash my chef's jackets and iron them in the mornings (it is the first time in my life I have ever ironed or bleached anything). At night I eat dinner with my sister and my sister's three children before retiring to my room to 'think'.

What I think about at night is the life I have left behind. The times I think about are ordered into boxes in my mind that are labelled 'yearly holidays'. These had been times of stability. At the age of 27, when I had travelled to Tasmania with Eliot, could I have imagined the life I am living now? What had been so memorable about that visit in 1996? There was Hobart, picturesque and urbane, Launceston, parochial and noisy. There were the giant trees along the winding roads and the endless history that countered deeply held insecurities. New Norfolk, where we had stayed for two nights, possessed the *oldest pub in Tasmania*, a place where those early pioneers who had been taken from one distant outpost, an island in the middle of nowhere, would have passed the time and thought about their lives on their new Island (would they have been happy about their new surroundings?). There had been Junee Cave where we had walked down a thickly wooded path, past a burgeoning creek, into a primeval landscape of tree ferns and bright green moss. In that place I had felt the presence of the past pulse and surge beneath my feet – its fingers brushing against my face as I

pushed through the foliage. But it was the memory of Port Arthur that has remained strongest with me, that gives me a reason to believe I had ever taken that trip. Two months after the 'massacre' it was no longer just the prescribed tourist destination – it had become a shrine to both past and recent wasted lives, to the violence that lurked beneath the quaint 'colonial' reconstructions. I remember there was an unspoken silence around what had happened only weeks before, but as we walked around that strangely ornate penal colony, and people snapped photos and talked amongst themselves, and the guides looked bright and cheery, I noticed that the dark blood stains on the wooden board-walks had remained. We tripped lightly over these marks to take the 'ghost tour'.

Sometimes I find long letters from my sister sitting on my pillow (usually in an envelope, but of course no stamp is required). The letters tell me all the things my sister cannot say to my face: how I am wasting my time, who I should be spending time with, what I really should be doing. The letters are always neatly typed and I cannot fault the punctuation or the grammar. After reading the letters I put them into the folder with my unfinished manuscript. In time, I think, the letters may prove to be useful – one day they may be part of the *historical record*.

One night, after I had finished thinking, I dreamed I was walking down the boardwalks at Port Arthur into the half-decimated buildings that held the prisoners. The rooms were small and carefully reconstructed to give an impression of life – a rolled up bed, a tiny desk, a set of authentic books. I took the path to the 'isolation cell'. The boardwalk creaked beneath my feet; I could not look down. At the end of the path was a door, partly open. My hands pushed against the wood and I stepped into the room.

When I woke the house was silent – it was late. I took out the manuscript from its folder and began a new page. I knew what I had to do. This time it would be Rebecca's story. I scribbled the words: *ULTIMA THULE (Paradise Lost)* and knew I had found a beginning.

2010

THE PAST IS GONE FOREVER

The Future Life group always begins with an affirmation. They have bought a laminating machine and spend a little time each week cutting out affirmations and insights to be carefully laminated. This, surely, will make them last forever. They pass around these bits of plastic covered paper and choose the ones they wish to keep. I pick out one that seems to strike a chord: *Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.* I risk a tiny smile, these insights and affirmations seem so stolid to me, so very obvious, but then I am being unkind again, and I force the smile to become sincere. I remind myself that there are women here who wholly believe these nuggets of wisdom – that they have helped them to end their terror.

When the women are all seated in a circle the group leader reads out her affirmation.

Today I am letting go. Tomorrow I will be free.

The women nod their heads and murmur sounds of appreciation. I wonder if this notion could ever be achieved. Freedom, to me, seems to be a risky business.

There are thirteen steps in the Future Life program. Unlike AA they are not afraid to gamble with an unlucky number. My favourite step is number five: *I am what I think.* It reminds me of that famous proposition by Descartes, and the title of my most recent short story 'I drink therefore I am', but the story lacks a believable protagonist and reads too much like a parable. I suspect that all the affirmations and insights are sucking out my creative juices (where would I be without the delete key on my computer?).

At Future Life there is no talk of politics or religion as these things, it seems, are viewed as impediments to recovery, or even the ubiquitous idea of freedom. Unlike AA there are no prayers, no deference to a Higher Being. At Future Life they believe that each woman is responsible for her actions (Step Thirteen) and that each woman is a sentient being with many imperfections that must be accepted (Step Six). God is

dead here. This is the main reason I continue to attend the meetings (however, I am not convinced it is possible to divorce politics from any social situation).

To attend the meetings we are required to be unaffected by drugs and alcohol and everyone blows into a breathalyser upon arrival. We are given our own plastic tube to keep – a strange memento of our sobriety.

Once the group leader has read out her affirmation she announces the step they will be following that day, 'Last week we looked at step six, *life can be ordinary or it can be great*. I think that's a good one cause we all know how *ordinary* life can be!'

The women all laugh and smile at each other, 'This week we will look at step nine, *the past is gone forever*, one of my favourite steps. Anyone want to start?' I put up my hand, 'I'm not sure I can get my head around that one, how can the past be gone when it makes up who we are?' The group leader nods her head vigorously, 'Yes, yes, we can't forget it, but we must not let it rule our lives.'

'Yes, but if that's the case then what I'm doing would be considered, in some ways, feeding into it, dredging up the past, writing about it, you know …' The group leader continues to nod, 'It cannot harm you if you are being honest, if you are writing the truth.'

I am suddenly uncomfortable as I remember the first line of the autobiography I have just begun: *I am a liar*.

'I don't think it can be as simple as that. I, for one, am constantly inventing the 'truth', I don't even believe it can exist as a concept.'

There I go again, making things more complicated than they need to be. The group leader will not be deterred and says, 'The truth is always there, we just sometimes fail to see it.'

To me, this statement sounds like another insight cut into a bite size chunk and regurgitated without thought. (or even something from an American television show,

The Truth is Out There.) I look around the room and realise I have lost them, again. Why would these women, whose lives are a daily grind, even a torture, be interested in concepts of 'truth'? I understand it is a folly to meddle with the here-and-now. *Mine is not to question why*. Best to shut up, I think.

The conversation continues in a roundabout way before returning to more concrete concerns. *Triggers*, that's it, that's what the past does. It has the power to trigger all those pressure points; it makes you run back to that toxic lover, makes you lie back and let it all happen again. All the women in this room are masters of self-sabotage.

The meeting is always concluded in the same way. We stand, form a circle, hold hands and recite the Serenity Prayer:

> Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
> the courage to change the things I can,
> and the wisdom to know the difference.

I know this prayer well, I am also aware that in this room the word God has been omitted. For this I am grateful.

2010

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Australia is in a state of flux; one could say it is almost teetering on the edge of *anarchy*. I sit down to write but there are too many words, and what do they mean anyway? Words *slip and slide* and eventually *perish*. There is no consolation for me in this understanding. I stare at my thin manuscript that begins with the words: *I am a liar*. I wonder if I will ever be able to show anyone the words I have written (or will they read too much into them?).

Australia is still reeling from the unconstitutional shafting in Canberra. I will always remember where I was that day – the day a woman (childless, unmarried, atheist, flame haired) did the unthinkable. I watched a soundless television screen in a bar in the city narrate a moving portrait of a change of leadership. Words translated into sound were not needed (how soon before those words would become *shrill*?). All around me people screwed up their eyes but they could not look away.

It is the beginning of another spring and a year since I took that trip with my sister to The Farm. All around me things appear to be changing, and I remember yearning for that change, for that metamorphosis – but was it enough?

My new job as a cook is the same as my last one in title only. In my new job the title explains almost nothing. As a 'cook' in a public hospital I rarely pick up a knife except to slash open plastic wrappers or to prise open the lids on catering size tins. I adhere to strict guidelines and keep track of temperatures, noting the result from each meal down on charts designed for clarity – for safety. The menu rotates on a fortnightly schedule. Each day there are two mains, three different vegetables, mashed potato (made from combining a dust like substance with hot water) and gravy. I pick pre-packed, peeled and sanitised food from freezers, cool-rooms and dry-stores before steaming, boiling and baking to create balanced, bland meals. I lift lids from heavy steel containers that emit cloying odours (what is it today? Beef Stroganoff or Chicken Cacciatore? It's hard to tell). It takes a certain amount of skill to bring each meal together at the right time, at the right temperature – but no imagination is needed

in this process. Stories run through my head as I go about my daily work (what was the name of the poet who took his pet lobster for walks in Paris in the nineteenth century?).

To send 120 hot meals up to the wards in 30 minutes is not an easy task. It takes teamwork. I rush from cool-room to ovens to benches to hotboxes in an orchestrated dance until I stand at the bain-marie and plate-warmers ready for 'the belt'. Sweat pools around my chef's hat and runs into my eyes. I am given tickets that indicate if the meal is to be diabetic, low-fat, vegetarian, vitamised or minced. The plates pass through three different hands before being given a plastic lid and placed on a trolley. There is a sense of jubilation when the timing is correct, when the temperatures are correct, when each ticket has been given its rightful plate. There is no room for error.

Often, at the end of my shift, I watch the plates come back and the left overs scraped into the bin. I am not surprised by the waste but wonder if they should just cut out the middleman and put the food straight in the bin. Once again, it seems to me, people are given too much food (and how much food do you need when you are lying around in bed all day?).

It is September and the country is preparing for an election. During a lunch break I talk to my colleague Jan, a woman with two grown up children who still live at home. I mention the election and ask Jan who she thinks will win.

'Dunno, don't care, don't vote.'

I grab Jan's arm and say, 'You have to vote, women chained themselves to fences and *died* so you could vote!'

'Calm down!' Jan yanks her arm away.

Don't mention the war.

I have often thought that there is a certain amount of freedom in apathy. Then nothing will be your fault. Have I always gone out of my way to be a difficult woman? Does it

matter that I *care*? Should I just dye my hair red in a stab at solidarity? Will anything ever change?

There is an election. It is decided. It is official. There is a *hung parliament* (off with her head!).

I stay up late on election night watching the coverage on television. The wine I drink makes me blurry and sentimental. All those classes I have taken on relapse prevention are no use to me now. I cry for joy but the feeling becomes lost amongst the alcoholic haze. In the morning I can't believe that anything will ever be the same again.

Do I feel a sickening sense of shame that I've gone and done it again? It seems I am an expert in letting myself down – but I had good reason to celebrate, surely. I'm sure Freya would have noticed the bottles but she has left early and I make myself a solitary breakfast. I ride to work on the streets that look the same, there are no banners, no streamers, no straggly leftovers from the party the night before, just pale, bland concrete, rows of silent houses, commuters waiting at tram stops.

In the kitchen at work I begin the daily ritual of searching for the right ingredients, the right slabs of frozen food, the right cartons containing today's choice of mains. I'm ripping open a bag of peeled potatoes when Jan walks up to me and says with pride, 'Hey Sarah, you will be pleased to know I voted, yep, and I voted for Labor 'cause my daughter told me to.'

'That's great Jan.' This is not what I meant to say. It is not what I meant at all.

I put down my knife. There is nothing left to say.

ULTIMA THULE

Part One: Paradise Lost

> Most strenuous efforts were made to secure purchasers in England, and for this purpose lecturers were employed, who travelled through the counties England and sought by advertisements and by glowing descriptions of this "promised land" to induce those who had capital to invest; thus securing to the Company a large amount of money in advance from the sale of these orders; and in the second place securing a larger return from the results of speculation by the land brokers, whose office became a necessity and a privilege in making these selections. (*Aldine History of South Australia 1890* pp.127-8)

REBECCA BRADDOCK

1873 Cherry Gardens, South Australia.

When she took me in her arms my mother would sing me a song she had learnt on the ship. When my mother came to Australia from England, aboard that ship, I was yet to be born, but somehow I seem to have that song in my memory from that time – a time she calls, 'Dangerous lessons learnt on the Big Ship'. These were the lessons she continued to teach me during my childhood: stay away from the sailors and the Irish, air the mattresses and don't let them fall overboard, be aware of signs of sickness, privacy is for the privileged, do not pack the jam with your winter clothes, always use the proper place for ablutions, and hope for calm weather.

Could these lessons be translated into a life on the land? This is the only life I have ever known – born on this land but not of it.

Ellen, my mother, reminds me that I have the sea in my blood, for she knows that was where I was conceived. She cannot talk to me about such things of course, the things I know so much about now, but it is her inference – privacy is for the privileged – that I was conceived amongst a crowd. Were others listening in the dark?

Hardness is the nub of my mother's heart. She lost her baby Jacob on board the ship. She watched as he was slung into the sea like so many loose stones, a small shrouded package, cast adrift. Beware of signs of sickness – a clammy forehead, a cough that does not wane. I have lost one of my own children to a violent illness, yet I cannot understand why my mother refuses to speak of her loss, or even mine. I still visit the little memorial of Baby Jacob, when I can, but I cannot tell my mother these things. There cannot be another Jacob now my father is dead. I will name my next child after my husband's father for I am sure the baby will be a boy. He has the feel of a man about him already – there is strength in his kicks.

Since my father passed away last year there has been a major shifting of people and objects. My eldest brother Elijah has taken over my parents' farm with his young family and my mother has taken residence in my crowded house on my farm at Cherry Gardens. She has brought with her all the mementos she carried across the ocean thirty-five years ago – linen, silver, dishes and writing paraphernalia – the things that survived. These things are no use to me in this house full of children and dust. They are too genteel. My mother keeps them safely wrapped, packages that when opened remind her of her past. As the youngest child it was my duty to go through my father's papers and prepare them for documentation. My father was a prolific writer and kept everything he wrote, and everything that was written about him. There was a great stack of correspondence and another bundle of different drafts of his famed book, *The Destiny of England, or Britain's Power the Hope of Israel*. There are seven published copies of the manuscript, one for each living child and one to be placed with the most appropriate official authority. How many more published copies there are of the book I do not know. My mother refuses to speak of it as if the book had in some way cursed their very lives. I spent many weeks going through this mountain of paper, and that was when I found my mother's diaries and letters.

It came as a surprise to see how much she had written for I had never seen her write anything at all. It was even more surprising to see how well her handwriting looked on the page. I had never thought of my mother as an educated woman and was even in doubt as to her ability to read. I had seen her follow the words in the Bible in our nightly readings with Father when I was a child, but this is easily done and does not denote comprehension. That she was devout I had no doubt; it would take only a

devout woman to bear what Father put her through. I organised the diaries into a bundle – there were three altogether and seemed to begin on board the ship from England and end when I was about twelve years old. She must have written at night or when we were all at school. The letters are to her relatives in England. She kept copies and this surprised me greatly, more than the actual writing of them. There are other letters to my father when he was away from home. It appeared he was the one who kept them, carefully tied together in a wooden box that held the scent of sandalwood, or jasmine, I couldn't be sure. The letters were less interesting to me than the diaries. I did not tell my mother I had found the diaries and read them surreptitiously when she was asleep or taking her daily trip to church. The guilt I felt when reading my mother's thoughts written in her diaries was only assuaged by my need to know her.

From reading these pages I discover that I was born on Kangaroo Island. This is something I have never been told. It seems there is a great deal I do not know. When my mother returns from church, her daily ritual, I hide the diaries beneath the mattress on my bed. My husband will not notice the lump for he rarely visits my room now I am so large with child. In the evening, when he returns home, he takes his coat off at the front door, eats his dinner and falls asleep on the chair in front of the fire. His own bed is an unchanged testament to his recalcitrance.

ELLEN HOSKEN

21st March 1837 Kangaroo Island

I told myself today I do not mind the place so much, I seem to have finally got used to the flies and the dust, but I remain uncomfortable with this child swelling in my belly. The other children run wild in the scrubby earth on this Island and will not be told what to do. This would never have happened in England. Jacob seems not to notice their behaviour.

Kangaroo Island is a large tract of barren land. There are tents set up (tents so awful I cannot begin to describe their brutishness) on the original settlement where we are

required to stay until we can secure a place on the mainland. The other families that travelled here to the Island with us, when we left the ship at Holdfast Bay, have moved in different directions. I sometimes see the smoke from their fires in the distance. Their camps could easily be mistaken for the places where the blacks live; I have heard about those places. We do not see any blacks on the Island nor do we wish to. They are said to be numerous on the mainland. I do not look forward to meeting them but Jacob tells me they are nothing to worry about, that they will soon be gone.

31st April 1837

This morning I left the rancid tent, for I could not stand the stench anymore, and took a walk just past the first hill where you can just see the blue of the sea in the distance. I marked a small area for a tiny grave. Although there is nothing left to bury, my son will finally rest here. I placed some crude wild flowers on the spot where I wish to construct something of a plaque. I don't know how I am going to do this and Jacob is against anything to do with my plans. He sees it as some sort of sacrilegious behaviour but I do not care. I will construct my own memorial. I only remember his words for they seem to be so unfeeling. He said to me, 'He is already buried at sea,' he does not understand why I need to bury him again. And then he said, 'Chip away at that hard land and all you will find will be more hardness. You cannot bury him in something so brittle, even your memory of him will disappear in this bleakness.' I looked at him when he said this to me and for the first time felt fear for the child I carry inside me. This child is small and quiet, I hardly feel movement and when I do it is not like it was with my other children. I have felt the sickness of confinement so badly, my teeth are in constant pain and now I cannot walk with ease. My little walk cost me dearly for now I can barely move for the pain in my legs and my mouth. The children are very noisy.

10th May 1837

She did not come quickly, Rebecca. She is small and does not cry. I hold her little hand and hope her eyes will open soon. I am tired and cannot stand the sound of the children's voices. I have no one to help me apart from Jacob and my eldest boy,

Elijah. Jacob is going tomorrow to the mainland for there is some hope for land. Elijah keeps a close eye on the other children but he cannot manage the damper and has burnt the only meat we will see until Jacob returns.

2010

MAKE UP

> Our whole lives are lived in a tangle of telling, not telling, misleading, allowing to know, concealing, eavesdropping and collusion.[33]
>
> Germaine Greer

When I apply make-up in the morning I feel as if I am filling in my features, as if I am making up a face I once knew (or am I filling in the cracks and creating something new?). These days I have to be careful not to end up creating a caricature of myself. There is an art to subtle masquerade. The pots, tubes, sponges and brushes still hold a fascination for me, but I am no longer enamored by the results I create. The panic I feel as I look at my face in the mirror is not easily explained.

Photographs I have of myself from my youth tell a story about the transformative nature of make-up. I arrange the photographs in what I consider a natural progression of self-knowledge. At 15 make-up was used to create an appearance of maturity (what did my mother think about me wearing so much lipstick?). At 25 it was used to hide imperfections. After 30 the photographs betray a lack of interest (or is it because Eliot had lost interest and no longer took photos of me?). The only photographs I have of myself after the age of 35 are passport shots that reveal a stunned expression – a woman on the verge.

I often wonder why I can't leave the house without applying those powders and creams. It reminds me of a short story by Beth Spencer. In the story Spencer writes,

> *I go to put on some eyeliner, instinctively. The house may crumble at any moment, but I cannot leave the room with my face so bare, so naked*. It's not *me* like that, not the adult-me. It's only me when I *make myself up*. (Without my make-up I look like my mother.)[34]

I wonder if the make-up I use consolidates an idea I have of myself – a way of making up the adult I should be. I have no idea what other people see when they look

at my face. My face certainly lacks the softness it once had (is my past finally catching up with me?).

I know from history that women in the nineteenth century did not wear make-up, or if they did it indicated low moral character. It's hard to tell if this is true from photographs of that era – my photograph of Rebecca reveals a strong face, but Rebecca's features are indistinct, the *chiaroscuro* has flattened out the details and has nearly obscured her eyes. When I think about the nineteenth century I see it in this effect of light and shade. If I am to include colour in my writing I will have to imagine it (what colour were Rebecca's eyes? I assume they would have been green, like my own, but that could be another one of my fantasies).

And then there's the problem with light. Bright light reveals the layers applied to the skin – the skin can no longer be described as *concealed*.

At night I use my futon mattress as a desk. I create a space between the books, my computer and my slowly growing manuscript in which to position myself to write, and then, to sleep. I am often surprised in the morning when there is no make-up left on my face. I cannot find traces of it anywhere.

The books I have collected are all of a type described as 'dry historical texts'. When I read these books I feel sure that the facts and authentic details of the nineteenth century will eventually filter into my brain, to come straight out through my fingers onto the page. This immersion, I feel, will give me the power of validity, but then I am beginning to wonder if verisimilitude is really what I should be striving for. What am I writing after all? Surely if I am writing a 'biography' or something 'historical' I don't have the right to 'make it all up'; however, if I don't make it all up I have no way of continuing. I have so few facts about Rebecca's life, and that, to me, seems to be the point.

It's this idea of the untold story that interests me the most. The silence surrounding Rebecca's life, and more importantly, her untimely death, and that lonely portrait, were the things that had started my obsession in the beginning. There was a sense that somewhere a crime had been committed (a crime against what? I wonder). I have just finished reading a memoir about a woman's search for the truth behind a story of a double poisoning in her family's history. It was a kind of detective story, and I liked

the author concluded that lies sometimes speak more loudly than any evidence you could find, and in the end when she discovered a piece of paper that revealed the hidden 'truth', it only confirmed how many lies people had told her, out of social propriety, on her quest. My own quest is full of gaps and I doubt I will ever find that magical piece of paper – I will just have to get on with it and make it all up.

I take comfort in this notion of somehow combining the writing with a kind of weaving, or even of digging in the earth. My ancestors made a life of living off the land – a life that was fraught with all the inconsistencies that the land could give them. I knew, from the documents the men had left behind, that they were god-fearing citizens with a bent for preaching. But this was the men, I have no way at all of knowing how it related to the women, I can only imagine the effect it had on them.

There is a sense of security, for me, in this notion of imagining a life, but I am still worried about how much the writing will reveal about myself (and then there is the conclusion to contend with – will I change the only part I know for certain?).

ULTIMA THULE

Part Two: Gone To Earth

> While we deem it proper to draw the veil over this chapter of gloom, we are forced to acknowledge, in justice to historic truth, that the conduct of the officers and leading members of these guardians of the peace was such as to produce a condition of society out of which profligacy and impurity grew, and became the prolific sources of crime. (*Aldine History of South Australia 1890*, p.78)

REBECCA BRADDOCK

1873 Cherry Gardens, South Australia.

My brothers Elijah and John have just returned from their time amongst the people giving their lectures on spiritual matters. They are known around these parts as the 'Sons of Thunder', and it appears they have both inherited my father's menacing stare. It brings back to my mind the days before the school was built when Father would give us lessons at the kitchen table. I learnt to read with a bible in my hand – it still sits amongst the other books on my shelf, but I do not have much time, or inclination, for reading it these days. I do, however, have my little book, *The Bow in the Cloud; Words of Comfort for Hours of Sorrow*, which I often look at for it sometimes does provide comfort, of sorts. This morning, just before the arrival of my brothers, I opened it to the 3rd day, and the words, 'A man shall be as an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place; as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land' brought to my mind my own dry and weary soul that does not benefit from any great watering. This child that I am carrying shall be born with little rejoicing. This child, it seems to me, is sapping my very life. I fear for my other five children. Who shall care for them when I am gone?

Elijah and John have brought a bag full of oysters, which are an acquired taste, but I have come to enjoy them. They say the road to Adelaide is vastly improved and they encountered two new buildings – a blacksmiths and a large store for provisions – during their stay in Town. I have heard much about Adelaide from the men, Father

often wrote to the paper about the terrible state of the roads, he did not have much time for the men in charge of our State, or the 'Powers That Be', as he referred to them. I found one such letter as I was going through his papers, which upon reading, suddenly sent me back in time, I could almost hear his stern voice:

> Wednesday, November 21, 1849
> Gentlemen – Though the dirt be now dried up, Adelaide, it is to be feared, will again have more of it than some will know what to do with, when the next wet season sets in, and as every succeeding winter exhibits a state of the town more deplorable than the preceding one, it is not only desirable, but imperative that some systematic plan be adopted to check, at least, the downward progress to a bottomless pit. I say *systematic plan*. Random work has permitted the present crisis to arrive.

The letter goes on at considerable length; I imagine that those people for whom it was intended would have grown weary by its voluminous and *expert* advice. Just scanning the page reminds me of Father's noisy exhortations. But then he was a preacher, and never lacked an audience. I'm sure my mother was an expert at appearing rapt and at attention. It is still difficult to see through her steely gaze. I have inherited her grey-green eyes, but my eyes will not be averted by pretty speeches.

Elijah and John have also brought news of my sister Elizabeth and her husband William in Black Rock. Poor Albert only lived for ten months. They have lost too many children and I am sure this will be the end of confinements for my sister. Thankfully their eldest child Harriet, who is fourteen next month, is strong and has always been a blessing. Harriet writes the most amusing letters to my mother and always signs them, your Loving and Affectionate Grand Daughter Harriet. Her hand is most strong.

Entertaining my brothers puts a strain on my daily routine. The baking will need to be done this evening, and the dairy has been neglected. They leave me with a replenished stock of flour, which is needed at this time, as the reaping is slow this year due to the unseasonably dry weather. The provisions from Adelaide are still at a very high price.

I wonder at the need to wait for my inheritance, I fear that eight years is a very long time.

Before I go in and see to the children and the supper I feel compelled to take out my mother's diaries. I no longer feel the guilt I once did when reading them, I'm sure my mother will understand this need of mine. Another person's story holds so much interest, and I am so close in this particular story, one could say it is also about me.

ELLEN HOSKEN

10th May 1837 Kangaroo Island

No wharf or jetty could be seen
Along the desert strand.
The tents were few and far between
Among those hills of sand

The men with wives upon their backs
Made for the distant shore
Like donkeys with their heavy packs
I'd often seen before[35]

I recite this little verse for it reminds me of when we landed at Glenelg for the first time on December 28, 1836, on which day about noon Captain Hindmarsh read the proclamation beneath the old tree. Wasn't it enough that we had endured months of *confinement* on the ship, only to be faced with *nothing*, not even an easy position on which to place our feet? The houses they had promised us were nowhere to be seen, and the best land had gone to the highest bidder months before. Jacob promised me it would be different on Kangaroo Island.

Now it is my turn to promise my children a better life. I am still waiting for Jacob to return from the mainland, I have heard nothing of his search for suitable land for us to cultivate. In our small community I do not find one man or woman that does not most

bitterly rue the day they left England; in fact, the general feeling in this place is a determination to get back as speedily as possible. If there is no other recourse then we too shall return, although we have nothing left of our savings. We talk about these things around the fires built in front of our tents – these fires provide the only possible way to cook and warm ourselves. It is often surprisingly cold, for it is nearly winter in this strange upside-down place, yet it rarely rains.

There is talk of reparation for what we have lost, but I do not believe it will ever transpire. Before he left, Jacob was writing to the men who have let this happen, and he did receive some answers, he showed them to me, short letters of commiseration with nothing to indicate resolution, it appears they are *very sorry*, *and deeply sympathise with you and your family …*

Rebecca continues to be unwell, I am unsure of the reasons, all I can think is that the very air in this place is contaminated – she breathes heavily and rarely opens her eyes.

I wait for news from Jacob. The other children continue to be children. I have lost another tooth.

2010
FINE ART

Photographs furnish evidence.[36]

Susan Sontag

I have been looking at the portrait of Rebecca for so long it has become a talisman of sorts. I have traced Rebecca's features so often in my mind I am sure I could draw her face from memory – and the image of her white elegant hands often haunt my dreams (my hands are small, almost childlike, and wrinkled from the plastic gloves I wear at work).

When I was eighteen I had gone to university to start a Fine Arts degree where I began to learn about *perspective*. I remember all those hours standing at an easel in front of a pile of wooden planks in the middle of the studio floor, picking out only the vertical lines, and drawing them in isolation on the page. That was the first two weeks. Then we were instructed to pick out all the horizontal lines, then the angles. This went on for months. My page was a mess of rubbings and holes and badly drawn angles. It was tedious work (wasn't I supposed to be painting?).

My teacher, a short man with a dislike for the colour yellow, came over to my easel, stabbed at my work with a stubby finger and said, 'It looks like you've attacked the paper with an iron bar!'

If I had been older I would probably have laughed, but then, the blood had shot to my face and I had looked down with shame. The urge to destroy my work had been strong, but I continued, looking and judging distance, right past my teacher's head, avoiding his eyes. I knew, then, that it was meant as a hard lesson. And I did learn. The exercise taught me how to *see*.

Sometimes I wonder if I am beginning to lose this hard won ability, or if it needs daily application to remain viable. All around me I see life going on but I do not feel a part of it. The modern connection to life is a series of photographs posted on a computer screen. I constantly see photographs of children, holidays, weddings and

celebrations. I have nothing to share. My life, these days, is firmly rooted in my imagination. I wonder if I am losing the ability to differentiate between reality and fiction.

When I look at the portrait of Rebecca what I see is the woman I have created in my mind. The facts I know about Rebecca's life – her date of birth, her date of death, the number of children she had, the name of her husband – furnish the story I am weaving, but the rest is left to my imagination. The story behind Rebecca's death remains a mystery. Can I really be sure Rebecca drowned in the water tank on her husband's farm? I have heard this story but I am unsure when I heard it, and who told it to me. The story had always been there, told in muffled tones. I wonder if this 'fact' is also just a piece of fiction. What I am really waiting for is that magical piece of paper.

I tell few people I am writing a novel. I'm not even sure if that is what I am doing. When I mention books at work most people say they don't read, or if they do, they like to read something that is *real* and not made up. At lunchtime I often take a book into the cafeteria and people always ask me what it's about. I usually tell them it's just a novel and hope they don't ask further questions. This habit I have for reading, I think, strike my colleagues as slightly odd, but hardly consequential. During the daily trivia quiz they often look to me for the answers to difficult 'literary' questions. *What was George Orwell's real name?*

I have borrowed my parent's self-published genealogy so they know I am writing something about the family. They are happy I have found something to keep me occupied, and my mother seems fascinated by my interest in my ancestor. I think that my mother understands the allure of the photograph of Rebecca, but I sometimes see a look of concern in her face, as if she thinks I have gone a little too far and I am becoming obsessed. I re-read my parent's genealogy constantly in the hope I have missed something – that salient piece of information that will explain everything. But it is always the same, an unfinished story waiting for the next chapter, for the conclusion it so desperately needs. This cannot be left up to my parents as they are getting old and beginning to become absent minded (and my mother recently confessed that she is starting to *lose interest* in the whole thing).

The days continue in a bland wakefulness – my fingers rip apart plastic packets of frozen vegetables and prise open steel containers of cooked food. I deposit vitamised food onto plates in neat, rounded scoops and whisk instant gravy, a salty mixture of gluten and flavouring, with boiling water to make a viscous sauce that masks all flavour. My arms continue to be burned by the searing surfaces of the hot boxes and ovens. The plates of food go up to the wards and then come back to be scraped clean. This dance could go on forever.

The nights remain my own, alone in my room – my fingers playing with the keys on my computer – and then I receive the photograph from my parents in the mail.

The photograph is inserted inside a greeting card with a funny message about becoming old and absent minded. In the card my mother writes, 'Just returned from a fraught five days in Adelaide and nearly died in the heat! Bliss to be back. This time I've remembered to send you this photo of a painting of (we think) Rebecca Braddock. We thought you might be interested.'

The photograph shows an elegant woman of indeterminate age with strawberry blonde hair, perfect porcelain skin and green eyes. I stare at it in an attempt to see Rebecca as I have known her for so many years, but she looks like a completely different woman. It is true there is a certain sadness in her countenance – she looks away to the side – maybe in contemplation of her future, or it could just be a pose prescribed by the artist, as an aid to her natural beauty. And she is beautiful. A lovely English Rose.

I place the photograph of the painting, and the black and white portrait side by side, but it is no use, however much I stare at them both I cannot see that they are depictions of the same woman. I wonder how it could be possible that the woman I have known for so long had blonde hair? In my portrait her hair looks black, and then I notice something for the first time. It occurs to me that in my portrait Rebecca is wearing a headscarf that almost completely covers her hair. How could I have been so blind? I begin to see that the features are the same, or certainly similar, in both women: the set of the mouth, the line of the cheek and the chin, the spaces between the eyes and the forehead. And then I begin to wonder if I am making this all up, that I am being led by my imaginative desire to *see* the evidence. Can I be trusted in this investigation? I am also disappointed with this new image for it lacks the pathos of her portrait, and it begins a series of questions in my mind about Rebecca, things I had never thought about before, the foremost being a question about *class*.

Before I go to sleep I look at my own hair. It has grown since I cut it very short just after I left Eliot. I remember that I was blonde as a child and after puberty it had turned a dark brown colour. These days it grows silver at the roots. I wonder if women in the nineteenth century were ever unhappy with the colour of their hair. Would Rebecca have been tempted to exaggerate the golden hue of her hair with unnatural products? Once again this seems to be a fantasy – a twenty-first century intrusion on the ideals of female beauty. I am tempted to give my hair the obligatory *100 strokes* before I retire, but I have never owned a brush. Did Rebecca sit at a dressing table to take down her long hair at night? Did she have a *looking glass*? What did she see when she looked at her reflection?

Before I continue writing about Rebecca and Ellen I have to decide which image I am going to trust. The painting seems problematic to me – it is someone else's idealised image of a woman – but this idea makes me uneasy for it is clear I am in the process of constructing an identity in a similar way, only using words instead of paint. I am

also afraid of spoiling the paper with badly drawn angles and unsightly smudges. My sense of perspective has been changed.

ULTIMA THULE

Part Three: A Small Valley

> It only took a very short time for the absentee capitalist and the South Australian Company and their friends to get possession of the best lands and the only streams in the country, and thus virtually monopolise the whole; having the sole authority to survey, and, doubtless, having the disposition to survey, in the first instance, such territory as was found to be of the richest character. It thus became a very easy matter for them to issue the first numbers of any selection to themselves or to their friends. (*Aldine History of South Australia 1890* pp.127-8)

REBECCA BRADDOCK

April 1873 Cherry Gardens, South Australia

It is over. A little girl was born early last week we have named Mary Elizabeth. I was sure this child would be a boy but I am not displeased; however, I can tell William is of other minds. He will not let it go, this incessant talk of his about my coddling of the infant, and for the need for me to return to my regular duties around the farm. He cannot understand the joy, dare I say *rapture*, of such new life. I hold her close to me and breathe in the scent of this unformed flesh, a scent that is so unlike my own, but of it. It is her need that gives me hope.

My niece Hattie comes over most mornings and bustles in with her energy and youth, all wide-eyed at such a small being. She amuses the younger children and gives me space, but she cannot replace my strong hands.

William has gone again to Adelaide with Elijah and John as they have a meeting with Governor Musgrave. They are sure that this time their plans will be accepted. The new church has long been discussed and I have heard it described so often in the last few months I can clearly see its structure. I do not think it need be so very grand but

they are very persuasive. It seems to me that we are adept at making much out of nothing and I know that my mother is not in favour of replacing our little chapel, if that is what you can call it, for it bears the mark of her handiwork: the beautiful embroidery and needlework she attempted to teach me when I was a child. My hands are not made for delicate work – I have far more skill at what my father used to call, *plowing, sowing and growing*. I often wondered at his descriptive way with words, and if he was always that way. I cannot imagine where he learnt so many words when he was a spinner and weaver in England – a land he told me much about, a land I so often dream about. I'm sure that if he were still alive my father would find much at fault in my household at the moment, for the children are not easy to take care of with such a small infant, and many chores are being neglected. Hattie is a great help, but there are times when I find her chatter tiring.

At the moment I am looking out of the parlour window at the lovely vista across to the hills with little Mary who is clutching at one of my fingers. When I look into my youngest child's eyes I see my mother Ellen looking out at me – it is not the colour of her eyes, as they are a pale blue – it is the way they stare that gives me this idea. There is much about my child that is like Ellen, even her hands. My mother's hands are small, almost childlike, and wrinkled from many years of work.

There is much to be done, I should not be so idle, but sometimes I am fearful of my thoughts. Mary is such a solace, I cannot bear to be away from her searching face for long, but I have no choice. I must go in and prepare supper for I can hear Hattie calling me from the kitchen, but before I do I will read a little from my mother's diary for since the birth of Mary I am easily distracted and my mother's words have the ability to give me a strange and uneasy peace. I must know more about my early life in this place.

ELLEN HOSKEN

1842 Cherry Gardens, South Australia

It has been nearly a year since our arrival in this place and I can truly say I finally feel some kind of resolution. Jacob and the two eldest boys worked hard building our log-thatched house, a primitive but cheery place that looks out onto a high hill and the neighbouring land. We have a small valley of about two acres or more that runs between two hills where have our garden. Our potatoes have just got up but the Indian corn, pumpkins, gourds, melons, both sugar and water melons, cucumbers and tomatoes are now growing and nearly ripe. The last named fruit made into pies taste nearly like goosberries, but the melons, when ripe, these are truly delicious. Jacob can almost finish a whole melon pie by himself! Marie helps me with the cooking, she is learning quickly and sets a good example to little Rebecca who watches her constantly. Rebecca is small for her age, I fear the beginnings of her life may have marked her – she is clumsy and not at all sweet tempered.

From the kitchen door there is a view lower down the valley where six or seven gum trees were burnt down to take the shadows off our wheat field that lies on a flat piece of land on the other side of the creek. We have fenced the wheat field with stakes and bush, and plan to plough another piece of land, due west of the house, next season.

I take great pleasure in the knowledge that my family is now the same number as when we left England, although the older boys are preparing to leave for neighbouring farms where they will start their adult lives. I shall miss their hands around our little farm.

Water is our major concern here – last year was terribly dry, they say we should be ready for any eventuality, even flood, although I cannot imagine it now as I look at the parched land. We shall have to think of ways in which to temper and contain the water we have. This is something we never considered as we embarked on our journey to this place. How could we know how arid this land could be? If we cannot grow all we need we shall certainly be destitute. Provisions from Adelaide come at a very high cost.

The lessons Jacob undertakes with the younger children are very stark indeed and I wonder at the way their attention does not falter. I pass by these lessons during the

day on my way to one place or another and cannot help smile at the silence from my little ones – all I hear is the booming voice of my husband. I teach my two girls the skills I feel they will need as wives and mothers: embroidery, needlework and patchwork, as well as all other domestic duties. Marie has a lovely hand with a needle, but it is too early to tell if Rebecca will have any talent. We sometimes sit in quiet contemplation with a swatch of fabric on our laps, the silence only broken by Rebecca's squirming and scratching at her skin. Now she is five I think she needs to be a little more settled. On a sunny day we sometimes spend an hour or so outside for the hills are covered in wattle, tall gum trees and silvery stringybarks, and there are many orchids and wildflowers that are very vibrant even in this dry season. Rebecca seems to enjoy these little walks and will always bend to pick a posie or two. Last week I told Rebecca about the art of pressing flowers and I did see, for the first time I think, a spark of wonder in her little face. I try to imagine what her face will be like in time – right now it is wan and formless, but her eyes are a light grey-green and her hair is a delicate pale yellow. I hope these attributes will save her from becoming plain.

Can I say with certainty that there is happiness in this settlement? My children are strong, we are building our place in this new country and we have nearly enough to think brightly of the future. I must not dwell on what has passed, or think too much about the old country, but my mind often wanders to those distant pastures. It is not so much like Paradise here, but I cannot complain about our small valley.

2010

EVIDENCE

> The world tap-dances to the evanescent music of the half-heard story, and like all writers, I depend on eavesdropping to refill my narrative litter bag.[37]
>
> Carol Shields

Living in my sister's house makes it difficult to know where I stand. Am I an encumbrance? Do I pull my weight? My nephews are quiet children, usually immersed in a computer screen, and they rarely talk to me. On my days off work I sometimes go to the weekly Future Life group, but these visits are becoming draining and a month may go by before I remember – it seems to make no difference to my life. This forgetfulness could easily be construed as deliberate – almost rebellion. Sometimes, on my days off work, I cook.

I never 'bake' for this usually involves precise measurements and a light touch. I pore over recipe books and devise new ways to create attractive plates of food that are always nourishing. Sometimes I throw away the food before it can be eaten. Sometimes I plate up the dishes, always more for everyone else, sit down at my place at the table and think *I don't have to eat it*. The sight of a full plate of food in front of me creates a pressure in my head. Once again I am wasting.

I like salty, piquant flavours and symmetrical designs. The colour of the foods I choose should always be complementary: green beans and red capsicums; cauliflower and puy lentils; bocconcini with basil and tomatoes; tofu in black bean sauce. I can sometimes spend hours just looking at photographs of food. I have recently heard that this is called *food porn*.

I know I am good at combining flavours and textures when I cook – I can see the pleasure in the faces of people as they eat what I have created. For this I feel of use. If anything is left uneaten I worry that it was not good enough (I remember that when I was a child there was always a collection of congealing, fatty food in small dishes in the fridge – my parents never threw anything away until it was ready to walk away of

its own volition. I knew this had something to do with my parents' formative years during The Depression).

I know this penchant I have for cooking is in some ways a form of procrastination, even if it does produce something useful. Freya doesn't seem to mind my intrusion in her kitchen although we have different ideas on how much salt should be added to food. She often reminds me that if you add too much salt there is no way you can *take it out*. Freya follows recipes diligently – I throw things together and taste as I go. At the end of cooking a meal I have often eaten enough, or so I tell myself, there is no way to know for sure.

The science behind how food reacts with techniques and ingredients fascinates me – how the rolling out and layering of dough can create something light and flaky, how salt in water when boiling potatoes can make them crisp in the frying process, how beating egg whites can fail with one invisible hint of water or oil – this is the evidence of science and practice, an evidence clear and unassailable. But the sense of taste is another matter. How much salt is too much? Can you build a tolerance to salt in food? It seems to me that the more you add the more you need (step away from the salt cellar).

The kneading of dough takes time. You must feel with your hands the texture before you are sure it is ready. It must be of a pliable consistency and have a plastic and smooth surface. Then it can be ready to *prove*. If you set it aside for long enough it will never fail to rise.

If I had a family to cook for would I treat this chore with such interest? There is so much I take for granted. Water flows from taps in the kitchen, laundry and bathroom. I have a vague idea about its origin but rarely worry about its availability. Staples such as flour, rice and sugar come in neat paper or plastic packets from a supermarket. Just like water I would never consider them luxuries – I know this would have been different for women in the nineteenth century.

When I cook in Freya's kitchen I fantasise that I am Rebecca in her house in Cherry Gardens preparing a meal for six hungry children. I try to imagine her thoughts as she

kneaded the dough for damper or cut up mutton for stew. Did her mind stray? Did she wonder if she would see her children grow up? Did she think about herself?

Tonight dinner is over, another meal, another day, and I know I have to start writing again. I have a new piece of evidence that cannot be ignored any longer. In a desire for some sort of empirical testimony I sent away for Rebecca's death certificate and last week it was delivered, in a very twenty-first century way, to my email account. I had hoped for a resolution and I received it. The cause of her death was clear: *Found drowned in tank.* There it was, the confirmation of proof, written clearly and plainly right under her rank, profession or trade as *Wife of William BRADDOCK, farmer*. So why is it that when I hold that document in my hands I feel such enormous loss? Was it because, once again, this woman had been reduced to *a wife*? How much work would she need to have done to be considered a *farmer*? Or is it that I am no closer to knowing the cause of her death? I imagine a water tank would be difficult to fall into. Or would it? (I had discovered recently that some water tanks were set into the ground, not unlike a well.) These thoughts could keep going around in my head forever. It occurs to me that the more I find out the more I don't know.

Once again I begin looking through my parents' genealogy – look really closely at all the fine print – and then I see it. Under her name: Rebecca Braddock and the date of her birth and death, is a list of the names of her seven children and the dates of their births and deaths. It is in tiny print, but there it is. Her last child, Mary Elizabeth, lived for only two months. Rebecca died three weeks later.

I put away my papers and sleep. I dream I have given birth to a tiny child that fits into the palm of my hand. I try to feed the child with a large syringe, struggle to find its tiny mouth, and it inflates into a white balloon and floats away.

2010

PAST IMPERFECT

At Flinders Street Station the trains slide in and out with reassuring regularity. Each journey is announced by a calm female voice lacking inflection – the emphasis sometimes appears to be on the wrong syll*able*. I know this voice is automated but in my mind I always put a face to these soothing proclamations and imagine a small woman in a glassed-in box looking down on the platforms and reading from a list written on parchment (or a palimpsest), scratching off each destination with a red pen. *The next train to depart from platform five will be the 11.51 Belgrave Line stopping all stations …* I fill in the next line in my mind – *So Help Me God* – and make a tiny sign of acknowledgement with my fingers, once on my forehead and once on my lips, as I board the train. Genuflection would be inappropriate in this place – even a bow would be conspicuous. Nobody must see my secret rite.

It is my return journey and it takes me a moment to realise I have taken the wrong train (it has been four years since I had taken the Belgrave line – maybe this time I will alight at Laburnum and complete my journey in a roundabout way – but it is definitely the long way round). I should not be travelling east – northwest is my destination. At Richmond Station I fumble for the green button on the door – it is the size and shape of a communion wafer yet I find it difficult to manage. When the doors slide open there is a large gap in between the train and the platform and I am reminded of travelling in London and those prophetic words I heard at every station on the Underground: *Mind The Gap*! There are notices everywhere about personal safety and avoiding unbecoming behaviour: Do not run, Keep to the left, Stand behind the yellow line (gamble responsibly, drink moderately, if you drive on drugs you're off your head). My mind is on the gap and I concentrate so hard on my footing I almost stumble. I am not late for anything but I feel an overwhelming urge to rush. My bag is heavy with books and bangs against my right thigh as I walk. I watch the yellow line and the plastic circles stuck onto the concrete – braille for the feet. I walk as closely to the yellow line as I dare and take the ramp down onto the passageway. The woman is talking to me again, telling me which way I should go: *turn right and take another ramp, do not keep going, do not go into the street …* The next train to

Flinders Street is on platform two in five minutes. I have to go back to the beginning – I need to start again.

In my bag, with my books, I have the guide to the National Gallery of Victoria – a slim pamphlet with a floor map and a short guide to seminal works – the sort of art that creates headlines (*Blue Poles* was bought by The National Gallery of Australia in 1973 for 1.3 million dollars, was publicly derided and declared a travesty of 'drips and daubs created by a barefoot drunk', but that's another story). My early morning journey had taken me there, to a place that looked the same from the exterior, a late 1960s grey mausoleum with a moat of consecrated water, but inside it no longer resembled the place I knew from my childhood. The interior had been refurbished, or as I liked to describe it, 'attacked by a heavy hand'. It was no longer a comfortable space. That morning I had roamed its wide-open spaces, gazed at the long flanks of black glass that had shattered one day in the 40 degree heat, and had felt lost until I had found *Weeping Woman*. As I stood and looked at that small, ugly painting – a study in day-glow green and purple with an ominous black shape in the background that seemed to presage the woman's demise – I was reminded of a quote from Picasso, something I had read recently, *The painter takes whatever it is and destroys it. At the same time he gives it another life …* Was this idea a kind of transubstantiation, or even alchemy, or was it something more sinister? Dora Maar had been Picasso's model for the painting but his subject had been the effect of war on humanity. In the past I had never really ascribed a sense of 'humanity' to Picasso – how did that Modern Lovers song go … *Pablo Picasso was never called an arsehole … he was only 5'3" but girls could not resist his stare …* was it okay to make fun of a man for being short (and, apparently, an arsehole)? The painting, it seemed to me then, didn't help – most people look for beauty in Art.

Weeping Woman was now a priceless artefact, an astute purchase in 1986, and was probably past making headlines. As I walked away from the painting, Dora Maar's eyes (both of them on one side of her face) followed me, as if they had imprinted their image onto the back of my head, something not unlike 'Veronica's Handkerchief'. This woman would be forever remembered as Picasso's 'muse' – a woman who had possessed great beauty. Mary Magdalene *paled* into insignificance beside her. I imagined, then, that Dora Maar might have found the representation of her face in that

painting as somehow reprehensible – a strike at her famed beauty. Or maybe she had been pleased with the violence, the urgency (I am clutching at straws, wasn't it Renoir who said he painted with his prick? That, of course, is a contestable quote). With Dora Maar's eyes urging me on I had left the Modern Art section and averted my gaze as I made my way through the Baroque, Renaissance, Classical – all too much flesh, too much attention to detail. The ceilings were too close to the floor in the upstairs galleries so I had taken the escalator down to the ground floor, circumnavigating the cafeteria selling a selection of sandwiches (high tea) for forty dollars per person, and wondered how I could escape the string of Freudian slips I had collected on my morning journey (I live with my sister but this sometimes falls out in conversation as *my mother*). Before I left, at the entrance to the gallery, I had slipped my fingers into the Water Wall, just as I may have done as a child, and was surprised at how warm the water felt against my skin.

At Richmond station I waited for the next train to Flinders Street and imagined I could see our house, our first nest, the place where everything seemed so achievable, before the future became a blurring, foreboding darkness. As my eyes strained to focus on that street in the distance I realised it was not possible to see the house from my position and that it had been ten years since I had lived there with Eliot. That little house, with just enough room for two people, had been sufficient for us, for me, before that insidious desire to expand. I had been so sure it was the right step to move to that house in the hills with the fabulous view. The outline of the cityscape had been tiny from the balcony in that house, but I had always entertained the idea I had some sort of telescopic second sight that would allow me to pierce into the heart of my past life. This was somehow mixed up with the dream I had been carrying around with me for over twenty years. This dream did not possess the abstract characteristic of expectations and desires but a visceral, foreboding understanding. In the dream I was walking my bike along a path where I saw a half concealed sign with the words *The Seven Paths to See the City By* … I stopped in confusion because there was nowhere to go but straight ahead. There were no crossroads, no bubbling stream, no dirt tracks, only closely threaded branches of eucalyptus trees and scrubby earth – and a solitary path. I kept walking until the light faded and I could no longer navigate safely. The dream faded into blackness but I could not forget the feeling it left. For years afterwards I wondered about those prophetic words on the sign for the city was so far

away from that house in the hills. Had my search over the years, for the right path, been just a banal mistake? Had I missed the message? Was I supposed to have turned around on that path and gone back to the beginning?

On the train to the city I sit so I can see the Richmond streets grow smaller and then the first oblique lines of Federation Square come into view. During its construction I always imagined that, when complete, Federation Square would disappear entirely. To me it seemed to be encased in a kind of camouflage – a protective, secret skin. But that didn't happen, there it was, its grey/blue tiles shining in the sun, the sandstone cobble-stones sourced from Western Australia that lined the steps and sloping open spaces promising sharp, dangerous edges (you could put your eye out if you fell over in that place). Did people imagine they were stepping onto some sort of sacred space when they walked over those bricks? Did anyone stop to consider their colour and the many letters stamped into their surface like I did? There were many stories here, almost as if they were to be read by the feet. Did anyone else attempt to avoid stepping on the cracks? To me those bricks seemed hard and cruel – just like the Australian sun.

At Flinders Street Station I catch the right train to take me safely home. Did I imagine it was the correct path? There was no city view from the room in my sister's house. The densely packed houses of the Northern suburbs spoke nothing to me of the stark South Australian light, or the red earth of my early childhood in the Northern Territory. The present was a Hills Hoist in every backyard hidden from view behind the façade of the ubiquitous California Bungalow. No children wandering in the bush – barefoot and fearless. No Devils Marbles or termite mounds. No long, straight roads traversing the horizon.

My morning journey has taken me home again. In the kitchen I am greeted by my parents and Freya sitting around a table with the remnants of a meal consumed – over. Did I forget that my parents were coming for lunch? There is no direct accusation but I am aware of the disappointment in their expressions. My mother smiles and places her hand on a large envelope next to her on the table and says, 'We received some interesting things from South Australia last week. Some photographs and other

documents. What's really interesting is the inquest report, the inquest for Rebecca. We thought you might want to look at it.'

I take the paper, a single typed A4 sheet, and quickly read through to the end. The paper bears the title:

> Person Note for Rebecca Braddock
> DEATH: She was found drowned in a water tank on the farm property at Cherry Gardens SA.
> Friday, July 20th 1873.
> BRADDOCK – On July 19th, Rebecca, Wife of William Braddock, aged 36 years.

The story I read beneath these lines is short but says so much with so little. The omissions and silences are as revealing as the last paragraph is damning:

> The Jury, after deliberation of 45 minutes, brought in the following verdict – "That Rebecca Braddock came by her death by being drowned in a tank near the house, and that there is no evidence to show how she came there; but are of the opinion, that she threw herself into the tank while in the state of temporary insanity."

In my hand the paper seems insubstantial and shakes slightly as I read through its contents. I imagine the warmth from my body will give this story life – another form of transubstantiation. It is time for me to finish the story.

ULTIMA THULE

Part Four: The Origins of Power

> For God is not *the author* of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (1.Cor.xiv.33.35.)

ELLEN HOSKEN

1890 Cherry Gardens, South Australia

Thirteen years have passed since I buried my youngest child. Many more people have gone since then and I have had the multiple sorrow of watching the young and strong perish, yet it is Rebecca my mind often returns to in my great old age. That I should live so long is surely a sin for my memories do not get any dimmer – with them comes remorse and painful regret. To lose a small child is something women must constantly bear and to imagine those lost children as adults is a painful pursuit. I lost a small child on that journey from England so long ago, even while another was forming inside me. I wonder if that tempestuous beginning for Rebecca marked her out for sorrow, or is it the lot for most of us? I know I will spend my last days in this manner – there is nothing left for me to think about than these lost souls.

The last weeks of my daughter's life, even now as the rest of my faculties are fading, are still so vibrant and real in my mind. When the infant sickened so suddenly and failed that dreadful night I saw my strong child weaken visibly in front of me. There was something about little Mary Elizabeth that had given Rebecca purpose and renewed vigour. I saw Rebecca begin a mourning I thought as natural and right, but then she seemed to disappear inside herself. I saw her searching for comfort in that silent house. I knew she was not in her right mind. I saw all this but said nothing. How could I speak to her about what must not be spoken? When they pulled her poor body from the water tank that night all the Doctor could say was that she had seemed 'quite well, had appeared in great spirits, *I might say cheerful*.' Those words will

never leave me and I worry away at their meaning. I have to concede that they have no meaning at all.

Was my late husband, a man dead for so many years, right in his estimations of the place for women in this world? My sons, who continue his mighty work in the land, spreading forth the word of the Lord, have kept all his sermons and often repeat them verbatim to anyone who will listen. I have heard those words so many times I weary at their presumptions and the way they seem so abstract in nature. Even now I can see before my eyes a gilded apostrophe to an audience rapt in silent contemplation and awe:

> It is manifestation from scripture testimony, that priesthood with its ritual observances was in full operation during the patriarchal ages; and the skins of which our first parents' coats were made, give strong circumstantial evidence that its institutions is coeval with the loss of Paradise. … As the sentence pronounced on the serpent thus contained a promise and type of man's recovery from the fall, so the very words which conveyed the sentence of the woman's subjection to man, contained the promise of comfort in her allegation: "And unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorry and thy conception; in sorrow shall though bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." The import of these words in connexion with the context is, as if God had said to Eve at full length, and in so many words; In multiplying thy offspring I will greatly multiply thy sorrow.

Did we find Paradise in this place? My late husband was a firm believer in a better place for all of us. He spent so much time writing about our salvation in Israel he seemed to forget how to live in the here and now. But life goes on and things are constantly changing. My sons tell me of groups of women who wish for a more rounded position for women in our society. Just last week they brought home a pamphlet from the Social Purity Society of South Australia, and I must say that their aims do not seem so very strange to me. My sons may laugh and pull faces as they

describe these societies – I will keep my thoughts about these things to myself. I may be an old woman but I still have my wits about me.

Others thought that William's marriage to Enid took place at a decent duration from Rebecca's death, but I was not so sure. There were the children to think about, and William had never been a great one for family matters, but I could not help thinking about the untimely haste in his marriage. Once again I have kept these thoughts to myself; it will not *do* to doubt the will and purpose of the men in our community. William has grown large and prosperous with his new family, and Enid has given him a boy both bonny and bright. The older children have moved away but they are still a large brood. Each festive season the family comes together to celebrate the birth of our Lord and I am always at the head of the table. William makes much of my seniority but I must say I detect an aspect of pain in his countenance whenever I mention the name of my youngest child. Enid continues, throughout, to be most cheerful. Just this year she presented me with a group photograph of them all – William seated in the middle, wide with importance and pleasure. I strain my eyes but I cannot identify the *people* behind the black and white representations of them. Nevertheless, I have placed this photograph next to the only photograph I have Rebecca on my mantelpiece, the one that was taken just after the passing of my late husband. And of course there is the painting of Rebecca that shows her in a much better light that I have hung in the sitting room. It gives me comfort to look at her face as I go about my daily duties. I wonder if someone else will treasure these images as much as I do. I will leave them both to William. I hope he will think highly enough of both to pass them on.

REBECCA BRADDOCK

July 20th 1873 Cherry Gardens, South Australia

The silence in this house is not to be borne. Mary Elizabeth, my dear sweet child, has been gone these last three weeks and I have had nothing to say until this day. The older children tiptoe around me – even Hattie has become mute. That such a small

child has been taken from us is something I do not know if I will ever be able to countenance. I search for answers with my daily prayers, and I know it is a sin to be thinking this way, but all I read are weak pronouncements and trite blandishments. I find no solace in my prayer book and my recitations are merely echoes committed daily without fervour. My heart has been broken.

William is not someone who stands still and thinks. He went off to Town last week, as if nothing has happened, and continually tells me that *life must go on*. When he left I had to rise from my bed, for as he says, life must go on, and the children need to be fed and the butter churned, but I do not have the energy, nor inclination for boisterous activity – even just the thought of getting dressed drains me of my will.

The days following the passing of Mary are dim and vague in my memory. For two nights I wandered the house, searching for I know not what, until William sent me to stay with Hattie. The memory of those two weeks is a place of darkness and despair I do not wish to relive. All I remember clearly is that we buried her little body, a small helpless group, the younger children not fully understanding what happens to our worldly body when it is interred, or even that their little sister is no more. The eulogy is plain and simple: *Jesus called a little child I heard a voice from Heaven saying unto me. Right Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.* This baby-sized grave is a sad and pitiful thing indeed – I only hope that flowers will grow on its surface.

I returned to the house last week with Hattie who checks on me at night and sometimes rests her head with me. This should be a source of comfort. William is still not returned from Town and the Doctor visits me daily. He seems much concerned, but I am often putting his mind at rest – rising in the morning, dressing with care, tending to the children, reciting my prayers in the right order. I take great pains to appear cheerful. He tells me often, quite emphatically, that he seems to think I am much recovered.

Morning Prayer

Let us ask of our Lord Jesus Christ grace to discover the sins which we have committed this day; and beg of Him a true sorrow for them, and a sincere repentance.

Accept, O my beloved God, this my good desire; give me Thy holy benediction, with an efficacious grace not to commit mortal sin throughout the whole course of my life, but particularly on this day, on which I desire and intend to gain, all the Indulgences which I can gain, and to assist at all the Masses which shall be celebrated to-day throughout the whole world, applying them all in suffrage for the holy souls in Purgatory, that they may be freed from those pains. Amen.

Tonight the children are all in bed and my thoughts take me to my own childhood. Conceived on the ocean, born on an island lately attached to a large island continent, raised in the sweet hills with my sisters and brothers to look over me, the memory of my mother's hands remains distant and opaque. My mother, Ellen, spoke to me rarely, and most certainly did not tell me of the pain that may come my way. Women must not speak of that which ails them – this is as much as I have learnt. The men may shout from pulpits and decry all sources of evil in this world for they possess the origins of power of which much is stated in the Good Book. There is nothing idle in my thoughts and I am no longer concerned with being a Good Woman. Tonight the Evening Prayer will absolve me,

Evening Prayer

Let us endeavour, as much as possible, to put ourselves in the dispositions in which we desire to be found at the hour of death.

O My God, I accept of death as a homage and adoration which I owe to Thy divine Majesty, and as a punishment justly due to my sins; in union with the death of my dear Redeemer, and as the only means of coming to Thee, my beginning and last end.

Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit: Lord Jesus, receive my soul.

We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God, despise not our petitions in our necessities; but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.

Amen.

2010

THE HERE AND NOW

In my garden the vegetable patch is showing promising signs of growth. The spring onions are poking up their dark green stalks in a pleasing line – a uniform reaching for the sun. The tomato plants are beginning to stand to attention and are providing a little shade for the capsicums and cucumbers. Everywhere there are little white flowers against the green and the brown earth drinks in the water from my plastic watering-can to become a burnt umber slush. It is spring but there has been little rain. Water restrictions have been in place for a number of years now and lawns and nature strips across the suburbs have been left to dry out in the sun to become a series of scrubby, pale yellow patches. Even on the fertile southern borders of this country it is impossible to escape the annual depletion of moisture and the threat of bushfires (Black Saturday last year is still a very close memory – the searing heat on that terrible day and the cruel northerly wind in the evening that brought with it a blanket of dark grey ash). I wonder if it is my imagination but I am sure I have never seen Melbourne this dry before.

The lemon tree is still too small to bear fruit but the apple tree is strong and hardy and a few round bulbs have appeared on its branches. I have high hopes for picking lemons to add to tabouli and hummus for a simple meal. I have no fear for the mint and parsley, as the little herb garden near the back door is already plump and ready for cultivation. I know mint has a way of taking over by spreading its insidious roots beneath the earth and strangling nearby plants so I have given the mint its own little space in a separate pot. I pick a sprig of mint daily just to take in its grounding aroma. When I press its leaves against my fingers it leaves an oily lustre against my skin – this residue somehow comforting with its sweet scent.

The decision to leave my sister's house and find a place of my own came quite easily. It was the early morning trip to the National Gallery that sealed my purpose (was it really a blind spot that caused me to take the wrong train?). The loneliness I felt in that room in my sister's house was nothing compared to the feeling that I was living in a *backwards* kind of way – a thwarted, extended childhood.

In the kitchen in my little house I am free to choose ingredients and methods as I please – I can add as much salt as I want and disregard as many steps to a recipe as I see fit. And I can leave the dishes for the morning.

The lunch I am preparing for my parents has a series of necessary steps. For the dashi stock a piece of kombu seaweed that has soaked in water overnight is brought to a low simmer in a litre of water and left to infuse with a handful of shaved bonito flakes. It is important not to let this liquid boil as it will create an unsightly scum and a bitter flavour. The bonito and kombu are then strained from the liquid and set aside to cool. This dashi has a delicate, umami flavour and goes very well with all types of seafood. Three fillets of Atlantic salmon are seared lightly on both sides and left to cook slowly in the residual heat of the pan. The flesh should be pink and soft and flake easily with a fork. Soba noodles are boiled for three minutes in a large pot of salted water. Sugar snap snow peas and asparagus spears are blanched for a couple of minutes in this water once the noodles have been removed with a slotted spoon. The vegetables must retain their bright green colour and crispness. There's nothing worse than overcooked vegetables. Once all the ingredients have been prepared it is an easy process to warm the dashi, ladle a small amount of the stock into shallow bowls, top with the noodles, salmon and vegetables, add a little fish sauce and garnish with some bonito flakes and pickled ginger. I put everything into the fridge and wait for my parents to arrive.

These days I sometimes find it hard to recognise my parents. They greet me as they have always done but they seem to be getting smaller – a quiet slipping away with the years. I wonder how I must look to them, their youngest child settling into early middle age (or will I always be that recalcitrant child in need of instruction?). Today I notice that my mother leans more heavily on her walking stick and seems to be out of breath.

After a short tour of my little house and the garden, the tea is prepared – always milk in first – and my mother gives me a small envelope. Inside I find a photograph of my parents on their wedding day, the one where my mother's face is so bright with pleasure and hope, a bundle of one hundred dollar bills, and a ring. On the back of the

photograph my mother has written: *I was obviously happy to be taken off the hook here! Since I may not be around to officiate on your 50th, we want you to have it now. It is a real diamond.* At first I am not sure if she is referring to the money or the ring, but of course, it is the diamond that gives it away.

'Your Father has kept it all these years, it was Kiera's, and we want you to have it.'

Once again I am surprised by my mother's easy acceptance of my father's first long engagement to Kiera, a woman who appeared in so many of the photographs in his albums. I had always known about that near chance, that twist of fate or separation that prevented their union, nothing dramatic, just the parting of ways, but it still came as a shock to think of my father as the romantic type.

I place the ring on the fourth finger of my left hand and it fits perfectly. It feels very strange to be wearing an engagement ring from my *father*.

'So, why am I getting the ring?' It seems a logical question.

'Freya's got so *many* rings, and you don't have any …' My mother's answer, too, seems logical, and it makes me smile at its pragmatism.

When my parents leave I place the ring in a small wooden box I use to keep mementoes. I wonder if I will ever find a reason to wear the ring – for now, it will be something to treasure.

That night I dream I am digging with a trowel in my new garden on a warm spring night. I dig until I find a large heart shaped wooden box. Inside the box I find the engagement ring and a pair of Kurdaitcha moccasins made from emu feathers and human blood. I know these shoes are sacred objects used by Aboriginals from Central Australia in death ceremonies and should not be seen by children or women – but the shame I feel is not enough – they are so beautifully made I have to keep looking at them. I put the ring on the fourth finger of my right hand, wrap the shoes in kangaroo skin and cover them with the dark earth. A woman wearing a black silk velvet dress appears by my side and takes my right hand. She is here and I am no longer alone.

Notes for sources of epigraphs, quotations and song lyrics.

[1.] Quote from Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014) Granta Books, Great Britain, p.78.

[2.] Line from Sylvia Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday'in *The Colossus* (1967), Faber and Faber, London, p.75.

[3.] Quoted by Anne Stevenson in *Bitter Fame* (1989), Penguin, Great Britain, as she discusses Plath's short story 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', p.143.

[4.] From Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977), Penguin, Victoria, p.1.

[5.] Line from the song 'Marry Me (Lie! Lie!)' by These Immortal Souls from the album *Get Lost (Don't Lie!)*, (1987).

[6.] From T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in *Selected Poems: T.S. Eliot* (1961), Faber and Faber, London, p.14.

[7.] From Beth Spencer's *How to Conceive of a Girl* (1996), Random House, Australia, p.58.

[8.] Line from The Smith's song 'Big Mouth Strikes Again' from the album *The Queen is Dead* (1986).

[9.] From Beth Spencer's *How to Conceive of a Girl* (1996), Random House, Australia, p.60.

[10.] Line from Joni Mitchell's song 'Sex Kills' from the album *Turbulent Indigo* (1994).

[11.] Lines from Tom Wait's song 'Strange Weather' most notably covered by Marianne Faithfull on her album *Strange Weather* (1987).

[12.] Quote from Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1980), The Women's Press, London, p.216.

[13.] Quote from Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983), Allen and Unwin, Australia, p.20.

[14.] Lines from David Sylvian's song 'Before the Bullfight' from the ablum *Gone to Earth* (1986).

[15.] Quote from W.H. Leigh's *Travels & Adventures in South Australia: 1836-1838* (1982), The Currawong Press, NSW, p.57.

[16.] Taken from a heading in Julia Kristeva's 'About Chinese Women' (1974) in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi (1986), Columbia University Press, p.156.

[17.] Quote from *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad in *The Oxford Library of Short Novels* (1990), Vol.2 ed. John Wain, Oxford University Press, p.389.

[18.] Lines from The Birthday Party's song 'Sonny's Burning' from the album *Mutiny/The Bad Seed* (1989).

[19.] Quote from Albert Caumus's *The Outsider* (1961), Penguin Books, Great Britain, p.13.

[20.] Lines from the song 'Shadow Blues' by Laura Veirs from the album *Carbon Glacier* (2004).

[21.] Line from Tom Wait's song 'Strange Weather'.

[22.] Lines from the poem 'Precogniton' (1984) by Margaret Atwood in *Margaret Atwood Poems: 1976-1986* (1992) Virago Press, London, p.98.

[23.] Taken from the album title *Birth, School, Work, Death* by the Godfathers (1988).

[24.] Lines from the poem 'After a great pain, a formal feeling comes – ' by Emily Dickinson in *Emily Dickinson* (2010) sel. Helen McNeil, The Orion Publishing Group, London, p.24.

[25.] Quote from Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* (1980),Vintage, Great Britain, p.92.

[26.] From 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', p.12.

[27.] Quote from Brian Castro's *Shanghai Dancing* (2003), Giramondo Publishing, p.104.

[28.] From *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1999), J.A. Cuddon, Penguin Books, p.286.

[29.] From 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', p.15.

[30.] Lines from T.S. Eliot's poem 'Portrait of a Lady' in *Selected Poems: T.S. Eliot* (1961), Faber and Faber, London, p.19.

[31.] Quote from Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning, Midnight* (1969) Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.33.

[32.] These lines taken from Anne Carson's poem 'The Glass Essay' in *Glass and God* (1998) Anne Carson, Jonathan Cape: Random House, London, pp.9-10.

[33.] Line from Germaine Greer's memoir *Daddy, we hardly knew you* (1989), Penguin, Australia, p.172.

[34.] From Beth Spencer's *How to Conceive of a Girl* (1996), Random House, Australia, p.152.

[35.] This poem was taken from my parent's genealogy – no author was attributed.

[36.] Line from Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), Penguin Classics, New York, p.5.

[37.] Quote from Carol Shield's essay 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard' in *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction* (2003) ed. Goertz, D & Eden, E, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, p.21.

EXEGESIS

Re-imagining Silenced Women's Stories Through Historiographical Metafiction

INTRODUCTION

The Refusal of Silence: Embouchure and Singing off-key

The scream/of an illegitimate voice/It has ceased to hear itself, therefore/it asks itself/How do I exist?

Adrienne Rich 'Cartographies of Silence'

In 1976 – a time I think of in terms of a certain quietness, or even simplicity – I became a child flautist. With hands too small to adequately straddle the length of a flute I was given a piccolo, on assignment, on which to practise until I grew into the prescribed 'real deal'.

My mother took me to my weekly lessons, on the No. 42 tram down Whitehorse Road, and waited in the 'sitting room' until my teacher – a woman I thought of as elderly, although she may have only been in her late 50s – would release me for the journey home. I treasured my diminutive instrument in its blue velvet bed and kept it 'nicely', as I knew I should.

I began to learn the language of music – signs and measures often borrowed from the *Romance* languages equally rooted in Latin – Adagio, Allegro, Presto, Tempo, with Fortissimo the loudest (*fff*). These words and traces spoke to me of alternative and alliterative ways to listen and respond to the world.

The legacy my parents entrusted to me by giving me, at the tender age of seven, a complex, silver instrument, was similarly expressed by the first presents I ever received from them – always books of poetry. Would I have foreseen that *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*, inscribed with my childish hand 'This belongs to Lianne Broadbent', would still hold pride of place on my bookshelf? Poetry and music, inexorably linked in my mind, would follow me throughout my life.

By the time I had graduated to play my silver-plated Armstrong my natural playing posture was fully formed, and the place my mouth found itself on the flute's

mouthpiece (embouchure) was as entrenched as my stance (slightly bowed). My teacher would often tell me to stand up straight, that it would improve my tone as much as my embouchure; however, as I began to realise that my teacher was deaf (the telephone ring that sounded like a fire alarm and its attendant flashing red light, her slightly flat speech patterns) I struggled to understand how she could possibly tell the difference. When she urged me to play with more *vibrato* I imagined it was something she experienced in a corporeal way – that the vibrations from my playing were informing, or even pressing, her more tuned senses.

Many years later, when I began to play complex and demanding pieces of music, my new teacher identified my embouchure as *incorrect* (as incorrect as speaking out of turn). This unacceptable positioning of my mouth upon my instrument made it impossible to reach the last few notes in the highest octave; however, in order to change my embouchure I would need to sacrifice, for a time, the clear tone that came naturally – something I had spent years perfecting. It was also noted that I had been taught, inexplicably, an incorrect finger positioning for the note D, which created a subtle, yet definitive, flatness – something akin to singing slightly off-key. I understood that it would take me years to iron out these inconsistencies, and this marked the time when the pleasure I found in playing the flute became subsumed by the anxiety of achieving perfection. I put away my instrument for the last time with relief rather than regret – and turned my attention to harnessing what I had learnt from the language of music to encourage what I now understand as the 'voice of the poet' – a voice that can legitimately sing off-key. Adrienne Rich understood that, 'A poet cannot refuse language'; however, 'the poet can re-fuse the language given to him or her, bend and torque it into an instrument for connection instead of dominance and apartheid' (Rich 2002, p, xvi), which can also been seen as a method for the 'refusal of silence.' I knew there was something missing in those classical compositions I so dearly wished to play perfectly – an element of compatibility or resonance I began to find in the work of writers and artists who spoke to me of what it is to be female in a changing society.

My interest in the work of female artists and writers began as I was nearing the end of my high school years – a time often fraught with anxieties about the future and the responsibility of choosing the right path in becoming an independent adult. When I

applied for university I had to decide between my two major passions: visual arts and writing – as this bind seemed quite limiting to me I wondered why it was not possible to combine these fields. In the end, my decision to study Fine Arts was an arbitrary one as I settled, probably in an act of desperation, for my first offer of acceptance. I proved to be a mediocre painter; however, those three years of my undergraduate degree introduced me to many feminist artists and their work, particularly the self-performative art of Jillian Orr and Cindy Sherman (my third year research project focussed on Sherman's photography), and the haunting sculptures of Louise Bourgeois. And the quality of my painting suffered because, towards the end of my degree, I began to concentrate on creative writing.

The significance of this formative and enduring interest in both visual arts and writing, and how the intersection of image and text have informed my practice as a feminist writer, is pivotal in understanding the structure of this thesis. There is the consistent use of imagery throughout as a method to explore the themes of invisibility and silence in women's lives and the importance of developing an 'artistic voice' in order to reclaim these erasures, and the way images can be used as a form of dissent, or a connection with the past. Equally important is the discussion of writers who have used life-writing and historical fiction to re-imagine the stories of women who have been left out of 'official histories', women who have in effect being silenced by these omissions, and how the links between image and text informed the structure and content of the creative work *Portrait with Still Life*.

The Novel

From the very beginning I aimed to use historiographical metafiction in the creative work as a method to not only to reclaim and re-imagine silenced women's stories, but also to create awareness of the way women have often been omitted from a great deal of history – particularly women who have transgressed society's norms or have been institutionalised. The literary term 'historiographic metafiction' was coined by Linda Hutcheon in her 1987 essay 'Beginning to Theorize the Postmodern' and expanded on more notably in her 1988 study *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* Hutcheon uses this term as way to describe novels that are 'intensely self-reflexive' and 'paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages

(Hutcheon 1988, p.5).' As a specific form of 'metafiction', which Patricia Waugh in her study *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) defines as a 'term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh 1984, p.2)', historiographic metafiction goes further to highlight 'its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction, [to create a] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past (Hutcheon 1988, p.5).' As the novel examines the ethical dilemmas of re-imaging and unearthing stories from the past and what form that narrative structure should take, as well as the problems of providing veracity, or truth, with scant empirical evidence (or facts), I understood that historiographic metafiction would provide an avenue to examine these issues in depth. As Hutcheon states in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), 'Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: [fiction or history] the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole (Hutcheon 1989, p.58).' As a narrative that crosses the borders of fiction, historical writing, biography and memoir, *PWSL* incorporates elements of historiographical metafiction (self-reflexivity, parody, pastiche) in order to examine the role of narrative in re-imaging lives from the past, and the present.

I also wanted to highlight, because of my own experience with mental illness, the limitations placed on women because of shame – or what is often sanctioned as 'private' and subsequently hidden from view. I wanted my readers to have a very public view of a very private space and to understand the dangers of the split between the two. As Adrienne Rich wrote in her essay about Emily Dickinson 'Vesuvius at Home' (1976):

> It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live—split between a publicly acceptable persona, and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, the creative and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous. ... For many women the stresses of this splitting have led, in a world so ready to assert our innate passivity and to deny our independence and creativity, to extreme consequences: the mental asylum, self-imposed silence, recurrent depression, suicide, and often severe loneliness. (Rich 1976)

While these dangers are still very real for women in contemporary society, I wanted the novel to be an exploration of different ways of telling difficult stories – to elucidate rather than entrench shameful pasts – and for a 'recovery', in both literal and metaphorical senses, to take place. In order to avoid what Tillie Olsen describes in her book *Silences* (1980) as, 'self-censorship' that is often 'extreme for women writers' the writing would also need to be intimate and *revealing* – with the aim of contributing 'to literature and the comprehensions we seek in it (Olsen, p.44)' with innovation (historiographical metafiction) and illumination (imagery) to push the boundaries/blurring between writing history, biography, memoir and fiction. Here it is important to note that the contemporary part of the novel is based on my own life, further illuminating the dilemmas of writing about real events and people, and how the writer decides what to include or omit (silence).

The Exegesis

The three chapters in this exegesis, while discussing the themes and overarching research questions mentioned above, are arranged around the link with my own family history and story, the reading and imagery that have influenced and informed my writing processes, and the challenges involved in writing fiction from a feminist position. This fiction also should be viewed as a 'celebration', for the 'future of feminism' as Jacqueline Rose states, 'also depends on how we, as women, choose to talk about each other' (Rose 2014, p.26).

Each chapter begins with autobiographical material – stories about family and myself – and the inclusion of this material can be seen as a method to introduce the underlying themes of each chapter, to inform and extend the following discussion, and to give the text a more personal voice in order to engage the reader.

The ways in which women can appear, and disappear, in a society currently experiencing trends in challenging the aims of feminism is the focus of Chapter One. Further to this, the aim of this chapter is to highlight how women are often erased or silenced as a consequence of entrenched societal expectations – despite the impact feminism has had since the late 1960s – and to offer methods to counter these

erasures. By linking my own experience, of what I can only describe as a loss of identity, with the writing of Janet Frame and the photography of Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman, I explore how artists can use their work in powerful and constructive ways to contest how women are expected to 'appear'. The idea of the fear of women's voices, and the importance of taking a stand against this fear, is central to the discussion throughout. As Rose wrote in *Women in Dark Times* (2014), 'Patriarchy has been very efficient in countering the noise of feminism with epithets – 'shrill', 'hysterical' – intended to send women's voices scurrying back, abject, underground' (p.5), something as artists we need to fully understand in order to address, and to, ultimately, reject. This rejection can be seen as a form of liberation, to reinstate the lives of women that are often subsumed by the life of the people who surround them – a central aspect continued with the close discussion of the writing of Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields.

In Chapter Two these themes are explored further, with a focus on aspects of women's lives that are perceived as unpalatable or taboo, and how writing and imagery can open up complex understandings of the place these facets have in the creation of identities – and the importance of connection with the past as an act of remembering. The impact of writing to reveal the difficulties of the past is emphasised here as fundamental in this process. As Hannah Arendt wrote in *Men in Dark Times* (1973), 'No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story' (p.29). Furthermore, the central concept of the 'past as disturbance' is maintained throughout this chapter as I discuss my own experience of anorexia and the role reading and visual art played in my recovery. With this in mind I discuss the links with anorexia and hysteria in the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on the writing of Charlotte Gilman Perkins and Virginia Woolf. In the final part of the chapter I return to how imagery can be used as a method of recovery by looking at my own photographs from the 1980s and the self-portraits of the Melbourne photographer Carol Jerrems.

The beginning of Chapter Three offers a detailed exploration of how the image of my ancestor Lois, a black and white nineteenth century photograph that was the catalyst for the entire project, informed the writing of the novel. This part of the chapter goes

on to discuss the conflicts and challenges I experienced in my search for authenticity and historical accuracy, due in part to a lack of 'reliable' information, and how the discovery of a new image of Lois changed the way I imagined her life to be. A discussion of the distinctions between fact and fiction, the veracity of the photograph versus the painted image, and the inherent subjectivity underlying written texts, lead the reader into the last part of the chapter in which I outline my aims in using historiographical metafiction as a method to reclaim and re-imagine silenced women's stories.

CHAPTER ONE

Women Appear: and disappear into images of themselves

> … a woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (*A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf, p.127)

The last time I visited my mother's house I noticed that the large genealogical poster my sister had made for her eighty-seventh birthday had been placed with prominence on the lounge room wall. This poster, a series of small photographs, all portraits, linked with red lines to denote marriage and progeny, spoke to me of the way we represent a life, or understand how a life is lived and carried on to the next generation, and how we are all linked by these lines of genealogy that allow us to 'appear' to others. When I looked for my own face on this poster I noticed it was placed at the 'end of the line' and I appeared to be at a textual, or conceptual 'dead-end'. This understanding created, for me, an overwhelming sense of loss – a feeling that although I appeared on the poster I was in the process of disappearing altogether. Was I in danger of falling off the end of the poster because I had never had children? Was this how women throughout the ages have experienced their own sense of identity – through their marriages and children, always through another?

When Drusilla Modjeska was searching for the evidence of her mother's life as she was writing *Poppy* (1990) she understood, 'that is how we mark a woman, by her kin and progeny. But it doesn't tell me who she was' (p.12). Later in *Poppy* Modjeska goes on to wonder, 'Is that the feminine condition, always a life-line to other people's lives and therefore split from our own? Does this explain the dreams women have: the perfect husband, the perfect lover: priest, guardian, father.

Failing that, or perhaps most of all: the perfect mother' (p.16). I would suggest she could also mean that women dream of *becoming* the perfect mother. That I had never had this dream myself did not release me from the enduring presence, the exacting pull, of societal expectations still prevalent for women today.

Intellectually I know I am more than just a small photograph in danger of disappearing on a family tree; however, that feeling of loss I experienced that day in my mother's house was visceral and painful to acknowledge.

Here it is important to note that a nineteenth century photograph, a portrait of my ancestor Lois, had started the whole process. That Lois had 'appeared' to me through this photograph and inspired me to find out more about her life was a testament to the power of image. That the only evidence I could find about Lois's life in my parent's genealogy was a list of dates –her birth, her marriage, the birth of her children, her death – and nothing more, was indicative of the gaps and silences so often apparent in the lives of women. The story of her death – an act of violence against herself – a story that had entered the family history almost as a myth, and was told in hushed tones, also indicated that Lois had somehow transgressed the role of women in society. To me, there was an unspoken understanding that a woman should never leave her husband and her children, and shame about her death was the reason for the silence. As Carol Shields writes in *The Stone Diaries* (1993), 'There are chapters in every life which are seldom read, and certainly not aloud' (p.111).

I aimed to write a novel that brought Lois's story to life, to make up for what had been lost through silence and shame, and with this in mind I understood that the writing would need to be revealing and intimate, with my own story serving as a kind of ballast for the whole. When thinking about this I was reminded of Janet Frame's autobiography *An Angel at my Table* (2010). In her autobiography Frame gives the reader an insight into how, as a young woman, she was constricted, and in a way, censored out of her life by the prevailing conservative attitudes of New Zealand in the1940/50s by being shut away in a mental asylum. Writing, for Frame, was to be her salvation, and indeed when her collection of short stories *Lagoon* (1951) won the Hubert Church Award for best prose she was saved from a leucotomy (a prefrontal lobotomy). By winning a prize that validated her as a useful human being and not

someone to be ‘changed’, to become ‘normal’, Frame was given a chance to appear in society away from the degradations of institutional life.

The reprieve Frame received with her prize for *The Lagoon* was certainly monumental; however, her eventual freedom was slow in coming. She languished in hospital for the next four years and was finally discharged ‘on probation’ in 1955 – but the years of incarceration where she had experienced countless bouts of unmodified E.C.T. and overwhelming misery had left deep scars. As she explains in her autobiography, ‘I arrived home at Willowglen, outwardly smiling and calm, but inwardly with all confidence gone, with the conviction at last that I was officially a non-person’ (p.266). Despite these feelings of inadequacy Frame continued to write and her first full-length work of fiction, *Owls Do Cry*, was published in 1957 to critical acclaim. With this publication came the need for her to be photographed for an official studio portrait. One passage from *An Angel At my Table* expresses clearly how this act of being photographed gave back her sense of identity – almost a method of validating herself as a human being as she moved towards re-entering ‘normal’ society. She writes:

> The photograph was urgent, a kind of reinstating of myself as a person, a proof that I did exist. In my ignorance of book publication I had supposed that all books carried photographs of their authors and I remembered my feeling, when copies of *The Lagoon* were brought to me in hospital, that I had no claim to the book, that there was not even a photograph to help stake a claim. This, combined with my erasure in hospital, seemed to set me too readily among the dead who are no longer photographed; my years between twenty and nearing thirty having passed unrecorded as if I had never been. (Frame 2010, pp. 286-7)

In Frame’s memoir *In The Memorial Room* (2013) she describes this feeling of erasure as ‘ … psychological annihilation, of the *mood* of annihilation, of obliteration, which may overcome a person or a country, like weather’ (p.58), an idea similarly expressed by Rebecca Solnit in *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014):

> Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have

> her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt. (p.78)

Janet Frame found her way back into life with writing, her own kind of revolt. I hoped I could achieve a similar aim. If Frame felt that her life between the ages of twenty and thirty had passed unrecorded, as if she 'had never been'; my concern was that although I had a plethora of images from that time, I felt that none of them belonged to me or spoke clearly of the person I had been – and I wondered if the same could be said of the portrait of Lois. The inclusion of the photographs in my novel, with an underlying questioning in the text of their power of suggestion, of their ability to describe a life, would create an avenue in which to restore what I thought of as the 'missing years', both for Sarah and Rebecca. I began to understand that although a photograph has the capacity to recall what has been, or could be seen, as Sontag describes, a *memento mori*, (Sontag, 1977 p.15) it could also be used as way of reinstating an identity, as a method of 'appearing' in society.

As I was coming to the end of a PhD that aimed to highlight and redress what I saw as the 'silencing' of women's stories in Western culture I began to fully understand how the silences and omissions in my own life, silences similarly experienced by a great many women in contemporary society, and my ability to unearth and question the reasons for these silences, was integral to the project as a whole. In this chapter I will discuss the use of imagery, particularly photographs, in this thesis and its importance in supporting the text. To elucidate and reinforce this discussion I will examine a number of works by the artists Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman, primarily because their photography boldly reinstated woman as subject and challenged the manner in which the image of women in many aspects of the arts, including history, visual art and fiction, is mitigated through the 'male gaze' thus rendering women unable to appear as fully bodied subjects with agency. I will conclude the chapter with an analysis of the novels *The Stone Diaries* (1993) by Carol Shields and *The Blind Assassin* (2003) by Margaret Atwood and the methods these writers employed to similarly highlight the loss of agency women experience as they age, or as they search for meaning beyond their conventional roles as mothers and wives.

Women Appear: through images

The power of that initial encounter with the image of my ancestor Lois was the catalyst for a series of questions about how we consider representation – particularly what we consider a 'true' depiction of a subject. It was the way Lois was presented in the portrait that piqued my interest and perhaps contributed to a romantic, or idealist notion of what it was like to be a woman in nineteenth century Australia. The photograph itself, as an uncontested method of authentic portrayal – the way we view them and how they inform our ideas of the past – are all aspects I wished to highlight and interrogate, both in the creative manuscript, and in this exegesis. The photographs of Lois and myself are used then not only as illustrations throughout, but as critical counterparts to these questions of authenticity, and what it means to have agency and to be given a voice.

If the image can be seen as representing speech, or standing in for a voice, then it can be a powerful tool in reclaiming identity and *presence*. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger examines the way images in Western culture are given meaning and purpose. As he states: 'Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented' (p.10). In this sense he implies that images are heavily loaded in historical meaning and have more veracity than literature (Berger, p.10). Berger goes on to analyse the ways in which women are represented in art and photography and sums it up with the phrase: *men act* and *women appear*:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 1972 p.47)

If we consider the date of Berger's writing we may be tempted to consider his theories out of date; however, I believe this is one area, although by no means the only

one, that has yet to change in any concrete way in third wave feminist Western culture. This could be translated into the ways women are still expected to appear in society, particularly if they are public figures. If we take the time to scrutinise the misogyny and vilification Hillary Clinton experienced in something as recent as the Trump election campaign in America, or even closer to home with the sexist campaign leveled at Australia's first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard, it would seem that society is experiencing a backlash disturbing not only because it is so pervasive, but also because it is so powerful. As Jacqueline Rose states in *Women In Dark Times* (2014):

> The famous backlash against feminism is, we could say, not just aimed at restoring the ascendancy of men in the material world, but also, and no less forcefully, directed at women's speech. An outspoken woman is a threat, not just because of the content of what she says, the demands she is making, but because, in the very act of speaking, her presence as a woman is too strongly felt. (Rose, 2014 p.5)

My contention is that despite the enormous steps for equality women in Western culture have accomplished over the last forty years, women continue to be given the message they should be 'seen' (usually only if they are young and beautiful) and not 'heard' – and if they transgress this, or are seen as having too much power, they will be faced with opposition and emotive, clichéd accusations of being a 'bitch', 'witch', or merely 'hysterical' (and the accusation that I 'read too much into things' is something I frequently experience). Berger was writing at a time of tumultuous change; however, the examples of images, particularly photography used in advertising, in *Ways of Seeing* could easily be contemporary, with little change.

It is true that during the 80s and 90s the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger questioned and commented on woman as subject to be looked at, and advertising has certainly attained more complex and artful methods; however, the basic tenet that *men act and women appear* is, I suggest, still something that underpins mainstream Western culture. The questioning of this underlying notion supports my method of inserting photographs, both of myself and my ancestor Lois, in the novel, in order to lead to more complex understandings of what

photographs signify for investigation into history and the veracity of documentary evidence. Susan Sontag discusses this idea in *On Photography* when she states, 'But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth' (p.6). I question this veracity by playing with my images in artful ways, thus linking the images and the text with an understanding that they are both equally subjective. As Sontag states in *On Photography*:

> What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. (p.4)

The photographs also point to the understanding that I am not what I seem or appear to be – that the image alone cannot tell the story, but it can certainly 'furnish it'. In my novel the main protagonist Sarah discusses this idea as she looks at the photographs taken by her husband Eliot early on in their relationship when she states:

> Do these photographs provide evidence of the woman I had been, or more ominously the woman I would become? At the time they were taken I had admired them for their artistic qualities – the composition, the lighting, the way they made me appear. Later I would understand them for what they really were: images of a young woman as seen through the eyes of a man. (*PWSL* p.22)

Sarah at 20

Sarah at 22

Later in the novel Sarah will attribute these same qualities to the photograph of her ancestor Rebecca as she searches for clues to her identity – a search clearly reiterated in Sarah's own journey of self-discovery and desire for autonomy (this will be considered in more detail in Chapter Three).

The photographs of myself (or Sarah) in the novel are also used to comment on the feeling of loss I experienced when I looked back on them – both the loss of my identity and my youth – as well as a growing understanding that the photographs only reflected how I was 'seen' by an/other and not how I saw myself. I realised, with increasing sadness, that I had allowed myself to be photographed in this way and I was somehow complicit in my own erasure. In *PWSL* Sarah articulates this with the statement, 'On weekends when the sun streamed through the windows on bright summer days, creating the perfect canvas for his art, Eliot would clear a space for me to lie or sit, and I would willingly oblige thinking that this was the highest form of compliment, this need of his to *snap me up*' (p.20). If, as Laura Mulvey stated in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) that, 'Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other … by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning'

(p.29), then the analysis of these photographs in the text will allow a revolt to take place – a method in which to give myself a platform to reappear. The inclusion of these photographs of myself in the text will also give me a way to propel the narrative and assert myself as the 'author' of the images and not just their subject and the ability to align myself with female artists such as Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman. As Amelia Jones writes in *Interfaces: Women/ Autobiography /Image /Performance* (2002):

> The strategy of self-performance in self-portrait photography has a particular force for women artists, who struggle to articulate themselves as "authors" rather than "objects" of artistic creation and to intervene in the structures of voyeurism by which women's bodies are subordinated to a gaze that is aligned with male subjects. In picturing themselves photographically, they speak themselves as subjects (creating their own visual narrative or autobiography of sorts) and thus unhinge the age-old tendency to collapse any image of a woman's body into the status of speechless and dominated object. (pp.69-70)

Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman: controlling the 'gaze' by appearing and disappearing

Both Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman used themselves as subjects in their photography in order to explore and question female representation in its many manifestations; and while it is not clear if Woodman was overtly concerned with positioning herself in a feminist dialogue, unlike Sherman whose body of work possesses a clear political stance, her work, for me, appears to be redolent with the desire for a reinterpretation of the female form and its representation. As Anna Tellgren states in her essay 'Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel', 'Francesca Woodman's consistent use of the female form as a starting point for her photographs – as a surface on which we can project our gazes and desires – has inspired feminist interpretations and attempts to locate her in that tradition' (Tellgren, 2015 p. 11). However, not all writers have agreed with this position, such as Kathryn

Hixon who writes in her essay 'Essential Magic: The Photographs of Francesca Woodman' that:

> Woodman's use of the female nude, and of her own body, seems not to be overtly political, neither a reclamation of the female image from patriarchal culture, not a display for that culture's exploitation. Rather she unapologetically and unabashedly uses the female nude to explore her own identity. (Hixon, 1992 p.29)

Rather than disagreeing with this interpretation, it is my belief that it is exactly this sense of defiance in her photographs that give them their power, and creates an understanding that her work locates itself from a feminist standpoint. That her photographs foster a number of interpretations attest to their significance and the particularly enigmatic nature of their subject matter reinforces Woodman's interpretation of identity as being fractured and highly subjective. In this sense she opens up a discussion of female identity, in particular, the idea of women becoming 'invisible' and 'subsumed' by their environments, a concept I will look at in more detail later in this chapter with the writing of Carol Shields and Margaret Atwood and also in Chapter Two.

Woodman's work has been praised for its original use of gothic and surreal ideals in fledgling work during the 70s that showed immense promise. It wasn't until the mid 1980s that her work began to be exhibited and a number of publications and writings about her life and work are now available; however, regardless of this attention she remains a shadowy, mysterious figure. She died at the age of 22 by an act of violence against herself that was both dramatic and unnerving (she threw herself out of a window) that has spawned a great deal of retrospective interpretations of her photographs, and may indeed have encouraged a certain fascination with her work. Despite her youth, Woodman's photographs illustrate mature and unique understandings of compelling and disturbing imagery that may have had an influence on Sherman's output in the 80s and 90s. Sherman's photography, particularly the photographs of the late 70s and early 80s, sits within a framework of postmodern feminist discourse that questions the static objectification of women in advertising

and film. Linda Haverty encapsulates this idea when she writes in *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*:

> The photographic image has been a contested site in feminist practice, for feminists have recognized in photographs the objectification of the body, the creation of the body as passive image that cannot resist construction from the viewing subject. Feminist cinematic studies in particular have construed the viewer as male and the objectified body as female. (Haverty, 2007 p.16)

Unlike Woodman, Cindy Sherman works explicitly and emphatically to contest this construction and her work has resonated with me throughout my life and has in many ways inspired and directed my own artistic output, in both visual arts and creative writing, culminating in the novel *Portrait with Still Life*. I became aware of Woodman's work only relatively recently; however, the impact of her haunting imagery has been similarly affecting and so a brief discussion of their photographs and artistic aims will elucidate how their work has inspired me, and the method I have used, in the novel, of the intersection of image and text.

The absence I felt when confronted with my image at the metaphorical end of a genealogical line was equally experienced when I looked at the photographs of myself I have used in the novel. This sense of absence is, in my mind, articulated by Woodman in her self-portraits that show her as concealed or partially seen, almost hidden (Plate 1 and Plate 2). These images appear to speak of what has gone, of the mortality of the subject and ' … in appearing to withdraw or absent herself even in the present of the photographic moment, Woodman emphasizes the fleetingness of her own temporality' (Sherlock 2013, p.388). Similarly the photographs in my novel speak of what has passed, with an understanding in the text of coming to terms with that loss – and a way of moving towards recovering a more fully formed and autonomous female identity.

Plate 1. Francesca Woodman. *Space2*, Providence, Rhode Island. 1975-1976.

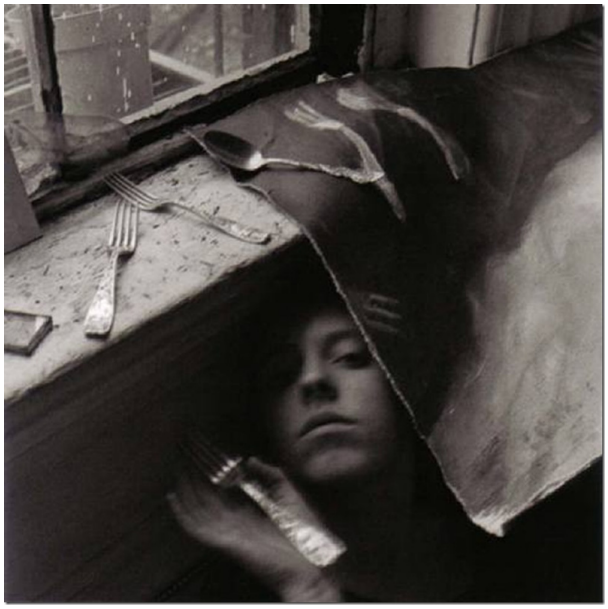


Plate 2. Francesca Woodman *It must be time for lunch now* New York, 1979

What Woodman achieves with her photographs is a sense of 'blocking interpretation' by being ' … deliberately enigmatic. If she aspires to be enigmatic, she also uses that enigma to challenge photography's capacity to describe and place its subjects' (Chris Townshend 2006, p.56). What I understand from this statement is that Woodman achieved a refutation of the photographic self-portrait as an avenue for comprehending the subject's true identity and created a series of 'anti-self-portraits'. The viewer is not expected to clearly recognise the subject and in turn experiences a sense of dislocation – the curiosity is piqued and the uncertainties begin.

What the photographs of myself impart is a crisis of identity – I am not who I thought I was for the photographs display a construction – almost a mask. While my face is clearly visible in the portraits my true identity can only be revealed by the commentary in the novel, unlike Woodman who as ' … an artist apparently so interested in self-portraiture, there are precious few occasions when she clearly shows her face. We might even consider her as engaged upon what Paul de Man termed an autobiography of defacement, in which the masking of the subject, its fictional construction, is its 'real' self' (Townsend 2006, p.56). Similarly Sherman constructs fictional characters in her photographs, particularly the *Untitled Film Stills*, allowing us as viewers the freedom ' … to construct our own narratives for these women,' and 'encourages our participation by suggesting, through the deliberated nature of her poses, that she is the object of someone's gaze' (Cruz 1997, p.3).

In the *Untitled Film Stills* Sherman positions herself as the subject in order to comment on the way women are represented in Western society and these early pictures, ' … interweave the 1970s feminist production of the subject as an effect of the gaze with the twentieth-century exploration of the subject (via masquerade) as a production of adopted and often exaggerated particularities (marked in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, etc)' (Jones, p.39). Amelia Jones in her essay 'Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman' (1997) describes the concept of masquerade as, ' …the production of the self as the thing most expected – but marking this thing as *fake* …' and goes on to explain that with this masquerade:

> … the victim exaggerates the very modes of passivity and object-ness projected onto her via the male gaze; here, she might be able to open up the

> closed circuits of desire this eye has attempted to establish via its penetrative thrust through a kind of restaging of exactly what is expected of her. (Jones, p.35)

In *Untitled Film Still # 14* (Plate 3) Sherman's subject looks out at the viewer as if she is complying with what is expected of her as a woman 'to be looked at'; however, there is an underlying sense of a challenge to the viewer with her sidelong glance that reveals Sherman's satire of the pose. Elizabeth Smith in her essay 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters' (1997) describes Sherman's use of satire as important, ' … in its ability to reveal, and therefore to critique, the artifice of constructions of identity, myth, and archetype and the social and psychological character they manifest' (Smith, p.24). While the photographs of myself in my novel look out at the viewer with a pleading expression – that I read now as almost a desire to disappear – the commentary on the images reveals an understanding of the 'artifice' of the poses. Amelia Jones discusses this idea in her essay 'Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman' when she writes of Sherman's use of the 'specifically feminine masquerade' and how 'she reiterates femininity with a twist, opening the formerly sutured gap between its conventional codes and the bodies these codes are designed to fix as 'female' (Jones, p.38). What Sherman achieves is a sense of dislocation for the viewer by turning the ubiquitous female pose on its head and uses its inherent vulnerability as a weapon – not only to satirise its position but also to question its power. While I initially regarded my images with disquiet for they spoke to me of powerlessness, almost of being an admired possession, they began to take on, in a similar fashion to Sherman's, a method to question this inference of erasure.

Plate 3. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #14* 1978

Sherman's photographs challenge the concept of what it is to be 'seen' as female, the 'projective eye' embedded within the images and the 'passive *effects* of it propulsive force' (Jones, p.35), and are always used as a striking political message to comment on the way female bodies are used in advertising and the media; while my photographs, seen through the eyes of the narrator in the novel, are used to retrieve an identity – one that does not necessarily belong to anyone but herself.

In my mother's house there are many reminders of a long life – walls heavy with a multitude of photographs of her relatives, children and grandchildren that stretches back generations. Notably the only image she has of herself is her wedding picture where she is slim and young and clutching the arm of my father. That I notice this and see it as a slight on the record of her life speaks loudly about the chasm that exists between our generations. Was she right when she warned her brash ten-year-old daughter that if she planned to remain childless she would become 'a lonely old woman'? My own photographs, lately safely housed in many boxes, will service my life in different ways.

Carol Shields and Margaret Atwood: absence, loss and disappearing into old age

If Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman provide, with their photographs, avenues for commentary on the way women appear, or disappear in society, then both Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields similarly explore methods in which women can be written back into their own stories in order to reinstate their identities.

I will argue that both Atwood and Shields, particularly in the novels *The Stone Diaries* and *The Blind Assassin*, use fictional devices as well as the insertion of photographs (*The Stone Diaries*) and many descriptions of photographs throughout both texts, to comment on the experience of absence and loss in many women's lives, and the underlying threat that women will disappear into old age, or become subsumed by the lives of others surrounding them – lives they may have in fact 'given birth' to.

Shields reinforces this idea of loss when she writes in her essay 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard', 'Enormous quantities of stories – perhaps the finest stories of our culture – have been lost to illiteracy or lack of permission … most often: 'Woman, hold thy tongue!' (Shields, 2003 p.26), a concept further articulated in *The Stone Diaries*, 'Men … were uniquely honoured by the stories that erupted in their lives, whereas women were more likely to be smothered by theirs, Why? Why should this be?' (p.121). This concern that Shields harbours in order to reinstate women's lives, to uncover them and give them permission to live, begins with Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries* as she recounts her life in a semi-confessional wandering as an omniscient narrator writing in first person, later to be overtaken by a myriad of other voices (Daisy is appearing and then being suppressed simultaneously). In *Liminal Spaces: The Double Art of Carol Shields* (2008), Alex Ramon understands that these fictional devices used in *The Stone Diaries* as, 'Undermining traditional conceptions of autobiography as an unproblematic act of self-revelation', with the idea that '*The Stone Diaries* comes to exist in a liminal space between narratorial "presence" and "absence," between expression and suppression, self-exposure and self-effacement' (Ramon 2008, p.133). The reader sees Daisy as having a voice that is slowly undermined as she gets older

and becomes 'attached' to men and has children. Wendy Roy discusses this idea further in 'Autobiography As Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*' when she writes:

> Daisy's voice is replaced by numerous other voices and modes of narration, and her story is displaced by the stories of others around her. Her authorial 'I' fades in and out of the narrative, replaced through much of the novel by an omniscient or judgmental narrator who refers to Daisy in the third person, who undercuts her version of events, but who may represent the ironic or questioning voice of Daisy herself. (pp.118-9)

This mix of third and first person, as if directly commenting by syntactic confusion on Daisy's inability to differentiate her inner and outer self, as if she lives in her mind but sees herself in third person, is peppered throughout *The Stone Diaries* in subtle ways. As Shields writes:

> The long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom – all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out. Her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps. (Shields 93, pp.76)

In my mind these fictional devices have an unnerving effect on the reader, further reinforcing the expert manner in which Shields highlights the way women have been so often left out of their own stories. Dianne Osland commented in her essay '*The Stone Diaries*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance' that Shields has taken 'authorship out of Daisy's hands, effectively denying her a voice at the same time as insisting that her erasure from her own writing reflects the way women have always been silenced' (p.94-5). It is also important to understand the manner in which Daisy appears to live inside her head, that the purest confessions she makes are not meant for public consumption, that she is 'blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence' (76), while clearly writing in the public sphere. This is a double bind that demonstrates Shield's self-reflexive writing techniques, but also something that Alex Roman sees as Shield's abiding preoccupation with 'The disjunction between that private self -with its (frequently unexpressed) thoughts,

fantasies, fears, memories and visions - and its public persona(e) … ' She goes on to state that:

> … her texts explore the implications of the constructions of the self made by others, the constructions of others made by the self, and the ways in which social roles both express and suppress the individual. One of the principal propositions of her work is that the greatest human conflicts may occur not in the public sphere, in interaction with others, but rather privately and internally; as such, her characters often live their profoundest struggles and adventures in their own heads. (Ramon 2008, p.13)

In this way Shields can be seen to be giving voice to the often 'unspoken' thoughts and fears not normally articulated in women's lives. Profoundly, Daisy Goodwill's 'final (unspoken) words' at the conclusion of *The Stone Diaries* read, "I am not at peace" (p.361). Daisy Goodwill may be dead but her words (or thoughts?) live on, even though she has always been haunted by an uncanny feeling of being absent from life, something she noted early on in the novel, 'Other people were held erect by their ability to register and reflect the world – but not, for some reason, Daisy Goodwill. She could only stare at this absence inside herself for a few minutes at a time. It was like looking at the sun' (pp.75-6).

Similarly, Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin,* as an old woman looking back on her tempestuous life, feels she has lost her identity, not only because she is old and is no longer 'visible', but also because she sees her life as being subsumed by the people surrounding her and the events that made up her life. She has difficulty in reconciling her aging image with the person she feels she has been throughout her life. She shares this feeling of disconnect, or absence from herself, with her thoughts:

> When I look in the mirror I see an old woman; or not old, because nobody is allowed to be *old* anymore. *Older*, then. Sometimes I see an older woman who might look like the grandmother I never knew, or like my own mother, if she'd managed to reach this age. But sometimes I see instead the young girl's face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems – especially in the

> afternoons, with the light on a slant – so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking. (p.53)

The past is catching up with Iris, or even directly imprinted beneath the surface of her image in the mirror. She also finds this image disturbing for it reflects something she is unable to see – how she looks to others:

> You can never see yourself the way you are to someone else – to a man looking at you, from behind, when you don't know – because in a mirror your own head is always cranked around over your shoulder. A coy, inviting pose. You can hold up another mirror to see the back view, but then what you see is what so many painters have loved to paint – Woman Looking In Mirror, said to be an allegory of vanity. Though it is unlikely to be vanity, but the reverse: a search for flaws. *What is it about me?* can so easily be construed as *What is wrong with me?* (p.390)

This preoccupation with how a women appears in the world, her image and her actions, creates a sense of dissatisfaction within Iris about how she is seen in society and propels her to write herself back into her story, to give a true account. Iris understands she has made choices throughout her life in order to accommodate other people, and for this she has feelings of deep regret. As Magali Cornier Michael suggests in her essay 'Narrative Multiplicity and the Multi-layered Self in *The Blind Assassin*' (2002), 'By offering the elderly Iris's thought processes as she acts in the world, these passages reveal the price Iris has had to pay for that choice. Standing always "upright and contained" (43) has resulted in a deep split between her inner and outer life that has left her with a precarious sense of identity' (pg.90). When discussing the experiences of her own writing life in 'Professions for Women' (1931) Virginia Woolf called this predicament 'The Angel in the House' with the suggestion that 'Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer' (Woolf 1966, p. 286), an occupation, she proposes, that required time better spent in pursuit of excellence and knowledge, but a necessity all the same. With the angel gone what is left but the ability to give a true account? Woolf decries this further in her essay when she states, ' … killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not

think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet' (p.288). These abiding concerns for women, it is my contention, have not diminished over time, and Atwood manages to highlight this split for women with Iris attempting to reconcile these parts. Cornier Michael goes onto propose, 'That the past thus becomes its representations is exactly why Iris wants and needs to write—and thus control—her own story, her own identity' (pg.92).

Iris's split in identity is clearly demonstrated by the novel's structure. The main narrative, beginning with Iris at the age of 82 recounting her life, is interspersed with the story 'The Blind Assassin' written ostensibly by her sister Laura Chase. At the end of *The Blind Assassin* the two identities are reconciled when the reader discovers (the mystery has been solved) that Iris was in fact the author throughout, and has successfully brought the dead (and herself) back to life through a series of 'lies', or fictions. As Gina Wisker concludes in *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction,* '82-year-old Iris Chase Griffen carries out her own 'negotiating with the dead'…. so she can tell their stories'. Right from the beginning the reader is alerted to the fact there may be multiple narrators, or intertwined stories as Atwood elaborates the initial mystery: 'Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove her car off a bridge' (p.3), thus, 'the novel can be seen as a 'line' (a piece of fiction, a lie, a version) … dependent on a fallible narrator. (pp.132-3)

Even the many descriptions of photographs throughout *The Blind Assassin* disclose the precarious nature of what can be revealed with empirical documentation – the effects of memory and distortion. Iris is constantly searching for the 'truth' in the photographs of her past, they haunt her with what is dead and gone, even herself:

> She retrieves the brown envelope when she's alone, and slides the photo out from among the newspaper clippings. She lays it flat on the table and stares down into it, as if she's peering into a well or pool – searching beyond her own reflection for something else, something she must have dropped or lost, out of reach but still visible, shimmering like a jewel on sand. (p.8)

Iris experiences a sense of something missing when she looks at the photographs from her past, just as Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries* wonders where certain parts of

her life have gone as she reflects on her life with her husband Barker Flett – there are too many things that have gone missing:

> Let it be said that Daisy Goodwill has saved every one of Barker Flett's letters; she has them still, though she would be hard put to tell you just where they are. In a drawer somewhere. Or a cardboard carton. Her letters to him have not survived. (p.145)

Both Daisy and Iris experience this misplacement of material objects that may explain their pasts as a metaphorical loss of self – as though their lives can only be accounted for if they have evidence of themselves as attachments to people – as wives and mothers. I wonder, as I near the end of this chapter, that in Iris and Daisy's search for understanding their pasts how much empirical evidence is required to resurrect their identities, and what form that evidence, if it exists at all, would take. In *PWSL* Sarah asks herself similar questions as she attempts to discover some historical accuracy when researching Rebecca's life. What she finds is far from conclusive, it could almost be considered damning:

> In a desire for some sort of empirical testimony I sent away for Rebecca's death certificate and last week it was delivered, in a very twenty-first century way, on my email account. I had hoped for a resolution and I received it, for the cause of her death was clear: *Found drowned in tank.* There it was, the confirmation of proof, written clearly and plainly right under her rank, profession or trade as *Wife of William BRADDOCK, farmer*. So why is it that when I hold that document in my hands I feel such enormous loss? Was it because, once again, this woman had been reduced to *a wife*? How much work would she need to have done to be considered a *farmer*? Or is it that I am no closer to knowing the cause of her death? I imagine a water tank would be difficult to fall into. Or would it? (I had discovered recently that some water tanks were set into the ground, not unlike a well.) These thoughts could keep going around in my head forever. It occurs to me that the more I find out the more I don't know. (*PWSL* p.144)

What I didn't realise when I began writing *PWSL* was how much my own memory and experience would inform the narrative and drive the story towards my initial intention. That I felt similar gaps and silences in my own life as the characters I was researching came as a revelation that forced me to begin considering my past, and all its uncomfortable disclosures, in a productive light.

CHAPTER TWO

The Past as Disturbance

'We all see faces in the water. We smother our memory of them, even our belief in their reality, and become calm people of the world; or we can neither forget nor help them. Sometimes by a trick of circumstances or dream or a hostile neighborhood of light we see our own faces.' (Janet Frame *Faces in the Water* 1980, p.150)

Family secrets and the 'epiphanic moment'

A death in the family often brings with it a general atmosphere of unease – and a belated sense of nostalgia. My father went away for a week, to attend the funeral of his younger sister, and due to my mother's failing health and mental alertness she came to stay with me and I became a 'parent' for the first time in my life. The extent

of my mother's infirmity came as quite a shock. I had known for some time that she was losing her short term memory, but I was not ready for her disorientation, her almost childlike demeanour, and it made me realise how completely dependent on my father she had become. This revelation made me wonder if I had ever known her at all and made me increasingly sad and irritated at what I saw as the erosion of her identity through the loss of her mental ability – a slow trickling away of her life through the widening gaps in her memory.

She was also deeply depressed. She hid this from me as best as she could (put on a brave face) but it was hard not to notice how her mood became instantly brighter when my father returned. And the relief that *I* felt at my father's return only reinforced my sense of guilt at my irritation with my mother's decline and the imposition it had put on me. I was also disturbed because I was not ready to confront the impending death of my parents.

When my father returned he produced a photograph album he had been given at the family gathering – a book full of photographs of our particular part of the family most of which I had seen many times before. As I was flicking through the pages and smiling with recognition at our younger faces I saw a photograph that made me stop and look closer. In the photograph I clearly recognised my mother and father but not the very thin girl sitting in between them. It was only the spotted scarf in her hair that gave it away. How was it that I had so much difficulty in recognising myself? I felt no connection at all with that image – and with that revelation I began to question my own sense of identity – and to wonder where that memory had gone.

A young woman striving to disappear through self-starvation is not something to record or hold dear. That image was shocking because it was so *revealing* – my family never talked about the years I had spent in hospital in the 1980s with anorexia (or as it was more comfortably articulated at the time as a form of *eating disorder*) – it was too difficult to remember, and the silence surrounding my 'illness' and what it meant to my family (shame, powerlessness, fear) was palpable to me as my own fragmented memories came flooding back. That I, too, was somehow complicit in this silence was something I could not ignore, and I realised in that 'epiphanic moment'

that this was what I had been writing about for so many years – this desire of mine to disappear.

That the moment had occurred at a time when my family was going through a process of drifting apart, or losing the close bonds it had once had through age and infirmity, was important in creating the understanding that the only method I had – or indeed ever had – for coming to terms with uncomfortable truths, was with the practice of writing – to not only tell my side of the story but also to question why these silences seemed to inhabit women's lives. I also wondered if my writing would have the ability to deal with the nature of the 'fleetingness of epiphanic time', in the same way that a photograph can jog the memory.

In this chapter I will consider aspects of the female artistic 'voice' and its power in unearthing the unseen, the hidden and the unpalatable in a society that continues to perpetuate the idea that women should be 'seen' but not 'heard'. I will also examine how anorexia and depression are linked in what are considered particularly 'female maladies' that entrench stereo-typical gender roles, and how their inherent aspects of passivity, and shame, can be reclaimed as a method of revolt. Dissent can take many forms, in narrative or in imagery, and I will link these themes throughout. Central to this discussion will be a discussion of the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, as well as an analysis of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), a short story by Charlotte Gilman Perkins, the influence it had on me as I began writing *PWSL*, and its connection to the photographic series *House* (1976) by Francesca Woodman. Continuing the theme of the power of the image in reinstating the woman as subject – despite shame or taboo – I will conclude by examining two of my own photographs (self-portraits) from the 1980s, a series of self-portraits by the Australian photographer Carol Jerrems and the poem 'Daddy' (1965) by Sylvia Plath.

The past had come back to me then as an unexpected disturbance, not unlike the 'shock' that Virginia Woolf writes so beautifully about in 'A Sketch of the Past' in her collection of reminiscences, *Moments of Being* (1978):

> I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a

> child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. (pp.83-4)

Gabrielle McIntire (2008) in *Modernism, Memory, And Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* explains that 'Woolf's "moments of being" occur when one receives an emotional blow analogous to a physical "shock" that disrupts the ordinary flow of perception' (p.167) and in my case this disruption to my perception alerted me to something I had clearly repressed, or put aside in my memory as too difficult to contemplate. In reviewing the writing I had undertaken throughout my life, particularly the novel *PWSL*, I recognised my use of the overarching themes concerning the difficulties women often face with their position in society were ever present, almost in a palimpsest fashion, and has given me an avenue for expressing things I am not adept at *saying*. Now I am no longer *visibly* anorexic I can talk about my eating disorder in the past tense, for the shame of such a disorder persisting into middle-age, or indeed suffered by someone advocating a strong feminist stance is complex, even if it is compounded and perpetuated by the stigma of obesity prevalent in our society. Furthermore, consumer culture encourages us to indulge in our desires, but, 'at the same time, burgeoning industries centered on diet, exercise, and body enhancement glamorize self-discipline and code fat as a symbol of laziness and lack of willpower' creating an increasingly powerful bind or conflict, particularly for girls and women. It also seems clear that these, 'tensions of consumer capitalism are layered, additionally, with the contradictions of being female in our time' (Susan Bordo 2003, p.xxi).

Only in my writing am I comfortable in expressing the effect it continues to have on my life. In her book *Small Acts of Disappearance: Essays on Hunger* (2015) Fiona Wright echoes this idea when she writes:

> I know that writing has always been the only thing, besides my hunger, that helps me make sense of the world, to find patterns and connections and with them, some kind of solidity or definition; it is also a kind of striving, a

> reaching for something more. Writing has always been the thing that allows me to voice what is too difficult to speak. (pp.130-1)

While I do not suggest I find solace in my self-imposed hunger, I can understand how obsessions can be, in a perverse way, somehow comforting and consequently difficult to escape. That my past has been made up of many 'shocks' and many subsequent responses indicates that writing is one method I have used to remain sane. As McIntire in *Modernism, Memory, And Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* writes:

> These "shocks" make a mark on time and memory, asking to be explained and even contained via writing and narration to ease their unexpected disturbance. Writing therefore occurs as a response to being, while being itself is experienced most fiercely in the fleetingness of epiphanic time. (p.167)

Although the shock I received when I saw that photograph of myself was not bound up in shame for what I had been, it was redolent with sadness for what I had become. This revelation made me wonder if the past has the ability to create a disturbance in order to inform the present. Once again I return to Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past' and her poetic response to this question:

> The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. (p.114)

This ability to *look deeper* into the reasons for being the way we have become through connection with the past could almost be seen as a process of excavation. As Nicola King writes in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the self* (2000), 'The metaphors of archaeological excavation and the finding of keys to open the locked doors of memory suggest the act of remembering as the uncovering of a *secret*' (p.15), even if that secret has been simmering on the surface all along. Annette Kuhn in her book *Family Secrets* (1995) calls this process 'memory work' which she

explains, '… has a great deal in common with forms of inquiry … like detective work and archaeology …'(p.4) and that 'unearthing family secrets' can be used as a form of therapy. Later in *Family Secrets* Kuhn writes, 'As the veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and association peel away, revealing not ultimate truth, but greater knowledge' (p.5). As I read this I couldn't help but feel that I have my own form of 'memory work' and it is busy with bringing the present into 'being'.

Before my parents left that night I took the photograph from beneath the plastic of the album and hid it in a book. I felt a certain amount of shame at my behaviour but I thought they wouldn't miss it, and that it belonged to me anyway. Later that I night I dreamt I was looking at my reflection in a mirror and saw the face of my older sister staring back at me. I saw this not as a confusion of identity but as a clear symbol of the desire I had harboured as a girl to become *someone* else – even if that meant disappearing altogether.

The Girl Disappears into her Environment: a wasting

I Who Want Not To Be …

Julia Kristeva

When I was fifteen and had just returned to family life after spending a month in hospital, my older sister, in the motherly way she had, introduced me to the French writers Colette and Simone de Beauvoir – and I read, with wonder and enjoyment, the *Claudine* series and *The Second Sex*. These two writers, while they may appear to be incompatible to some degree, will always be linked in my mind to the beginnings of my interest in the idea of what it is to be female. Reading for me at that stage was not just an education but also a method to understand my own form of 'self-sabotage' and why I found it so hard to be a part of my environment – my society.

Thirty years later when I re-read de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) I was struck by her insight when she writes:

> The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and

> at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and to show her flesh. (p.333)

What is striking about de Beauvoir's statement is not just how it seemed to directly speak to me about myself as a girl on the verge of womanhood, but also how after the passage of over sixty years these words remain so pertinent. In 'showing her flesh' is it inevitable that a young woman continues to proclaim an allegiance to what is expected of her in the future – to exist solely as a sexual being and to be reduced to a conduit for procreation? My actions at the time would indicate I found this inevitability stultifying and wished myself to not only be *someone* else but also to be *elsewhere*. The only power I had at the time was the ability to change myself physically – to refute the feminine in order to make way for the individual.

Anorexia is a highly complex issue and the theories concerning its inception and continuation are usually explained in terms of social/behavioural, medical, family interactional or psychiatric in development – often with an overlap or intersection of these theories. As Helen Malson explains, it is often 'constructed as a consequence of familial dysfunction, of social prescriptions of female slenderness and of patriarchal oppression' (Malson 1998, p.98). More recent feminist theories have questioned the focus on the medical or physical aspects of the condition to highlight its societal causes and the meanings underlying its inception based on conflicting expectations central in contemporary women's lives. As Matra Robertson writes in *Starving in the Silences* (1992):

> The question of how anorexia nervosa creates meaning for women is one over which medicine and feminism have differed. Simply put, the former has anorexia as a type of psychiatric illness, while the latter most often sees anorexic behaviour as a symptom of women's oppression in a patriarchy. (p.xiii)

There is also an undeniable link between the nineteenth century medicalised concept of the 'hysterical woman' and twentieth century notions of anorexia – both existing at different times of growing emancipation for women. As Susan Bordo states:

> Here anorexia finds a true sister-phenomenon in the epidemic of female invalidism and "hysteria" that swept through the middle and upper-middle classes in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a time that, in many ways, was very like our own, especially in the conflicting demands women were confronting: the opening up of new possibilities versus the continuing grip of the old expectations. (Bordo 2003, p.157)

Understanding anorexia from a feminist perspective I was able to conclude that, in my case, it had less to do with the more generally accepted notion of the anorectic preoccupation with extreme weight loss, although that was clearly evident, but more to do with anxiety about a 'woman's place' and how she is able to look 'right' in a society obsessed with appearances. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), 'Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about – perhaps even loathing of – her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to "reduce" her own body' (p.54). That reduction, for me, could also be seen as a form of rejection of the 'beautiful image' – by becoming so thin as to become grotesque I was both refusing ideal feminine beauty and expressing ambivalence about femininity, which in itself could be seen as a method of protest. In *The Whole Woman* (1999) Germaine Greer discusses this paradoxical bind when she writes:

> The political history of self-starvation offers us a clue to the function of disorderly eating as protest; the protest of the powerless, dependent as they are on the approval of others, must take a secret form. Given the universal awareness of young women as bodies rather than people, it is inevitable that their impotent rage be turned against those bodies, which they are wilfully destroying, even as they are most admired. (p.78)

Naomi Wolf proposes in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) that 'A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession with female beauty but an obsession with female obedience' (p.153), an idea similarly expressed by Simone de Beauvoir forty years earlier in *The Second Sex* with the statement, 'The ideal of feminine beauty is variable, but certain demands remain constant; for one thing, since woman is destined

to be possessed, her body must present the inert and passive qualities of an object' (pg.189). Sadly, as with all methods of self-sabotage, my 'protest' was in effect cancelling myself out – with no energy or substance I had become the perfect, 'obedient woman'. By the very act of rejecting my environment I was slowly becoming subsumed by it and was caught in a self-defeating loop of wasting. The story of the reading I undertook during my 'convalescence' may contain some clues for how I turned that rejection around into something corporeal.

'The Yellow Wallpaper': the woman escapes from her environment

I've married a cupboard of rubbish/I bed in a fish puddle.

Sylvia Plath 'Poem for a Birthday' (1967)

In 1987 I was a first year undergraduate student at a less than prestigious art school and was caught reading *The Bell Jar* (1963) by one of my lecturers. He looked askance and asked if I 'liked *her*' (the book was now hidden) and went on to say, 'Isn't she a bit oh-woe-is-me?' Before this interruption I had just finished reading Sylvia Plath's sentence, 'I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all' (p.87), and while my teacher's words had made me feel *small*, that simple sentence, written in a time before I was born, had made me *think*. I was also aware that I was reading what is considered a 'girl's book', but I knew it was much more. As Janet Malcolm describes it in *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994):

> The book has a surface puerility, a deceptive accessibility: it reads like a girl's book. … It is a girl's book filled with poison, vomit, blood, and volts of electricity (the electrocution of the Rosenbergs and Esther's horrifyingly powerful shock treatments are mordantly linked), and peopled by creepy men and pathetic older women. (p.32)

Two years before, just as I was preparing for my last year of high school, I had become enraptured with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) (macaroons would forever be embedded in my mind as some kind of subversive sweet secret) and had accidentally come across the strange Gothic short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. What resonated with me when I read that story at

the age of sixteen was not so much the underlying feminist message, which I understood and appreciated in a rudimentary way, but the clear parallels in the storyline with my own recent experience. That I saw connections in a story that recounts a woman's slide into insanity as she undergoes treatment for 'neurasthenia' in the late nineteenth century and my own treatment for anorexia in the 1980s indicates how little had changed for what is seen as a 'female malady'. No longer used in medical parlance neurasthenia was a term used in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century that referred to the debility of the nervous system as a direct consequence of modern life. It was considered a particularly female complaint with symptoms of dizziness, faintness and fatigue, usually treated with complete bed rest, force-feeding and social isolation which in turn reinforced traditional gender roles. In *Mad, Bad and Sad* (2008) Lisa Appignanesi extends the link between female emancipation and neurasthenia when she writes:

> It was soon to become clear that often enough a nervous woman was also a 'new woman'. The contradictions of a time which demanded compliance and quiescence of the idealized feminine while championing dynamism in the culture as a whole might drive a woman to action or to the couch. The escape into illness was the mirror image of rebellion. Emancipation, feminism and neurasthenia, or its sometimes twin sister, hysteria, took shape in the same nervous soil. (Appignanesi 2008, p.102)

A theory similarly expressed by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*:

> Victorian female hysteria, mysterious at the time, makes sense now that we see it in the light of the social pressures of sexual self-denial and incarceration in the home. Anorexia should be as simple to understand. What hysteria was to the nineteenth-century fetish of the asexual woman locked in the home, anorexia is to the late twentieth-century fetish of the hungry woman. (p.163)

I can only speak from my own experience in the 1980s and not of what is currently on offer for treatment for anorexia – of being taken away and isolated from all stimulus and activity, fed three square meals a day, or 'stuffing', with the incentive, or 'bribe', of intermittent communication and access to family and friends until enough weight

had been gained for ‘freedom’ or discharge from hospital. I was also aware, at the time, that there was a restriction on ideas of ‘work’ or ‘heavy thought’ – with the implication that thinking was is in itself dangerous or even subversive, and certainly a hindrance to recovery.

Since the rediscovery of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ in the early 1970s it has become, amongst other things, an allegory of women’s incarceration in the home in the nineteenth century, and the struggle against the male dominated medical establishment to silence women with certain treatments – Dr Silas Weir Mitchell’s famous ‘Rest Cure’ in particular – a treatment that prescribed complete bed rest and isolation for nervous disorders (neurasthenia). As Ellen L. Bassuk describes it in her essay ‘The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women’s Conflicts?’(1986):

> To ensure complete rest, the patient was removed from her usual environment and assigned to the care of a professional nurse who was the doctor’s agent. If Mitchell thought it advisable, close relatives were either excluded or allowed only brief visits. To eliminate any possible sources of worry and anxiety, news from home was carefully censored. Mitchell believed that major relationships and responsibilities contributed significantly to the formation of the patient’s nervous disorder. (p. 142)

Patients undergoing The Rest Cure were also encouraged to eat a high calorie diet, which in combination with inactivity produced rapid weight gain. Throughout her life Virginia Woolf submitted to various rest cures to combat her recurrent ‘nervous illnesses’, and while she rarely stopped writing during these treatments it appeared that her weight was pivotal in her understanding of their success. As she writes in one of her letters, ‘I find that unless I weigh nine and half stones I hear voices and see visions and can neither write nor sleep’ (Appignanesi, p.243). She was, however, eventually bitter about the intrusion she felt her physicians George Savage and Maurice Craig had subjected her to – and amalgamated these men into the scathing portrait of Sir William Bradshaw in her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In the novel Woolf is clearly sceptical about weight, or lack of stimulus, as being analogous to health when she writes:

> Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve. (p.129)

Here we can detect Woolf's opposition to the notion that gaining weight to a medically sanctioned threshold of 'normality' is seen as gaining health – with the thesis that by acquiring health you become *happy* (or even sane). In her article '"Americanitis": The Disease of Living Too Fast' (2016) Julie Beck discusses this when she writes, 'When health is tied to happiness, it takes on an almost spiritual, moral quality: This is the way you *should* live, to be happy. … Mitchell, for one, characterized his writings about neurasthenia as "lay sermons".'

All these elements are clearly present in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' where a 'nameless woman' is 'denied pen and paper by her physician-husband during a severe postpartum depression' (Gilbert and Gubar 1989, p.77) and eventually becomes obsessed with the wallpaper in the upstairs room where she has become a prisoner. In the story Gilman's protagonist takes to surreptitiously writing down her thoughts as a form of release:

> I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus – but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.
>
> So I will let it alone and talk about the house. (pp.10-11)

The house has become her prison with her husband acting as the warden. Even though she constantly transgresses the rules by writing down her thoughts she has become passive – and for this she feels an increasing sense of guilt. 'I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more' (p.12). As her husband continues to reduce her will and independence he also makes it clear she needs to 'fatten up'. 'John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say

nothing of ale and wine and rare meat' (p.21). The resistance she feels to all her husband's ministrations, and her inherent powerlessness, leaves the reader squirming at her predicament – and her growing abject desperation.

Eventually she comes to understand the house as a metaphor for the estrangement she feels from her society and the need for her to escape from her environment – to either become emancipated or risk insanity. She identifies herself and her situation with the wallpaper – a mysterious and engulfing entity that needs to be pulled off, like a diseased skin, in order for her to escape. Ultimately it is the 'strange, provoking, formless sort of figure' she sees behind the wallpaper, a figure we can see is clearly a woman not unlike herself, that finally gives her release – and at the end of the story she shouts with jubilation, ' "I've got out at last, … And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (p.36)', before 'creeping' over her husband who has fainted across her path.

Throughout her life (1860-1935) Gilman wrote and lectured extensively on reformations to marriage and the family, which must have been considered extremely subversive at that time; however, it is telling that she is best remembered for 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Like all affecting works of art it appears to traverse time to leave a lasting impact on many contemporary writers and visual artists as it manages to combine the surreal, or the fantastic, with elements of a real or lived female experience.

It seems fair conjecture that Francesca Woodman, who I discussed in Chapter One, may have been directly influenced by the story – and the inclusion of two of her photographs from her *House* series is appropriate at this stage in illustrating a visual artist's interpretation of women's experience of entrapment in a repressive or stultifying environment that is literally 'consuming' her (Plates 4 and 5).

Plate 4. Francesca Woodman *House #3* Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

Whilst the female body in both of these photographs is indistinct and appears to be slowly disappearing, it is also evident that the body is becoming something else – the woman is 'transformed'. Anna Tellgren discusses this in her essay, 'Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel' with the statement, 'The notion of transformation also emerges in one of Woodman's strongest and eeriest series, *House*, from 1976, in which she gradually disappears into the walls, the torn wallpaper, the open fireplace, and other interior elements' (p.11).

Plate 5. Francesca Woodman *House #4* Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

I understand this transformation as something akin to Gilman's protagonist's eventual escape from her prison by becoming one with the woman behind the wallpaper, enabling her to render her gaoler supine and powerless. Unlike Abigail Solomon-Godeau's assertion in her essay 'Just Like a Woman' (1986) that 'Woodman presents herself as the living sacrifice to the domus', I feel it is more likely that Woodman is presenting the transformed woman as a subject of disturbing power with the ability to tell its own frightening story. As Anna-Karin Palm states in her essay, 'The Body and Its Stories: Thoughts on Francesca Woodman's Photography' (2015):

> The female body. Throughout the ages praised, depicted, described and elevated, pined for and idealized. But also turned into a taboo, regulated, dissected and analysed, confined and used and subdued. By the male gaze, power, and narrating voice. There are so many stories about us and our bodies, but they are almost never told by ourselves. (p.28)

My own difficult story eventually found its way into the novel *PWSL*, an excerpt recounted here that was written very early on, a part that displays similarities with both Gilman's story and Woodman's photographs:

> The room is airless and the light reveals cracks in the ceiling. I can hear the sound of trolleys in the corridor. The wheels click in time with my heartbeat. It is morning.
>
> I have not washed for days. They scrub at my skin and tsk under their tongues. I know they are waiting for me to speak. The toast is cold and flabby. I raise it to my mouth but cannot eat it. The breakfast tray is discarded – I am wasting. They urge me to drink the milk. *Mother's milk.* I take tiny sips from the glass throughout the morning and then empty it down the sink in the bathroom. The mirror in the bathroom exposes someone I used to recognise. Sexless, this person is dark on one side. Daylight creates a shadow across its face.
>
> In the room they have taken away my books. I must not move too much; I must regain my flesh. The walls are painted a sickly yellow – I wish there was wallpaper for me to look at. From the room I can hear the others shuffling down the polished surface of the corridor. In the evening the machine buffs away the day's journeys – it hums and slides around my brain like the sound of faraway feedback. (*PWSL*, pp.9-10)

While there are clear influences from a number of sources in this excerpt I have also employed methods to amalgamate various aspects of my own lived experiences in hospitals and institutions, both as a young woman, and later in my life with the recurrence of mental illness. There is also a sense of the disjointed nature of memory with the understanding that not only does it have the ability to enslave us; but also how recounting and revealing difficult memories can bring us closer to understanding the role they play in making up our identities.

The Woman Appears: the self as subject

While that previously unseen photograph created uncomfortable realisations about myself as a young woman, its ability to shock (or in Barthes' term: *pierce*) opened up an understanding of the power of the image to describe a life. As John Berger puts it in *Understanding a Photograph* (2013), 'When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future' (p.64). What we take from the past, even its shameful or disturbing qualities, can be used as part of a method for investigation into the evolution of our social identities.

More familiar to me are the photographs I have carried around with me all my life – amongst this pile of snapshots there is a small series of photographs (self-portraits) that stand out, namely because of their revelatory nature (Plates 6 and 7).

Plate 6. Self Portrait 1984

Plate 7. Self Portrait 1984

These ‘artifacts’ I like to call my ‘80s selfies’. As a term ‘selfie’ has a particularly modern understanding that my photographs do not share – I took them on a 35mm camera on a tripod with a timer, developed the film in a black box, exposed the shots using my father’s antique enlarger and printed them in the makeshift darkroom I had made in the laundry in my family’s house. More importantly, they were put away in a box and never ‘shared’. This was a completely solo project with the aim of producing works of art; however, there lingers in these images an affiliation with the modern fascination of recording, or ‘snapping up’ ourselves as an affirmation of our

existence. As Sontag puts it in *On Photography*, 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power' (p.4). Even though she was writing in the 1970s, Sontag seemed to understand where visual culture was going, noting later in the book that photography had become 'almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing' (p.8) and with uncanny prescience stated:

> It would not be wrong to speak of people having a compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing. Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. That most logical of nineteenth-century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph. (p.24)

Here it also clear that Sontag considers photography a mass art form – but not one that is especially artful – and this would seem to predict the coming ubiquitousness of images shared on social media platforms in contemporary society – the 'selfie' being a particularly reviled part of this equation and often regarded as shallow demonstrations of online narcissism. While my 'self-portraits' could be construed as sharing elements of the modern selfie (vanity, self-absorption, flattering angles) they differ in what is a revealing sense of 'masquerade'.

What is telling from these images are the elements I have employed to change my appearance, or identity – elements bound up in what it is to appear female. The heavy, exaggerated makeup is reminiscent of a 1920s flapper and the black lace scarf could be mistaken for the long, luxuriant hair of an Edwardian 'lady'. While these images suggest I was in the process of transforming myself into a more acceptable female ideal they also attest to the way I was playing with this notion and ultimately contesting it. As Mary Anne Doane states in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade' (1982), 'The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed' (p.49). It is also evident I was 'making-up' the woman I thought I should be, or even wanted to be, with the idea that it was incompatible with reality and could be discarded at any time. It is important at this

point to note the blouse I am wearing in both images, more visible in Plate 6, and the significance it plays in the idea that I wished to break with my old self and create a persona positioned in another time – even another century. The nineteenth century handmade black silk blouse I am wearing was an heirloom my grandmother gave to my sister just before she died in the 1970s and was an item I coveted for its intricate craftsmanship that spoke of a bygone era – an other-worldliness. The transformation I achieved by 'dressing up' myself as if a character from the books I was always reading indicates a desire to disappear into a fictional world – and also an innate understanding of the idea of the self as 'performance'. Annette Kuhn discusses this notion when she writes in *Family Secrets*, 'Dressing up as opposed to mere dressing implies … a more than purely functional attitude towards clothes: it points to the element of display, or performance, inherent in certain relations to dress' (p.51), and it would appear that, even as a young woman, I understood the importance of 'display' (particularly for women) in the creation of our identities. (It should be noted that at the time the photographs were taken I had yet to encounter self-performative photographic artists like Cindy Sherman, although, as I mentioned in the Introduction, it is clear that Sherman influenced me quite soon after as I featured her work in my undergraduate thesis.)

At a time when I was desperately striving to disappear from sight I was also reinventing myself in a playful twist on acceptable femininity – and giving myself a new method of appearing. What the photographs show is a girl on the verge of womanhood, even if that woman is in some ways a fake. If as Mary Price puts it in *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* (1994), 'In one sense the photograph is a self-authenticating document simply because it exists; but what it means has to be explicated. Self-authentication need not exclude fakery; if fakery is involved, that is what has to be explicated' (p.35) then the photograph can be one method to contest entrenched societal expectations, but it can also be used to expose uncomfortable truths about ourselves.

The *Untitled Film Series* Cindy Sherman produced in the 1970s contested and reinvented the 'male gaze', a key concept in feminist film theory, introduced by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in which she writes that women are represented by their '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' in

cinema – that women are 'displayed as sexual object' and 'spectacle' and man is 'the bearer of the look' (p.33). However, it was during this same time that the Australian photographer Carol Jerrems turned the camera on herself in much more provocative ways. After over a decade of photographing, 'the under-dogs, the under privileged of Australian society and all the things that people don't want to talk about or know about', as well as the burgeoning feminist and gay rights political movements of the time, she finally turned to herself as subject as she went through treatment for a rare and incurable disease – Budd-Chari syndrome. As Helen Ennis writes in *Up Close*, the monograph for Jerrem's exhibition at Heide Museum of Modern Art in 2010, 'She employed three inter-related modes of practice, documentary photography, portraiture and self-portraiture, the latter being the most performative' (p.151). Although I had encountered Jerrem's work in the 1990s – her most recognisable photograph *Vale Street* (1975) had gained iconographic status in the art world – I was unaware of the self-portraits she took just before she died until I went to the exhibition in 2010. What is most striking about these images (Plates 8-10) is their bluntness – almost in contrast to the way a person would like to be remembered, or even *seen*. Private and intensely personal the self-portraits leave the viewer with an uncomfortable feeling of witnessing something unsanctioned and certainly taboo – yet there remains a sense of revelation, a loud proclamation to all that is hidden from view in society – with their searing vulnerability we are faced not only with Jerrem's mortality, and also our own, but also the strength of her resistance. As Helen Ennis noted:

> In their hard-hitting realism the self-portraits can be seen as a continuation of Jerrems's radicalism. They are deliberately self-assertive acts, examples of a patient's "bad", even perverse behaviour. In her diary she wrote about her anger at being belittled as a patient, about not being listened to by some of the doctors involved in her treatment, and her determination to counter their chauvinism. After a "hateful" encounter with two doctors she declared on 20 July: '*This means war! I'm sick of being pushed around by men. A doctor is a person in a position of power. Patients liberation! I'm not going to take it anymore. I'm going to fight.*' (pp.152-3)

The force with which Jerrems faces the camera, naked and damaged, manages to cross a line for what is acceptable in the representation of the self and holds us with

the gaze of the camera lens – we are unable to look away. Just like all posthumous works of art they are imbued with presentiment knowledge that colours our interpretation, yet despite all this they also speak of the here and now. As I stood in front of those works I felt I was looking fully at the woman under siege – that her nakedness and vulnerability had revealed her true identity.

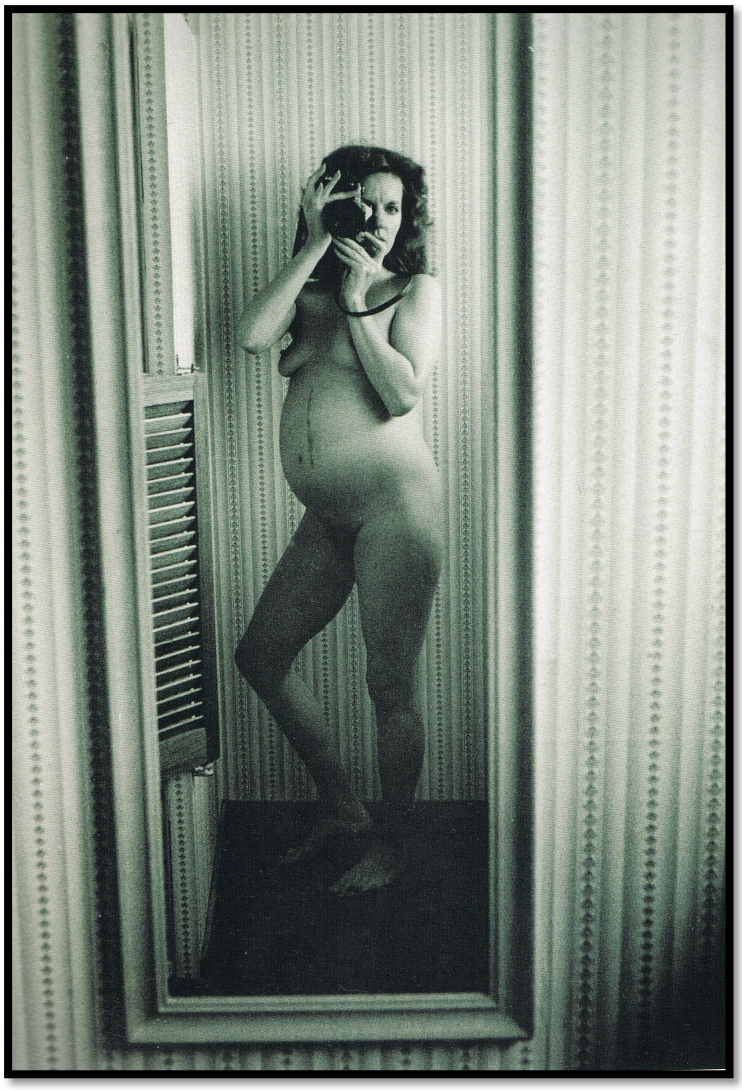


Plate 8. (Self Portrait) 1979

Plate 9. (Self Portrait) 1979

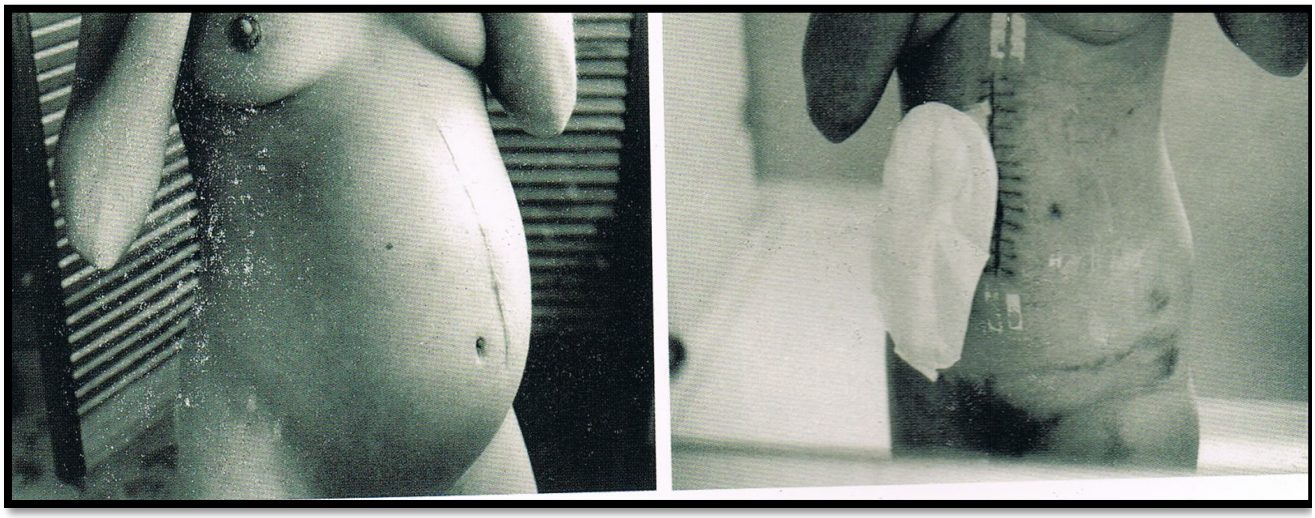


Plate 10. (Self Portrait) (Self Portrait After Surgery) 1979

From a series of photographs by Carol Jerrems taken in 1979 at the Royal Hobart Hospital, Tasmania – Printed by Roger Scott, 2004.

The unmistakable disdain in the voice of my lecturer all those years ago when discussing the writing of Sylvia Plath can be seen as a manifestation of fear – fear of the power of the writer's 'true voice' and her ability to look back at us with unflinching understanding of the nature of our existence. Jerrems looks at us with cool fortitude and declares this is 'how I am and I will not hide it'. In the *Ariel* poems Plath casts off 'The Angel of The House' to reveal her 'pitiless voice', one 'that had rid itself of its American accent' (Malcolm 1994, p.53), but she is not cool in her determination to risk stating what is unseemly, what is ultimately a declaration of independence. In the last stanza of 'Daddy' there is a clear sense of bitter rejoicing:

> There's a stake at your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always *knew* it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (Plath 1965, p.56)

This rejoicing could also be seen as what Rose describes as 'protest and emancipation from a condition which reduces the one oppressed to the barest minimum of human, but inarticulate life' (Rose 1991, p.224); a condition expressed in the earlier lines 'Barely daring to breathe or Achoo' and 'I could never talk to you/ The tongue stuck in my jaw', and is in a sense a fight against the father as oppressor. The unpalatable tone throughout the poem is what gives Plath's 'voice' its strength – a voice for which she is routinely revered, 'as the high priestess of direct psychic speech' (Rose 1991, p.69), but also condemned for what could be seen as illegitimate rage and unbecoming perversity from a *woman*.

We will never know how Plath wished the poems she wrote just before she died to be read, and indeed her greatest critic may have been Ted Hughes who in effect 'silenced' her by destroying some of her journals, perhaps because of the disquiet he felt around what he described as her ability to go straight for the 'central, unacceptable things'. Despite this, what she did leave was an enduring and uncompromising voice that continues to influence and inspire many artists. For me she possesses an enviable ability to impart something new upon each reading – she is

a writer who grows as we age – there is nothing simple in the 'truth' she conveys. Plath's tone in the *Ariel* poems, and even *The Bell Jar*, risks being construed as 'cold' – a complaint often levelled at strong women, especially if they are mothers – a complaint not usually aimed at men who are extolled for being 'cool' or 'objective'. This double bind strikes at the heart of what it means for contemporary female artists if they use their art to reveal continuing societal stigma in dissent or questioning the status quo (we only have to look at online abuse of feminists to see how this is a growing and troubling reality) and points to the necessity for those voices to become stronger and not diluted – or even succumb to the temptation to 'tell it slant' in the manner Emily Dickinson implied in the nineteenth century. Rose discusses this in her book *Women in Dark Times* (2014) when she writes, 'Feminism, we are being told, should wear a mask, pretend to be something else. … The word feminism upsets people – men, but not only men – too much. It agitates, stirs things up, messes with our minds' (pp.259-60), which we can see reflected in the recent resurgence of Men's Rights Activists and opposition to the term feminism in favour of the euphemistic term 'equalist'.

In 1931 when Virginia Woolf gave her lecture 'Professions for Women' she stated that women '… must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies of they are to succeed', and from her tone I understand her opposition to this notion. It has been nearly 90 years since Woolf's lecture yet it would appear that this is still something we need, as artists and social commentators, to continue to refute.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing the Novel

The Haunting of Imagery

The fascination I hold for my family's history – the untold and the barely glimpsed with their attendant mysterious implications – could be seen to be forged on the yearly expedition my family would take to South Australia to visit my grandparents in their dark house in Victor Harbor. We would always arrive on a Sunday, for a heavy roast dinner, and the scent of boiled cabbage and roast potatoes still take me back to those childhood memories – the fragility and unearthliness of my elderly grandparents and the necessity to be 'quiet' and 'still'.

My sister and I would sleep in the front sitting room, in the lumpy double bed that seemed to smell of another century, looked over by the imposing, heavily framed photograph of a young man in WWI uniform. We knew this man as 'Uncle Ralph' and that he had died on the Western Front in 1917. Although I was a child, I easily understood the sense of memorial suggested by the prominent position of the photograph – and while it was not openly discussed, it seemed possible that Uncle Ralph was my grandmother's first, lost love. There was also something overtly romantic, but ultimately tragic, about that image – and it roused in me an uneasy realisation of the power of unresolved grief and the force of memory in the creation of our place in the world. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the arrested life of Offred is compared to the women of the past who had spent their lives waiting for men when she asks, 'How long were you supposed to mourn, and what did they say? Make your life a tribute to the loved one' (p.239). I wonder, now as I write this, how my grandmother felt each time she looked at that image – it is indeed a sad, but compelling, mystery.

This sense of mystery was re-awakened in my thirties when I went to a family reunion and discovered the photograph of my great-great-great aunt Lois. Her image intrigued me, in much the same way as that photograph in my grandparents' house –not only

for her plaintive beauty, which was striking and remarkable, but also because her calm face contrasted so markedly with her hard-worn hands. This contrast impelled me to know more about her, to discover more about the essence of this woman, and so, with the help of my parents' voluminous genealogy of my father's family, I began to research her life.

As I read through that large document I realised, with disappointment, that although there was a vast amount of information about the men in my family, there was relatively little written about the women. This was due, in part, to the amount of written texts the men had left behind. As I was to discover, my ancestors' life in Australia had begun with great hardship for they had travelled from England, on the ship 'The Buffalo', under the misapprehension that they were coming to a fertile land where they could make a living as farmers. In 1836 when my ancestors Luke and Harriet Broadbent emigrated, Kangaroo Island in South Australia had been touted as the next great settlement, the place for the new capital (and a free settlement); however, it proved to be arid and uninhabitable. Like many others, Luke and Harriet and their five children lasted only a few years on Kangaroo Island, living in tents and then makeshift huts, before leaving to settle on the more fertile lands in the Adelaide hills. All I could find out about Lois was that she was Luke and Harriet's youngest child, born after the move to Adelaide, her age when she was married, how many children she had, and the date of her death. And her death was embedded in my family's mythology – an almost unspoken understanding that she had drowned herself in the water tank on her farm.

In this chapter I will begin by discussing how this family myth, and the discovery of a very different image (a painted portrait) of Lois, prompted and challenged the writing of *PWSL*, and how it instigated a series of questions about the ethical dilemmas in writing a re-imagined life based on my own subjective understandings derived from both the painting and the photograph – with the underlying tenet that 'photographs furnish evidence' (Sontag 1977, p.5). This leads to a detailed exploration of the importance in framing the creative text in the historiographical metafictional tradition – both as a feminist act and for the significance of this thesis as a whole. To conclude

I will discuss how *The Blind Assassin* by Atwood, and her use of metafictional devices in the text, informed my own writing process as I completed the final draft of *PWSL*.

To me, because of the whispers about mental illness and suicide, her story sounded much more interesting than the stories of the men in my family. The memory of the photograph of Lois stayed with me for a number of years until one day I found it on the Internet on a genealogical site about the people who had come to Australia in 1836 on 'The Buffalo'. Even though this image was a copy I printed on my computer, and not the original photograph, it had a dramatic impact on me, one I could only understand as a kind of haunting. The more I looked at the photograph the more I wanted to know about this woman, and this led to a desire to begin writing a narrative about her life. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart proposes that the photograph, although it is in a sense 'silent', has the ability to puncture the two dimensional surface, to give a narrative poignancy:

> The photograph as souvenir is a logical extension of the pressed flower, the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing us penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narrative of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia. (Stewart 1996, p.138)

I understood that the photograph of Lois had interrupted my train of thought, had created what Barthes describes as the *punctum*, or a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (Barthes 1980, p.42) which prompted me to discover more about her life. Barthes goes further to explain this idea, especially in connection to historical photographs as, 'This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in

historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die' (p.96). What interested me in the photograph, what 'pricked' me, was the presentiment of her future I sensed from the image. I knew only a little of her story from my parents' genealogy so I realised that I would have to use my skills as a writer and my imagination if I was to bring her back to life, to give her a way to 'reappear' (Solnit 2014). And although the image started this process, the words would give the 'evidence' I had found in the photograph a way to reach an audience.

Photographs and Furnished Evidence

Like most photographs from the nineteenth century the portrait of Lois possesses a static, fixed quality. This is not a snapshot but a carefully manipulated and constrained representation. One can almost feel the subject drawing in her breath to remain still. Her features are not very clear, her eyes are partially obscured by shadow, and her dress has been reduced to a flat, black outline. (Was she wearing a shawl? It is hard to tell.) It is difficult to read any emotion or feeling from her face – it is her hands, and the way they stand out, that give the sense of an uneasy hardness. Her hands, for me, spoke of work and grief. I felt sure I could understand a little more about this woman, and her life, from this photograph.

It was this personal connection that led to the development of the part contemporary, part historical structure of the novel. I understood that if I was to include my own story, in fictionalised form, it could have greater impact for the reader and provide a stronger basis to reveal Lois's life as I imagined it. It would also give me a way to explore fictional devices, the slippery nature of distinctions between history and fiction, and to discuss the subjectivity inherent in accepted forms of historical writing. I decided that in my novel my main protagonist Sarah would be writing a 'biography' of her ancestor 'Rebecca'. The photograph of Lois could only give me (and Sarah in the novel) limited information; however, it helped create Lois's character, and her life, in my mind. As Sontag states in *On Photography*: 'Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation,

and fantasy' (p.23). The writing of the novel progressed, with this image of Lois looking over me, and I felt I was succeeding in getting inside this character, in understanding what had made her so sad. It was her untimely death that propelled me in writing the conclusion – an untimely death that, in my mind, the photograph seemed to augur. Could the photograph, by the nature of its hold over me – by its *haunting* – be taking control of the story I wished to write? Were my feelings of connection with this character's doomed nature getting in the way of finding the right conclusion? Was I just looking for the image I wanted to find? Was I capable of making her more than just a fantasy? Sontag echoes my concerns when she writes:

> Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. … A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. (Sontag 1977, p.15)

These doubts continued as I began to write about the last days of 'Rebecca's' life in the novel, and then changed, in an unexpected way, when I received a new image of Lois from a family member. This new image was a photograph of a painting of Lois that challenged all my ideas about what she really looked like, and created a sense of unease about this woman I thought I had begun to know so well. I wondered, as I compared the two images, if I had relied too heavily on the 'veracity' of the photograph to 'furnish evidence' (Sontag 1977, p.5)) and created a confusion within me about which image I could trust as being 'true'. As Sontag states further in *On Photography*:

> While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do

> is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. (Sontag 1977, p.6)

I concluded, that what I was doing was investing in that 'shady commerce between art and truth', in fact, that is what I was attempting to comment on within the novel. This led me to understand that both images held an element of truth, as Timothy Dow Adams writes in *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*:

> Just as autobiographies are obviously artificial representations of lives, so photographs are clearly manufactured images: sitters are artificially posed and lighted, made to conform to the laws of perspective and the ideology of the photographic culture, reduced in size, reproduced on a flat plane often without colour – and yet there is something undeniably different about a photographic representation of a person as opposed to a painting of that same person. (Adams 2000, p.5)

With this in mind I began a new chapter of the novel. This new image, a painted portrait that endowed my character with *colour* and *life*, had changed, in my mind, her very being, and sent the trajectory of the narrative on a new path. In this excerpt from *PWSL* the writer is both subject and investigator:

> The photograph shows an elegant woman of indeterminate age with strawberry blonde hair, perfect porcelain skin and green eyes. I stare at it in an attempt to see Rebecca as I have known her for so many years, but she looks like a completely different woman. It is true there is a certain sadness in her countenance – she looks away to the side – maybe in contemplation of her future, or it could just be a pose prescribed by the artist, as an aid to her natural beauty. And she is beautiful. A lovely English Rose.

I place the photograph of the painting, and the black and white portrait side by side, but it is no use, however much I stare at them both I cannot see that they are depictions of the same woman. I wonder how it could be possible that the woman I have known for so long had blonde hair? In my portrait her hair looks black, and then I notice something for the first time. It occurs to me that in my portrait Rebecca is wearing a headscarf that almost completely covers her hair. How could I have been so blind? I begin to see that the features are the same, or certainly similar, in both women: the set of the mouth, the line of the cheek and the chin, the spaces between the eyes and the forehead. And then I begin to wonder if I am making this all up, that I am being led by my imaginative desire to *see* the evidence. Can I be trusted in this investigation? I am also disappointed with this new image for it lacks the pathos of her portrait, and it begins a series of questions in my mind about Rebecca, things I had never thought about before, the foremost being a question about *class*. (*PWSL*, pp.134-5)

This new path was, in part, based on my understandings of how both photographs and paintings have the ability to 'furnish evidence' and the differences between them. As

Sontag explains in *On Photography*, 'Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it' (p.5). Berger goes further with this idea in relation to photography's power versus an artistic rendering when he states, 'Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalistic, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does' (Berger, 2013 p.51). I had always thought that my photograph of Lois had given me the ability to see something of the person she had been, and that perhaps the story of her suicide had influenced the way I 'read' the photograph. Even so, I believed it was an authentic depiction of her, but when I was confronted with the painting, an image that showed a very different woman – a lighter, more refined representation – I had to concede I had been manipulated by my natural inclination to *believe* in the veracity of the photograph. What the painting showed me was a woman of a different class to the one I had imagined. It also gave her an aspect of happiness, of fitting in with her environment. Was I to believe this when I had always ascribed a sense of uncertainty and unhappiness to Lois, something I had taken as a given from the way she appeared in my photograph? As a writer did I 'tend to think of the photograph as revelation in which secrets may be disclosed' (Price 1994, p.42), as opposed to a painting created by an artist? If I was to understand that the painting was an accurate representation of Lois, how would this change the way I was going to write about the last days of her life? The effect of the painting was indeed a revelation for me, but it didn't change what I did know about Lois – that at the age of 36 she drowned in the water tank on her farm. I decided that the painting could inform a more rounded method of writing about her life, that it had the ability to imbue her character with more *colour* and *light*, but what it lacked, something undeniably present in the photograph, was a more abstract quality of *aura*.

This quality, if we think of it as Walter Benjamin describes it in his essay 'A Short History of Photography' (1931) as 'A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand' (p.209), or more recently by Herve Guibert in his collection of essays *Ghost Image* (1982) as **'**The passage of time across a photograph' that creates 'a mask of makeup; time bears the photograph along, deflects it.' (p.130), then could my photograph, with its aura, its sense of haunting,

provide a way for me to bring this character to life in a way that the painting could not? Benjamin was writing about photography as a relatively new technology in 1931; however, he gets at the heart of my narrative's conclusion when he writes about a photograph taken in 1843 by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson:

> In photography, however, one encounters something strange and new: in that fishwife from Newhaven who looks at the ground with such relaxed and seductive shame something remains that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer Hill, something that is not to be silenced, something demanding the name of the person who had lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into *art*. (Benjamin 1931, p.202)

That emphasis on the word *art* seems to speak of the photograph as possessing something other than just representation – almost as if the image itself has the ability to speak and, ultimately, to transcend a chasm of years. In essence, it has a spectral nature. Like all images that give the viewer presentiments of death – just like those shocking photographs after the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945; photographs that show an absence, or 'a persisting shadow' (Jones 2006) where a life had been suddenly obliterated – my photograph of Lois, instead of losing its resonance for me because of the painting, compelled me further to write about this woman's thoughts and fears with greater certainty. Berger clearly articulates this idea when he writes that, **'**A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it' (Berger 2013, p.20). Could my photograph be an effective implement in my desire to discover not '*what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*' (Barthes 1980, p.85) and give me the inspiration to conclude my narrative with pathos and empathy? I knew from my parents' genealogy that a year before her death Lois had given birth to a girl who had only lived for three months. This was a documented fact. The photograph helped me to stretch out, in a kind of *chiaroscuro*, her thoughts and fears – the painting helped me to fill in the *colour*.

During this part of the writing, I also understood that my search for 'historical facts' was a method to give my narrative a sense of authenticity, but it also suggested I was engaged in an 'excavation' – to unravel a mystery and reclaim the invisibility and silence inherent in both Sarah and Rebecca's stories. In the next part of this chapter I will discuss how I used historiographic metafiction in the writing of *PWSL* in order to highlight the gaps and omissions – or the mysteries – that often surround women's stories because of shame or taboo, with the understanding that writing historiographic metafiction can be seen as a feminist act. To elucidate these points I will also return to the writing of Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields, discussed in Chapter One, and how their use of metafiction in unearthing women's stories informed and influenced my own writing process.

Reclaiming Invisibility and Silence Through Historiographical Metafiction

At the beginning of writing *PWSL*, my initial overarching aim was to reclaim the invisibility and silence inherent in women's lives. With this in mind I understood that structuring the text in the historiographical metafictional tradition would be instrumental in positioning myself from a feminist perspective – as a storyteller with a political platform. As Solnit writes in her essay 'A Short History of Silence' (2017):

> Liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories. A free person tells her own story. A valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place. (p.19)

The gaps and omissions in the history of Lois's life, as well as the parts of my own life I felt unable to safely articulate through shame, seemed to me an important part of the discourse concerning what makes up a woman's life, how we come to know ourselves, and the importance of our place in society. This place can also be seen as the ability to have a 'voice', to write back what may have been censored out of disgrace or fear, with the underlying message that 'truth', while eagerly sought, is not easily quantified in both historical and fictional texts. My creative manuscript, as a historiographical metafictional text, also contributes to the feminist tradition by

commenting on the exclusion of women from The Canon and a great deal of Western History. In Western culture it may appear that women have come a long way towards equality; however, it is my contention that society, as a whole, is having trouble keeping up, and this can be seen in recent backlashes and regressions I mentioned in Chapter One. In Shields' novel *Unless* (2002), her protagonist puts it succinctly:

> I need to speak further about this problem of women, how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements.
> *But we've come so far*; that's the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we've arrived at the new millennium and we haven't "arrived" at all. We've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear. (p.67)

Solnit refers to this lack of voice as a part of a process that allows women to be 'dehumanized or excluded from one's humanity', with the understanding that, '…the history of silence is central to women's history' (Solnit 2017, p.18).

If this 'history of silence' is to be adequately countered, then my novel could be seen as writing new histories for women through a feminist lens with Joan Wallach Scott's statement in mind:

> Feminism's history has exposed as instruments of patriarchal power stories that explained the exclusion of women as a fact of nature. And it has written new histories to counter the lie of women's passivity, as well as their erasure from the records that constitute collective memory. (2011, p. 33)

The silence surrounding Lois's story, while clearly bound up with the shame of her suicide, was also part of a larger story of omission from the historical narrative for the majority of women in the nineteenth century, and this silence can be understood as a feminist issue – one that is still relevant for women today. In this sense it can be seen as important to highlight the inherited power structures that continue to inhabit our methods of narration – and that my choice in using metafictional devices will enable a commentary on the writing process itself as a way to undermine and question

notions of 'objectivity' and 'universal truths'. In her book *Metafictions?* (1993) Wenche Ommundsen describes metafiction as presenting, 'its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artefact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning making systems of our culture' (p.12), which can be powerful tools for deeper understandings of how texts can be used as systems of exclusion.

Similarly, by writing historiographical metafiction I aim to 'confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representations' and the idea of the past existing only as knowledge given to us, or passed down to us through texts (Hutcheon 1988, p.106). Feminist scholars such as Scott and Liz Stanley have written extensively on the subjectivity of history within fiction. This has been taken up in feminist fiction as a way to undermine the structure of realist texts and highlights their subjective paradigms. Historical writing and theory has lost its status as a truthful, objective discourse; and metafiction, with its reflective, self-aware methods, can be seen as a relevant way to explore this issue in feminist fictional texts (Hutcheon 1988).

The success of *PWSL* as feminist fiction also rests on its overall structure as a non-linear narrative. Shields discusses this in her essay 'Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard' with the statement:

> Women's writing has already begun to dismantle the rigidities of genre … to replace that oppressive narrative arc we've lived with so long, the line of rising action – tumescence, detumescence – what some feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling. (Shields 2003, p.35)

Written as a series of vignettes that are linked and often interconnect, the novel propels itself through time using Sarah's voice in the present to comment on the past. This reinforces the concept that our lives are not lived as neatly hewed constructions, as is so often represented in history and fiction, but in cyclical, fluid and intersecting states. There are also elements of dream-like states that can be read as fractured, or unreliable memories – states that reflect Sarah's own disturbed mental condition. Throughout the novel Sarah is literally 'travelling' in ever decreasing circles, and her constant train journeys symbolise the difficulty of women to find the 'right' path on

the Hero's Journey. In an effort to avoid the more realist convention of concluding the story in marriage, or at least in some kind of romantic solution, Sarah completes her journey as a lone, autonomous woman. Conversely, Rebecca is seen in a fixed and stultifying position, in a sense, imprisoned by her place as a wife and mother. It is this representation that consistently worries Sarah as she struggles to find the right method to write Rebecca's story. As Sarah doubts her ability to not misrepresent the past she describes her writing process while she is still at The Farm:

> I have been at The Farm for four months but I have failed to start the biography of Rebecca. There have been many false starts, essays that begin with the words,
>
> > She was born on Kangaroo Island, Australia's third largest island, in 183 –
> >
> > Her first memory is one of flight –
> >
> > She was the last child of six children, the only one born in Australia –
> >
> > At the age of 36 Rebecca gave birth to her seventh child. Later that year she drowned herself in the water tank on her husband's farm in Cherry Hills, South Australia –
>
> The problem, it seems to me, is that I am unsure of what I am actually trying to write. I know I want to write about Rebecca's life, and to strip away that 150 years of silence, yet there is a nagging doubt hanging over me. In that connection I have made with the image of my ancestor, the one photograph I have of Rebecca, confusion exists. Is it possible for me to extricate myself from the story? After all, it's not supposed to be an autobiography. It's supposed to be a biography – factual, true. Do I have the right to make it all up? Surely that would be fiction. (*PWSL*, p.101)

This concern Sarah harbours of putting too much of 'herself' in her writing is a problem underlying the slippery nature of subjectivity and accepted ideas of verisimilitude. As Shields writes:

> This sorting out of 'reality' and invention is not a new problem but a very old one, and has to do, I think, with the inability of fiction to stare at itself. So many questions arise. Is there such a beast as truth? Can we set aside our attachment to truth telling? Who makes the rules? Who is telling the story, and how does the teller relate the tale? (Shields 2003, p.25)

I would also add that it is important to know how the teller *relates* to the tale, and as Sarah concludes that – *everywhere you go – there you are* – she understands that she has no choice but to be part of the narrative.

By combining historical and contemporary fictional techniques in the novel, and as a female writer writing from a feminist perspective, I aim to solve some of these inherent problems with authenticity by using historiographical metafiction. If the 'truth' is not so easy to grasp in historical and life writing, then at least the novel will attempt to highlight this and offer methods for its retrieval. By commenting on the inherent subjectivity in written texts, including historical writing, it will also be clear as Hutcheon states in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), that, 'History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct' (p.16). As a writer who is 'constructing' a metafictional narrative, and re-imagining lives from the past, I must also be aware of what I choose to include, and what I choose to omit. As Hilary Mantel so poetically put it:

> Truth is squalid and full of blots, and you can only find it in the accumulation of dusty and broken facts, in the cellars and sewers of the human mind. History's what people are trying to hide from you, not what they are trying to show you. You search for it in the same way you sift through a landfill: for evidence of what people want to bury. (2004, p.151)

In my own search for 'evidence' throughout the writing of *PWSL* it became clear that what was missing was indeed important and highlighted the difficulty I had in relating

my own story without self-censorship. Ultimately I understood that by using historiographical metafiction, and acknowledging in the text where I was unsure of the 'facts', or where my memory may have been at fault (self-reflexivity), and blurring the boundaries between fiction, memoir and historical writing, I would be able to create an avenue for questioning these choices without offering any sense of tidy resolution. As Hutcheon writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism:*

> The present and the past, the fictive and the factual: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions. In other words, the boundaries remain, even if they are challenged. (p.72)

As a historiographic metafictional narrative, *PWSL* creates a 'feeling of unease about both the past and its role in the present' (Heilmann & Llewellyn 2004, p.139) by highlighting how much of women's histories have been lost to omission or evasion, but one that does not offer easy conclusions to these problems. This idea is echoed by Natalie Kon-yu as she discusses her own dilemmas in writing her ancestor's history in her article ' Letting go of the truth: researching and writing the other side of silence in women's lives' (2010):

> Given the very real problem of women's exclusion from historical discourse, and the shame that inhibits the passing on of certain stories I felt that writing a fiction that simply filled in the gaps would perpetuate the idea that information about women's history can be easily recovered. Instead, I wanted to write a fiction that would not gloss over the difficulties in finding information about a woman from the past. (Kon-yu 2010)

While it is important to understand the limitations and contradictions in writing about silenced women's lives, it is equally important to find methods to give agency to those losses and erasures. It is my contention that if we don't re-imagine the past, there is a real danger that women's stories will be lost forever. As a female writer working from a feminist position, understanding the choices I have made in re-imagining my ancestor's life in *PWSL* is important for the contribution of the project as a whole.

To re-imagine is also a way to re-remember – to bring to the fore what has been forgotten due to oppression or stigma. As Gayle Greene writes in her article 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory' (1991), 'Feminism is a re-membering, a re-assembling of our lost past and lost parts of ourselves' (p.300), and goes on to suggest it is a political act, a method of 'consciousness raising' and a 'bringing to mind of repressed parts of self and experience' (p.300). The dual stories in *PWSL*, linked by ancestry and shared experiences of shame or shunning, are both given agency through the writing and forced out into the open, to break through the silence in order to create change in the present. As Liedeke Plate states in *Transforming memories in contemporary women's rewriting* (2011):

> Remembering the past differently, women's rewriting embodies a feminist approach to the past confident that change is possible and that it will be brought about by changing the stories which shape cultural foundation myths and thus human existence. As such, it forges cultural memory. Focusing especially on the re-inscription of effaced, obscured, or altogether forgotten lives into literary history, women's rewriting exemplifies memory's reworking of the past to shape identity in the present. (pp.8-9)

Plate goes on to suggest that 'Silence is a *topos* in women's writing. It is a motive for writing and for rewriting. A central theme of feminist criticism, it is also a key issue for cultural memory' (p.97). This idea of 'cultural memory' is integral to the way Rebecca and Sarah's stories are linked, and how the past can often shape the present through the act of remembrance. Sarah finds the strength to tell her own story through re-imagining Rebecca's life with the understanding they share events and traumas that cannot be spoken. Plate sees remembrance as 'predicated upon communication' and that 'silence and forgetting are linked: silence is a tool of forgetting and amnesia' (p.97). To see the past differently is to re-write cultural memory, or to 'write back to silence in an effort to generate usable pasts, answering it with stories of its own' (Plate 2011, p.97). What I aimed to achieve with *PWSL* was not an act of redemption; rather, I wanted a method to give voice to the women who have been unheard, forgotten or passed over in official histories. That I was not seeking to speak 'the truth' is important, as I knew this would not be possible; and ultimately, despite all the misgivings I harboured about my right to unearth my ancestor's life, what I

realised was her life deserved to be told. As Kon-yu states in her article 'The recounting of a life is a cheat': Unreliable narration and fragmentary memory in historical fiction' (2012) as she discusses her own writing process:

> I have not told the 'truth' about Serafina's past, but by using highly subjective narration and offering contradictory memories, I have tried, instead, to show how her past is a difficult one to articulate because of the shame associated with it. I want to suggest that even though this character, like my own ancestor, has a past that cannot simply be told, her life should be remembered, however faulty or fragmented the memories might be. (Kon-yu, 2012)

In *The auto/biographical I*, Stanley questions the idea that writers can adequately reconstruct lives in biography and suggests that to recover the past and comprehend those lives in a historical sense can be quite problematic (1992). Stanley goes on to argue that good history and biography, from a feminist perspective, should ask more pertinent questions like, 'the past from *whose* viewpoint? … Why *this* viewpoint and no other?' (1992, p.7) Sarah comes to understand that Rebecca has been left out of her family's history and wishes to reinstate her in a meaningful and truthful way. The problems she encounters as she attempts this cause her to reflect on her own difficult past, and this gives her the freedom to uncover not only Rebecca's voice but also her own.

It seemed to me, as I was coming to end of writing *PWSL*, that small freedoms for women are largely hard-won and often unrecorded, and the minutiae of daily life is usually regarded as unremarkable, domestic or trivial and consequently not included in conventional fiction. In her poem 'The Glass Essay' Anne Carson writes about Emily Brontë and her 'unremarkable' ways:

> 'Emily is in the parlour brushing the carpet,'
> records Charlotte in 1828.
> Emily made her awkward way
> across days and years whose bareness appalls her biographers. (Carson 1998, pp.7-8)

My own family history relegated Lois to a peripheral position, barely mentioned except for her one act of violence against herself – and, unlike Brontë, she left behind no written texts to describe her daily life. I can only hope that my novel will fill in some of the detail missing in the lives of Sarah and Rebecca and record some of their 'small freedoms'.

Margaret Atwood and the 'voice outside the window'

In Chapter One I discussed in detail how Atwood has consistently used fiction to comment on accepted roles for women and the way they are represented in history. This is particularly evident in *The Blind Assassin* where an old woman recounts her life in a series of flashbacks that build to unravel the mystery of her life. The novel is sardonic and critical of romantic ideals, in a sense the *antithesis* of the romance genre, and while it is clearly satirical of conventional novelistic methods, it also uses this structure to remark on memory and its unreliability. Her main character is constantly inviting the reader to question her facts and her reasons for recounting them:

> How do I know all these things? I don't know them, not in the usual sense of knowing. But in households like ours there's often more in silences than in what is actually said … (p.98)

> Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants … At the very least we want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down. (p.118)

Throughout *The Blind Assassin* Atwood includes 'historical documents' with information to explain some of the mysteries in the story. What Atwood highlights in these sections is the unreliable nature of these documents and how they point towards what is left out. This indicates that the reader has access to more reliable information in the fictionalization of her life than in these more 'objective' texts that may indeed be 'fictions' with no basis in historical accuracy.

Similarly, the 'various interludes into science fiction' in *The Blind Assassin*, 'force the reader to readdress accepted norms of textual reliability, and also to consider the truths encoded in myth and legend' (Tolan, 2007 p.259), highlighting the way these truths are often passed down to us as quietly spoken mysteries in family mythologies and stories. As I was reading *The Blind Assassin*, with its intersecting stories and legends, I wondered if facts have the ability to change over time like words in a children's party game of whispers, and what that meant for my own concerns of authenticity and historical accuracy in writing the conclusion to *PWSL*. These concerns are echoed by Atwood's central character Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin* when she writes:

> I look back over what I have written and I know it's wrong, not because of what I have set down, but because of what I have omitted. What isn't there has a presence, like the absence of light.
>
> You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn't necessarily get you the truth. Two and two equals a voice outside the window. (p.484)

That 'voice outside the window' was something I had often imagined as I sat at my desk in my solitary occupation of writing – a voice that embodied both my own earthly preoccupations and the ghosts of the past who would visit me in my dreams. I also understood that a dream could be something that pulls you towards a desired conclusion – a nebulous space both fantastical and rooted in reality – a space where Sarah and Rebecca could finally meet. In this excerpt from *PWSL* Sarah recounts a series of dreams, finishing with what could be explained as a portent:

> I dreamt that I am outside the house at Rebecca's farm in Cherry Gardens, looking through the kitchen window, when I see Rebecca kneading dough on the kitchen bench. She looks up from her work, brushes the hair from her eyes and waves at me. She mouths the words, 'It's nearly done,' and goes back to working the dough. When I woke I wondered who I was in that dream. Had Rebecca recognised me? Did she have a picture of me on her dressing table? (*PWSL* p.73)

Much later, as Sarah continues to doubt her own ability to recount the life of the woman she finds so enigmatic, she realises that Rebecca has been there all along, speaking to her through her dreams. This makes it possible for Sarah to clearly imagine Rebecca as an animated figure, no longer a two-dimensional image sitting on her ledge, and in writing what she describes as a 'soliloquy in Rebecca's voice', she finally gains access to how Rebecca would appear *inside* the window:

> If I am secretive it is just as well for no one should know what I have been inking. I should have recovered well by now for it has been two weeks – William has already started preparations for the reaping, my mother is looking after the younger children, my niece Hattie has taken over the baking and other domestic duties – but all I can do is lie in this bed and think of everything that has been taken away from me. I cannot eat and when the doctor visits he is very stern with his remonstrations. How can this be? How can I watch the life going on around me when all I want to do is to disappear? Is it that I am afraid of growing old like my mother?
>
> I tell them that all is well and I feel much recovered. I make promises to rise in the morning and eat something sustaining. I make promises to myself to begin a better life – to be of some use and not such a burden. But every morning it is the same – I cannot face the brightness of the morning sun.
>
> For two weeks I have been having the same dream. I am making the daily bread – my hands are covered with flour and my hair is falling into my eyes. As I knead the dough I look up and see my youngest child, Mary Elizabeth, waving at me from the kitchen window. Her face is clear and young and she mouths the words, 'When will breakfast be ready?' and I reply, 'It's nearly done,' and then she is gone. (*PWSL* p.109-10)

The sadness I feel as I read those last lines indicates that I have not solved the mystery but merely added to it – the words and characters I have chosen may have given voice to something previously unspeakable, or as Shields puts it, 'the absent narratives … the dark void or unbridgeable gap … the vivid dream that fades by morning' (Shields 2003, pp.30-1); however, I know that the legacy of my ancestor Lois lives on beyond

what I can imagine – this legacy resides in the faces of my relatives, and I have a photograph to prove it.

CONCLUSION

Lois' granddaughters: Jean Lois, Mollie and Gwenllian

When I look at the clear, open faces of these young women, what I see is not only the legacy of Lois, but also the force with which the past runs into the present – and compels us to look towards the future. The determination in those faces speaks to me of the original aims and desires I had as I began writing this thesis. Now, the reminders we have of Lois are not only to be found in her descendants, but, also, now in the creative component of this thesis.

This imagining is central to my work in reclaiming silenced stories, and while this created conflicts and difficulties with my understandings of veracity and accuracy, it also provided me with 'another way of telling', equally important in writing about women's lives. As Solnit states:

> Part of my own endeavor as a writer has been to find ways to value what is elusive and overlooked, to describe nuances and shades of meaning, to celebrate public life and solitary life, and – in John Berger's phrase – to find

> another way of telling, which is part of why getting clobbered by the same old ways of telling is disheartening'. (Solnit 2017, p.7)

Similarly, the success of my writing resides in uncovering the stories that are often hidden through shame and entrenched societal stigma – facets of institutionalisation, mental illness, transgression, or the 'elusive and overlooked' lives of many women in history. While the overarching narrative in the novel is one of recovery (both Sarah's and my own) there is an understanding that it is the act of remembering the past, and coming to terms with it, that has the ability to be transformative. Furthermore, the use of metafictional devices, and the melding of the conventional genres of fiction, biography, history and memoir throughout the novel, creates a distinctive method of narration that comments on the subjective nature of all forms of writing, and highlights the importance of rethinking the use of dominant narratives in contemporary fiction.

Many of the writers and artists I have mentioned in this exegesis have commented on dominant narratives in their work, and their influence has been critical, both in the research I undertook and my own creative output. During the research for this project I was also introduced to a number of writers who work within a narrative non-fiction field – a style that weaves the use of memoir, literary theory, history and the essay into bold and powerful texts. The work of these writers have equally inspired and excited me, and given me a clear understanding of new methods I can use to push my writing and research in further directions – and perhaps some aspects of where my writing can be improved.

In *The Faraway Nearby* (2014) Solnit's past roles as an activist, art critic and essayist are utilised to create a memoir/narrative non-fiction text. Similarly, *The Orchard* (1994) by Drusilla Modjeska melds fact and fiction, memoir and the essay, into a narrative about four diverse women. Both these writers use their own stories to comment on the wider world, the connection between writing and experience, and how the ordinary can be as powerful as the extraordinary. Solnit puts this succinctly when she writes:

> We are all the heroes of our own stories, and one of the arts of perspective is to see yourself small on the stage of another's story, to see the vast expanse of

> the world that is not about you, and to see your power, to make your life, to make others, or break them, to tell stories rather than be told by them. (Solnit 2014, p.29)

It is within this structure of narrative non-fiction that I envisage the future of my writing and research heading – furthering my interest in history, photography and literary theory, whilst extending the life writing that is so integral to this thesis as a whole. With this in mind, as I write this conclusion, I am forced to concede there are some aspects I could not include in this project (my own work with photography, or the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois for instance); however, these are exciting and inspiring aims for the future.

One of the most striking discoveries of this project has been the power of the 'artistic voice' in offering solutions to combat the gaps and omissions in women's stories; and while I am aware I have a great more deal to say, I am confident that this project has allowed the silenced to 'speak', the forgotten or shamed to 'appear' and that I have given a space for women to live beyond their roles as daughters, wives and mothers or more broadly, all women who have lost their names to male patronyms.

Perhaps, if in the future women have found ways to counteract the patronym, our quest for an equal position in society may become just a bit easier. As Modjeska writes in *The Orchard*,

> Wherever she goes she takes with her these queues of lost women, well not really queues as they're never in straight lines, milling around is how she thinks of them: and every now and again one breaks free, swinging out, her old fashioned skirts, her cream petticoats flying out over the street. (p.95)

This is how I like to consider the women I have uncovered and created in both this exegesis and the novel – they may not be wearing petticoats, and they may be largely alone, but they have certainly broken free.

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