

Chapter Five

Making Lace

Fabricating Coherent Self



I am pregnant with certain deaths
of women who wander slamming doors
and sighing as if to be overheard,
talking to themselves like water left
running, tears dried to table salt.

They Inhabit Me
by Marge Piercy
from *My Mother's Body*, 1985

Lace: a delicate ornamental, openwork fabric made by twisting, looping, or knotting threads by hand or machine.
From Latin: laqueus – noose
(*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 2002)

Mum's great grandmother was Miriam Rose Jacques. Miriam is recorded as being a dressmaker, in the Census of 1881 when the family was living in Nottingham. Three of Miriam's younger daughters, including thirteen year old Loretta, are noted as being either lace finishers or lace menders. Miriam's elder daughter Martha, and Martha's granddaughter (my mother), Valerie, were all seamstresses. Mum's specialty was her fine hand stitching of beads and lace appliqué on wedding gowns. Handwork runs in the family.

I don't think mum ever knew she came from a line of women who sewed for a living, but she put a needle in my hand to keep me busy long before I started school at four and a half. By kindergarten I was adept at cutting out with real scissors and stitching thick cotton thread through paper, or scraps of fabric. Following patterns, stitching garments and trimming for a professional finish has been a specialist occupation of the women in my matrilineage for at least one hundred and fifty years. Now I am piecing together life fragments and scattered images to pattern a genealogy of women, doing my stitching with words and images.

Lacemaking is an exact art. The strength and intricacy of the pattern derives from the spaces that interrupt the stitching. Absence is an aspect of the coherence of lace. Lace tends not to fray, though cut edges get tatty in time.

Hiding the raw and messy edges of seams is necessary to the integrity of garment making. Secure joining of the pieces of fabric strengthens the garment. Have you ever turned a jacket inside out and looked under the lining? If you undo all the seams and try to lay all the fabric out flat, you would see that it is much bigger than the actual size of the garment. It's at least twice the size with the lining unpicked, if all the seams were unfolded and the snips and tucks exposed. A well-made jacket is a double inversion. The lining is stitched to the outside of the jacket, right sides together, and then the whole thing is turned inside out, but really it's outside in. That way the stitching and the seams are hidden between the layers of lining and the exterior, creating a smooth finish. Then, with all the rough edges neatly tucked away the satiny lining of a jacket becomes the outside of the inside and an interior that is faced with a durable coating fabric.

Subjectivity and memory are processes of inversion too. Experiences and impressions are interlayered and folded to the interior, and a sense of self is fabricated that incorporates the dis/appearances with apparent seamless ease. A negotiable, yet durable performance of self on the outside is protected by a close fitting protective membrane on the inside that keeps the messy and excessive interiority contained and manageable. Coherence elides excesses and messy complications. What is fabricated in the image of coherence always involves absences and loss.

This chapter looks inside the making of coherent feminine subjectivity in the way of lace. Lois McNay explains that subjectivity is a relational process and she acknowledges the individual's participation in managing competing influences:

When the formation of subjectivity is understood not in one-sided terms as an exogenously imposed effect but as a result of a lived potentiality and material relations, then an active concept of agency emerges. Understanding agency partly as the capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflicting relations of power provides a point from which to examine the connection between the symbolic and material relations that are constitutive of a differentiated social order. (McNay 2000:16)

What strategies and practices interface and smooth over complexity to shape respectable feminine subjectivity? I am interested in the marrow of experiences lived by actual physical bodies of women because disjunctures frequently become visible in bodily dis/ease. Where or what are the storylines and bodylines (Somerville 2004) that slip and ease women across disparate experiences, or do not? How are women actively engaged in processes of subject formation?

In her discussion of poor and working class autobiographies, Roxanne Rinstead (1997:258) draws on C. Waxman's theory of strategies that are used by marginalised people to cope with competing discourses and resist stigma. According to Rinstead, Waxman explains that strategies involve locating oneself in relation to others, and they include such things as forming associations with other marginalised people, isolating oneself, assuming appropriate appearances 'through acculturation or managing the stigma by appropriating its power for other uses' (Waxman 1983 quoted in Rinstead 1997:258). These 'strategies' are both conscious and unconscious and indicate that 'negative constructions of identity are not internalised directly but entail some choices' (Rinstead 1997:258). There is evidence of these kinds of strategies in the stories here in this thesis, such as Rose's story about her broken front

tooth. While the notion of *choice* raises problems because the so called choices are made within restricted options, consideration of strategies used to deal with stigma and competing interests is helpful to revealing how the individual interprets the world in which they are embedded.

I focus here on several themes arising in the Lifestory Workshops that shed light on discourses and strategies learnt in early life that demonstrate women's smooth negotiation of disparity to achieve a semblance of coherent, subjective unity. The presentation of women's self as a respectable unity that has as its image the good health, abilities and appearance of young, white and middle class womanhood, sometimes involved discomfort in the loss of aspects of self. However, the women's negotiations with dominant discourses produce experiences that are part of 'a process endowed with meaning, smoothed over, free of contradictions and made livable' (Haug 2000:156). In the Lifestory Workshops, listening to the women's stories and conversations, it became clear that certain common experiences involved active engagement with contradictions and multiple storylines, for example; the women's attention to appearances; their creative expression of, or subversion of self; their childhood play and family stories. These are discussed in this chapter.

Family stories are a framework, a scaffold to understandings about self, origins and family history. Layers form on each other building storeys of a dwelling that is the home of the self. I allow the words to roll into each other, story, stories, storeys, historia, hysteria. I speak them out loud and let the sounds swill in my imagination and loll about in my mouth, herstory, story, historia, storeys, hysteria, stories. I enjoy the play, feeling the flow from idea to idea. The words history, story and storey derive from the Latin word, historia¹⁶. Storey comes from a special use of historia and refers to the patterns on medieval windows, when stained glass recorded stories considered to be important. Male stained fragments of stories displace, dis/place me, contain me in fragments. I let my self go, allow the fragments to separate and shape new stories, the hysteric speaks to be free. So I tell my stories and edge towards hysteria.

Stories change with different tellings, and over the course of lifetimes. Scraps of memory shift like the mobile glass fragments in a kaleidoscope with each turn of another pair of hands, and another pattern emerges. Images overlay, they are embellished or hidden, with various tellings. Life story writing is a gathering up of fragments to piece together memories and

¹⁶ (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles 2002)

experiences packed away by dominant discourses, but there are many different tellings possible and new patterns to make if I can shake the fragments free.

When I was a child my grandmother told me family stories. Her name was Daisy Blood. Nana never spoke about her own life, and probably I never asked. Now when she has been dead for thirty years I wonder about the story my aunt has since told me about the time nana had a nervous breakdown. She was pregnant with my mother and had two other young children. My grandfather had signed up and gone to Gallipoli, so nana and her children moved across the State to live with her parents on an orchard in Sylvania. This story reminds me of the Lavarni Sisters (Chapter Four) whose mother could not manage her children when she became ill after her husband went to war, leaving her pregnant and with three young girls. With no one to help her, Mary Ann Lavarni was forced to put her three daughters in a children's home and she died before the war ended (Todd 1987). I wondered about the physical and emotional upheaval in my grandmother's life when her husband went to war, and then Rachel told me her story.

Rachel was a frail woman in her early eighties who came to one of the Workshops. She had phoned me in response to the advertisement in the paper and invited me to visit her in the Aged Care Home where she lived in a self-care unit. She wanted me to tell her 'all about the project' because she was very interested in writing her life stories. During that short visit she told me a great deal about her life and her desire to leave her memories as stories, for her son. I could hear that she was an untapped reservoir of experiences she was longing to tell. She wanted someone to listen. Rachel told me she wanted to be heard, she said that her family was considerate and attentive but they didn't really know her.

Rachel is an elegant woman, whose life appears to have been relatively comfortable in material amenity but the vagaries of advancing age had overtaken her respectability in recent years. She managed to come to one of the Workshops and afterwards I drove her the short distance from the Women's Centre to town.

I drove you into town Rachel, you were meeting a friend. It's too far for you to walk and you aren't that quick on your feet anymore, you tell me. We laugh a lot, and I stop in the middle of the road to let you get out of the car safely, so you don't trip on the gutter. Meanwhile, the car behind has to wait a few moments and I sense their impatience, it takes time for you to move to the safety of the footpath. As I wave goodbye the smell of stale urine seeps up my nostrils,

or was it on my fingertips? I brush my mouth and it rushes into me, my coat is soaked, my hair, the whole car. I am washed in it. Rotting leftovers of past experiences. Your stale urine, the excess your body can no longer successfully contain invades me.

Hours pass and stale urine still catches me out on deep breaths. It's lodged on those fine hairs inside my nostril, and it trickles to the inside of me, your urine, to my lungs and quickly into my blood. It burns and I rub my nose, but it is there on my fingers. And so it flows on and on through that day and the night, and the next, until eventually when I have scoured every part of me I am clean again. Rid of your smelly excess, I tell myself, with shame.

Even your humour is stale, its not the right kind of humour not the right way to be funny. Your timing is all wrong, out of time, out of step, like the urine, it's out of place, where it shouldn't be. Your smile is infectious too, when it comes with that little noise that I recognise now is a laugh, though it's not.

You know something. About me? Am I seeing myself down a long periscope peering into the future? My future. Do you see me in you?

Your son sees only a frail mother, you tell me in the car. He doesn't like you going out alone. You want him to see you, and to hear you. You want him to listen beyond what he sees. That's why you want to record your stories, especially your stories about the war, in your own words and your voice. You want to save your memories for your son, and your grandchildren. Your stories are fragments of their lives too, and their memories live in you. They tolerate your reminiscences, but they keep them separate from the woman who is also the body, is you, and they relegate your life as the past. I don't want to do that.

I want to know how you tell your stories with such wit and cheek. Your telling makes the stories alive for me and is intriguing. Why separate the past that is in you, and see only the aging body? You can't be contained any longer and though it's difficult for you to get about these days, you manage. You accept lifts, and you leave the door of your unit unlocked so you don't have to struggle out of your chair to let visitors in. This is one way your strength and determination express themselves today. Your laugh tells me you want to assert your otherness, your difference from the woman your family sees, a doddering old lady. You are very frail, but when you laugh I am reminded of Helene Cixous' words, it's political work:

just as soon as writing gets done by women that goes beyond the bounds of censorship, reading, the gaze, the masculine command, in that cheeky, risk taking women can get into when they set out into the unknown to look for themselves. (Cixous 1995:174)

That's what you're doing, I'm sure of it. You've set out into the unknown to look for yourself, and you want your son to see the woman you are still becoming, always his mother, but more than the leaky body. You're the same woman who protected him in the war by folding herself over his tiny body when the bombs fell. You're different now, Rachel, and yet the same woman, only now with the past written on your flesh, in the scent of the flesh that overflows with excesses.

You told me that you shared a house with another young mother during the war. Your husbands were away at the front. You dug a trench in the back garden to shelter from the bombs. Remember? You told me. You took your baby son, you were just nineteen, you took him into the muffling shelter of the earth and counted the bombs falling. If you can count them, that's ok, you tell me.

welcome Rachel:

it's only when I can't keep up with the count of them that I am afraid.

I pray we die together,

soon,

my baby and me.

Can't be injured or leave him,

either of us without the other.

We will die together.

But you don't die, and now he doesn't know that you are the same woman who sheltered him. Perhaps he doesn't know that he needed sheltering. 'He gurgled his baby voice to the sound of the fireworks', you said, with some frustration.

He doesn't know about your courage. You speak, and he listens, but he doesn't hear. He doesn't know that this failing body, his mother, is a woman he has never sought to know beyond his own perceptions. His mother is not an angel, nor a heroine, this frail woman is his mother. and your story is also in part, his. Your courage buffered and protected him and he was not afraid.

The day the war finished you told your friends that you would drink whatever they gave you. You got drunk by accident, you told me. Your husband didn't like it much, but he had been away at the war all that time when you sheltered from the bombs and made a life for yourself under the stairs, for you and his son. The trench was never much of a success, but under the stairs was the safest place you knew.

Rachel:

*We didn't eat much in those days, and hardly ever anything hot,
We'd get the dinner going and then the bombs came,
so we just left it all and went under the stairs
and ate it all cold and half cooked,
later.
So why not have a drink when it's all over?*

Rachel's care of her baby son and her need to protect him in their own home juxtaposes with her husband away fighting the enemy in a foreign land. For her, war was an assault on the private spaces of the self. Rachel's perception of danger and threat to her son and home were immediate and personal. She thinks getting a little drunk that one and only time was quite justified. Although the grownup son is kind to her he doesn't see her in the way that she knows herself. He understands her through stereotypical discourses about mothers and elderly women, through discourses that are consistent with the notion of identity as being unified and coherent, that close off other ways of knowing her. Perhaps this was the situation when her husband came home after the war as well, because he had not experienced Rachel's ability to act independently and with courage. Rachel was proud of her wartime efforts that were beyond the usual expectations of women and mothers in the early twentieth century.

Rachel's excesses sent a shudder of anticipation through me but her own stories are not framed by decline and reliance on medical metaphors to give her life shape (Feldman, Kamler, & Snyder 1996:xi). Rachel was inspiration. She inspired both fear and excitement in the letting go she embraced because she could not refuse growing old and her body failed to maintain respectable womanhood. 'Aging happens. Inevitably.' write Feldman, Kamler and Snyder (1996:xi).

Failures in agility and bodily functioning frame my story about Rachel but she also exuded enthusiasm and in that she offered me the possibility to refuse dominant discourses and fear of old age. Susan Feldman reminds me that:

Aging [...] is too often seen as a time of loss and desolation. If it is not also understood as a time of irreverence and courage, then we do not expect such attributes in our mothers or ourselves. We fear the inevitable and grit our teeth in anticipation. Growing older is a time to dread. (Feldman et al. 1996:xi)

Rachel is both irreverent and courageous. Her son relates with her through the framework of dominant discourses about aging women. These construe her life around her body's physical losses but she is also cheeky, strong willed, determined, high spirited, resourceful and brave. Listening to Rachel tell her stories about the past and seeing how she manages her life in the present provide an opportunity to re/think strength and agency and unsettle taken-for-granted narratives about aging. Yet Rachel also longs to be seen and heard. Some aspect of self-knowing has been lost in the containment and unity Rachel has practiced all her life.

Rose is another strong and determined woman but she is much younger than Rachel. Rose wrote a story about her frustration with signs of aging. Rose was quite candid about the changes she has noticed and sees them in a humorous light. The thought of losing her hearing is more important to Rose than the changes in her physical appearance. Rose's attunement to sound and the subtlety of the blue wren is indicative that she takes listening seriously. Other people's responses to her physical marks of aging have been harder for Rose to accept than the debilitating effects of chronic fatigue that has previously impacted on her life.

Rose:

It's new to me this type of decrepitude. I've had the hidden one of fatigue with its concomitant reaction from others that you are a hypochondriac or shirker. But I'm not sure that it isn't harder to bear this commiserating response from others when you show signs of aging.

I'm paunchy, my asthma doesn't attack me, it's moved in. I like my hair now it's white rather than grey but I'm shedding it worse than the pets do. My vision blurs and this alarms me, not to see faces at a distance, sometimes to have to blink and struggle with an eye chart that I am used to being able to read the manufacturer's name right off. And so far I still can on occasion which always surprises the testers. I love it.

But there's other things that I need magnification for now. I have long had a horror of being deaf because I love music and birdsong so much. I think of taking smoko with mum and dad at the shearing shed and we were picking birdcalls but neither of them could hear the blue wrens anymore. However I find it's deafness that seems the softest loss of all. Straining to hear just doesn't really work.

Rose wants to be seen for her own qualities not brushed over by stereotypes and misrecognised. Her awareness of the judgments of *other* people is a poignant reminder of women's attunement to the evaluations of other people and the influence of this on their own decisions (Mills 2003:102). Rose's concern about deafness is also related to her love of music and singing. Several months after the Lifestory Workshops I had the opportunity to hear Rose and Bea singing in a women's a cappella group. They were joyful, displaying familiar and intuitive ways of being, and the spirit of woman-defined Self shone through them.

The women brought their bodies close together beside Rose, curving a semicircle in front of the room, ready to sing. First they went through warm ups to find their tone and combine their rhythms. They stopped and started, not in shocking spurts, but with an audible rocking of their voices that brought them into harmony. One woman was holding a baby who was no more than a month or two old. In this room full of women I thought the baby was she, but I never asked. The mother held the babe in front of her, resting the fragile back and lolling head against her breast. The tiny face gazed out at me. She was serene with familiar mother hands wrapped around her, giving support as was needed. With her child nestled in the soft curves of her breast, the mother rocked with the gutsy rhythms and the swaying of bodies as one conjoined being. In this movement of women's bodies and voices the child was passed to the next woman during a song, perhaps the mother's arms were tired. Without the slightest rupture to rhythm or song the baby was handed into the welcome fold of Bea's arms and rested securely against her shoulder. The shape of Bea's face altered momentarily with a soft smile, but that was all, just a moment. The dark eyed glaze of the babe never faltered her deep outward peering. Rose's face altered too, for an instant, just a flicker of recognition, a softening of the lines but the singing went on, and all the while the tiny baby mouth was engrossed in the suckling of delectable tongue licking. Then a restless toddler in the front row was scooped into the arms of another woman in the flow of a song. With just a finger brushed over her mouth the toddler hushed into silent mimicry of exaggerated mouth shapes and the song went on.

The women took their lead from Rose, from her strong throated words and the rhythm of her hips sway, from the sweeping of fabric around her ankles in waves swirling from her waist, washing against Bea's legs. Recognition passed between the women before Bea's melody dropped down to a whisper and fine strands of Rose's long white hair loosened and tumbled about her face with the rolling of her shoulders, the motion of the songs with the rhythm of the women.

After the singing the broadest, most glorious smiles replaced the shape of sounds on the women's lips. Of course it had taken practice and patience for the singing to work so well, for the women to be comfortable with each other and the rhythms of the songs. But their familiarity was vividly expressed so as to appear intuitive, as much in the remembrance of the tunes, as in the gesture of the passing of the baby. And Rose was strong and powerful, and very beautiful!

When Rose and Bea were singing with the a cappella group they appeared at ease in the situation and free from negative assessments. Rose's awareness of how other people view her demonstrates her active engagement in processing information about the social world. Frigga Haug explains this process of engagement with the context of experiences in *Female Sexualization*:

Our use of the term 'subjective' might perhaps suggest that we view subjective appropriations of social structures as being entirely at the discretion of the individual. This is not the case. The day-to-day struggle over the hearts and minds of human subjects is located not only within social structures, the pre-given forms into which individuals work themselves, but also in the process whereby they perceive any given situation, approve or validate it, assess its goals as proper and worthy, repugnant or reprehensible. What emerged in our analysis as a particular way of processing the social world, as its appropriation by individuals, has to be seen as a field of conflict between dominant cultural values and oppositional attempts to wrest cultural meaning and pleasure from life. (Haug 1987:41)

The quest for self

The attempt to wrest cultural meaning and pleasure from life experiences was evident during the Workshop discussions in the pursuit of personal fulfilment. The quest for self was a theme that came up in the Workshops on several occasions when the conversation revolved around poetry and journal writing, and the making of family scrapbooks.

Claire and Ellie had been writing poetry and in journals for much of their lives. Maryanne made albums of carefully chosen photographs, complete with captions and anecdotal information about family members and family experiences. She gave these books that she called 'useless information books', as gifts. Claire pasted sayings and information she wanted to keep in scrapbooks. She brought one in to show the group. It was a collection of *little truths* she told us, that she had made during her late teens in the 1970s. There were sayings and quotes from Baba Ram Dass, Krishnamurti and other folk Claire held in esteem as well as her own poetry and photos with captions. Claire explained the making of the scrapbook was a search for meaning. Maryanne thought this was a sign of maturity in comparison with her albums, believing that Claire's scrapbooks were far more *creative* than her own 'useless information books'.

The making of these books is evidence of desires to keep, or pass on meanings gleaned from life experiences, or meaning the two women were searching for. The scrapbooks are important to the women yet they are shrouded in the idea that these activities are a personal indulgence without wider value. A lack of authority, and the idea that their own insights are not legitimate knowledge imbues the making of these *scrap* books. Even as they take up a speaking position in the making of their books, it is a position Maryanne and Claire accept as limited and restricted, rather than limiting and restrictive, echoing Bronwyn Davies words that:

The various discourses in which one participates, or in terms of which one gains a voice or becomes a speaking subject, also are the means by which one is spoken into existence (even prior to one's birth) as subject. These discourses subject each person to the limitations, the ideologies, the subject positions made available within them. (Davies 1992:64)

The women accepted that formalised knowledge and knowledge making is more valuable than their endeavours, and they positioned the making of their scrapbooks outside of knowledge making processes.

Discursive violence

The strength of associations resulting from certain discourses, produce discursive violence that is self punitive and negative (Rimstead 1997:253). Rimstead explains discursive violence as myths of failure and personal responsibility that are generated by 'exclusionary practices by people at the center against those on the periphery – such as stereotyping, blaming, disbelieving, misrepresenting or silencing – or when these constructions of identity result in feelings of shame, self-blaming, passivity, or powerlessness' (1997:250). The lack of

authority available to women is also evidence of discursive violence that de-legitimizes their speaking voice and undermines the possibilities of finding power in woman-defined Self. This was demonstrated by the participants who associated personal fulfilment and creativity, apart from its derivation in motherhood, with idleness and self-indulgence. The making of their scrapbooks came under this rubric.

Bohemian tendencies

Speaking about her mother's lack of fulfilment in family life and her alcohol addiction, Claire referred to her mother as having 'bohemian tendencies' in a conversation that follows. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2002:260), a Bohemian is a gypsy, a socially unconventional person, especially an artist or writer, of free-and-easy habits, manners and sometimes morals, or an inhabitant of Bohemia. Bohemia is a region of the western part of the Czech Republic (2002:260). The nomadic, often vilified group known as gypsies or Romany are called Bohemians in French (What is Bohemia? 2003 online). The term *bohemian* came to represent the artistic lifestyles of artists around the 1920s. Bohemian was also associated with both a romantic notion of the hedonistic pursuit of creative talents and the flaunting of middle-class respectability as far as sexuality and social habits. 'In a society oppressed by its own conformity Bohemia can act as an escape-valve for differences. It can even become high fashion' (Kirkpatrick 1992:28).

I was surprised that this concept of bohemian culture came up in the Workshops, but later I found it echoed by Richard Florida (2002) in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Although the notion bohemian seemed outdated to me, it apparently continues to draw strong associations. Florida argues that a new social class of people has emerged in recent years whose, 'creativity is the driving force behind economic growth' (Florida 2002:pix). Florida argues that the creative class 'are coming see themselves as having a deeply fused identity' and he received negative reactions from the interviewees in his study when he referred to them 'in any way [as] bohemian' (Florida 2002:210). Florida was making a connection between bohemian as representing creativity, mobility and free thinking with the lifestyle he identified as the pursuit of the new creative class of cultural leaders. The interviewees, however resisted being labelled as bohemian, seeing themselves as very much a part of contemporary culture and the multiplicity of opportunities and activities available, rather than different or alienated from the bulk of the population (Florida 2002:210). Florida's discussion shows that ideas, such as bohemia, are inflected with historical discourses and meanings that are prone to ambiguity when interpreted in different contexts.

Peter Kirkpatrick explains that bohemia is built on misconceptions and he charts changes in perceptions about bohemia over time. Kirkpatrick presents an overall sense of idealism, spiritual pursuits, self-indulgence and mobility based on a symbiotic relationship between bohemians and high culture (1992:27). However, bohemia is largely metaphysical, a country of the mind (Kirkpatrick 1992:9). It was this sense that the women in the Workshops associated with bohemia - as a state of mind, and the longing for personal fulfilment through creative and self-focussed endeavours that were imbued with an underbelly of storylines that hinted at laziness and self-indulgence.

While the discourse of bohemia has a relationship with middle classness and is elitist, the dimensions of bohemia are grounded in working class precepts, including anti bourgeoisie radicalism and poverty (Kirkpatrick 1992:30). Effectively then, the concept *bohemian* is a discursive resistance to respectability positioned against waged labour. In the discourse of bohemia, free time for creative expression is considered the prerogative of the wealthy and creative expression is indulgence or laziness when pursued by women.

The meanings encompassed in the concept of bohemia discussed in the Workshops drifted ambiguously between the idea of spiritual and creative expression of self, and the vagrant and dangerous transgression of norms. I recall that *tramp* was a derogatory term my mother often used to describe sexually permissive girls. Excessive alcohol consumption is also associated with bohemia, and according to Peter Kirkpatrick (1992:139), alcohol consumption was an obsessive feature of bohemian culture in Sydney in 1920s. Kirkpatrick (1992:139) observes that while alcohol was the centre of the fraternising of bohemian culture including its courting, dancing, singing and even writing, alcohol was a more widespread social problem than just the bohemian set at the time.

The women in the Workshops identified certain behaviours as falling within a stereotypography of the bohemian, including transgressive sexual morals, alcohol consumption, writing and self-expression. The women made connections with, for instance, being married three times, sensitivity, inwardness, self-discovery and pursuit of personal goals as bohemian qualities. In this understanding women seeking their origins or original selves, as Janice Raymond puts it (2001:59), might be thought of as bohemian because of the association with dubious morals and a lack of social responsibility. As a discourse, bohemian confusingly mixes positive and negative connotations that depend on context and prior

knowledge for meaning in particular situations. Discursive violence and negative associations derive from the ambiguous image of the bohemian.

Claire:

*well it's interesting.
My mum had a drinking problem for many years
and she was quite bohemian
and very sensitive
and very inner and
I think a lot of those qualities which fed into the alcohol.*

Maryanne:

*well this came out in my adoptive family,
my maternal grandfather and his sister
and I had to look the word up,
[bohemian]
did they mean she was ...
Was she a loose woman?
I am saying that my grandmother drank,
but that's what I feel about her
(she was bohemian, she married three times)
I feel that she was a person who loved me and
thought I was a worthwhile person to love
and that was what I had in my mind as my grandmother,
I'm not going to change that,
but now this is all coming out about my natural family and ...
they think I'm queer,
maybe I'm bohemian,
I'm just discovering myself at fifty.
I don't know ...*

For Claire and Maryanne, bohemia provided a storyline that explained the unfulfilled creative and spiritual yearnings of women who were not satisfied by the confines of the feminine subjective.

Maryanne:

*My grandmother she was a sort of funny kind of lady,
I had a very great relationship with her,
because I think she could see the relationship I had with mum,
and mum's mother hated me with passion,
I wasn't of her blood,
so I didn't count.*

*My father's mum was really good,
she was very soft and gentle but her ...
this was her third husband and he worked at Tamworth Hospital
and he used to be a boilermaker and stoke the boilers up in the hospital and anyway
I'd go down there for my school holidays ...*

*We'd go to the pubs,
this beautiful old pub in Tamworth,
we'd sit out in the garden with the two dogs and me and nana and pop
and they'd give me raspberry cordial,
they'd talk to all their friends there.
Then we went home and we had a cup of tea and they'd go to bed,
'don't wake me or don't wake nana up she's got a headache.'
So I'd be around by myself again.*

Maryanne's reminiscences of going to the pub with her grandparents reminded me of waiting at the Bowling Club for my parents. In the pub and the club there was a camaraderie and community that was not generally an aspect of our lives. Similarly to Maryanne's suggestion, I didn't feel abandoned or neglected in my early memories of waiting at the pub or club, and the boredom was simply accepted.

Maryanne:

*and then my grandmother died in 1967,
and I didn't know until that day,
until my father told me,
I said what did nana die of?
cirrhosis of the liver, she was a drunk.*

*I knew all about the pubs.
They treated me so well and I never knew,
she hid it so well from me,
she was so lovely
I look at pictures of her and,
she was a very stylish lady,
when she was young.*

*I never saw her drunk, except for those few drinks at the pub,
she'd drop off on the verandah of a night time
and she'd have a hangover, but I never knew.
She was so beautiful to me.*

Alcohol was an everyday beverage and an accepted way to socialise, to drown sorrows or to celebrate, as Rachel's story also shows.

Though she did not use the term bohemian, Bea also portrayed her mother as having attributes that fit the bohemian discourse. On several occasions Bea said her mother was a fun person but later she told us that when she was in primary school, her mother was often spaced out on tranquillizers so Bea had to go to her grandmother's house after school. In her mother's bedroom, there were traces of her life as a dancer prior to her marriage to Bea's stepfather.

Bea:

*She ...
was a singer and a dancer in a nightclub
when I was quite young
and
um her bedroom was just like,
you know,
princess palace
there was makeup,
there was dressups
there was wigs,
you know there was everything in there,*

*it was great,
she was a lot of fun,
mum.*

It is not the notion of bohemia that is of prime relevance here as much as the discursive tensions that it enfolds as conflicting moralities, between the idea that self expression is either a bourgeois activity, or potentially dangerous if it leads to the rejection of social norms and expectations. *Bohemia* smoothes over the intersection of contradictory experiences and emotions. There is an indeterminate, yet implicit judgment in this notion that draws on gender and class attributes of respectable behaviour. This tension is reminiscent of the common dichotomies used to describe women in the past, loose woman or angel, the damned whore or god's police, good and mad women. The women in the Workshops used the storyline of bohemia to explain tendencies that were contradictory to gender expectations. This kind of gender work is learnt and practised from girls' earliest years. Even in resisting duped or victim positions, ideological closure (Bird 1983:2) is forced onto the feminine in the necessity to fabricate the self as a coherent unity that is constrained by the gender binary.

Playing like a girl

During discussions in the Workshops the participants demonstrated that as children they had a definite awareness of polarised gender expectations they could meet, subvert or avoid. The central themes relating to gender expectations and stereotypes were about appearances and behaviour. The women were quick to label themselves retrospectively as tomboys when their childhood behaviour was not stereotypically feminine. The women referred to themselves as tomboys for riding in billy carts, exploring the bush or playing outside and generally being active. Indeed during a discussion in the first series I commented that many of the childhood stories being told were about little girls who were consciously doing things differently from what they knew their parents expected of their daughters. I suggested that this would be an interesting topic to write about. The following week it was clear that most of the women had translated this as a direction to write about *being a tomboy*.

Jenny recounted the following story about her tomboyish behaviour and the humiliation she felt after a billy cart crash that disastrously and obviously ruined her parents' expectations of their feminine daughter.

welcome Jenny:

*This is when I was seven years old,
me,
having two older brothers,
apparently my parents' joy
after two boys in the family,
A joy,
which seemed to me, as the subject,
a delusion.
Me?*

*Dressed up in frilly dress and fancy shoes
encouraged by two older brothers to come riding on the newly built trolley,
a billy cart.*

*Off we go down a steep hill,
wheeeeeee
oh the adventure and thrill.
Pull the trolley back up the hill for another exhilaration ride.
No help from brothers,
I had to do all the hauling myself if I wanted the ride.
Billy ride down,
hit gutter
tumble,
crash
tumble
hunks of skin dislodged from knee,
still have the scar today.
Back home and in tears,
blood pouring,
dress and shoes with a tear in them as a result of afore mentioned crash.
Oh the pain, agony and humiliation
after all the joy adventure and exhilaration.*

Jenny was caught out riding in the billy cart dressed up like a girl then crashing and tearing her clothes. Her humiliation is an expression of the mixed emotions her story reveals, her confusion about her parents' fuss over having a daughter, and the expectation that she will participate appropriately if she plays boys' games.

Maryanne was another woman who had not thought of herself as a tomboy previously, but on reflection, she decided that she wasn't appropriately feminine when she was a child because she spent most of her time on the farm with her father. In several conversations Maryanne reiterated the idea that her lack of female companions prevented her from learning appropriate feminine behaviour.

Maryanne:

*I must have been a tomboy,
I never thought of myself as a tomboy
but I was always with my father
Doing things on horses and being outside,
having no other little girls to play with
for a long time,
I suppose you play differently.*

In contrast with her self-defined tomboyish behaviour Maryanne, like all the women in the second series, had dolls from childhood at home in a closet. This discovery was a source of delight in the Workshops and the disclosure had the marks of a naughty secret shared. The kept dolls were prized possessions that most of the women did not remember playing with often, and hence they were still in good condition.

Maryanne suggested that we bring our dolls to the last session for *Show and Tell* and the rest of the group quickly took up the idea. However, not everyone remembered to bring their dolls on the day but those who had forgotten were so disappointed they insisted on going home to get the dolls. Such was the interest in sharing our dolls and their stories.

After this session I perceived that keeping these dolls symbolised the preservation of feminine subjectivity expected of girls. The symbolisation captured the ambiguity and ambivalence around feminine subjectivity and a reluctance to abandon altogether traditional feminine expectations. The dolls were treasured keepsakes although they were not the dolls the women

generally played with in childhood. Unlike the dolls that were played with more often and long ago worn out, the kept dolls remained in very good condition. The kept dolls did not have personalised and individual names but had always been known by the manufacturers names. There was Sasha, Katie Cruise, Skipper, Bride Doll and Maori Doll.

Ellie's doll, Katie Cruise, was inherited from her own mother and it was sixty-nine years old. This doll was treasured for its aesthetic value as a family heirloom. Ellie told us that when was a child she had been allowed to unwrap the tissue paper that contained the Katie Cruise doll and touch her less times than 'the fingers on one hand'. Ellie's grandfather had brought the Katie Cruise doll back from overseas as a gift for her mother who was ill at the time of the gift. Ellie didn't have a strong personal attachment to Katie Cruise, but it was a family heirloom.

welcome Ellie:

*like I feel dissociated from it I,
I don't know,
it's a strange feeling,
I feel like I'm not...
Like I am bringing a part of my story
and my life
but it feels like,
it's not really my story
and my life.*

This distinction is important to how the participants understood life story telling. They needed encouragement to accept that life experiences are not owned or fixed by any single protagonist or storytelling. As well, the idea that life stories involve disclosures is reiterated in Claire's light-hearted comments below in the discussion about the more casual play with everyday dolls in comparison with Ellie's Katie Cruise.

Claire:

*I think a doll does need to be held
and touched
and played with
and you'd have to develop a relationship*

Ellie:

*I was really mean to my doll,
the doll that I actually had as my doll.
I chopped its hair off
and I used to smack it
and I'd jump on it.
It's incredible.*

Claire:

that's an important story as well

(laughter)

Claire:

write and tell

Ellie:

a little girl with a temper tantrum

Claire:

*I remember having a teddy,
I don't know if you ever saw them,
and he was just a normal old teddy
but he had a squeaker in his tummy
so you had to go like that -
Whack.*

(She brings her hand down on her knee hard, laughter follows)

Ellie:

*that's what I did with my childhood doll,
I chopped its hair,
so it was that short.*

(Ellie holds two fingers just apart)

Claire:

*my first doll, Jenny, was this beautiful doll, that I remember,
I was in Orange
I was at the counter
and this Jenny doll,
this baby doll was handed over.
She wasn't a pure baby doll.
I just adored her,
but poor Jenny ended up with a punk hair cut
and a hole cut in her tummy with beads,
and all sorts of thing.
after the operation.*

(laughter)

All the women said that they hadn't played with dolls very often and yet we each told stories about tea parties, dressups and playing school with dolls and teddies as pupils. The everyday play dolls were remembered with affection and familiarity. Dolls provided an opportunity to play out reversed power relationships that appeared to be related to adult-child dynamics rather than specifically gender relationships.

Dolls that were coveted in childhood were often given to daughters. Some were dolls that were owned but never played with like Katie Cruise, and others were similar to dolls the women had longed for when they were children, but never owned. Apparently this was an attempt to assuage unfulfilled longings not only to own a particular doll but also to thwart what were seen as excessive parental restrictions on doll play and girls' behaviour. Ellie explained that she had bought her daughter the type of big doll that she had wanted when she was a child.

Ellie:

*I longed for a bride doll and a tall doll and a walking doll
and I didn't get any of those things,
but I did give my daughter quite a big doll
um I think when she was about two.
She was called Big Doll,*

*then Sally drew on her,
on her face
and on her stomach,
so Big Doll had pink scars*

Claire:

Big Tattooed Doll...

(uproarious laughter)

Ellie:

but she was very well loved

Maryanne:

in spite of her ...

Ellie: *yeap*

Maryanne:

made her more real?

Ellie: *mmm*

Even with the idea they hadn't played with dolls often, the women recalled being possessive about their dolls, especially if they were wanted by sisters or other little girls. They also recalled that boys weren't interested in their dolls but took an interest in their soft toys like koalas and teddies.

We all enjoyed the Show and Tell session with our dolls. It was an animated and very reflective session that highlighted just how important dolls had been to us when we were children but significantly, that our dolls and our memories of play with dolls continued to hold our affection. It was an interest that was easily rekindled. The noticeable ease in the talk about our dolls indicated that we were on comfortable and familiar ground. The lighthearted and humorous atmosphere both recognised and brushed over central issues in the construction of women's subjectivity, particularly gender expectations.

The familiarity and ease in this session extended to the no fuss accepted way that ambivalence about dolls and doll play was handled by the group. There was acknowledgment that doll play draws on gendered expectations that are stereotypical and that many of the women had tried to dismantle to some extent in their adult lives. However, the dolls remained treasures they intended passing onto daughters or other female relatives. The keepsake dolls were artefacts valued for their age and for the knowledge that they had always been considered special in a material sense.

Claire's well preserved Sasha doll was an exception from the other dolls brought to Show and Tell because Claire had played with it in her own childhood. Claire had already given Sasha to her own daughter and she explained to the group that Sasha is thirty-five years old now. The humour and contemporary themes in the following conversation about the Sasha doll illustrate two aspects of doll keeping; the awareness of the stereotypes involved, and engagement with those aspects of feminine subjectivity.

Claire:

*Hmmm ... she's thirty-five,
she's just thinking of having children now*

(laughter)

Maryanne :

well mine's forty-five so I think she's past the childbearing age

(more laughter)

Morgan: *So is my Maori princess.*

Sasha doesn't look like a doll that has been through the bath

Claire:

*no,
I never took her in the bath
because I was aware that she was a bit of a special doll
because I knew that she came from Sweden
and I was always aware that's what little Swedish children must look like.*

*I was careful and cautious with her,
and loved her.
I remember a cousin or friend came
and accidentally scratched one of the little painted eyes,
and I noticed that and I was upset.
I actually gave it to my daughter
when she was seven.
She's been fairly good,
careful with her,
but she did take her into the bath
and
I think she secretly snipped just a tiny bit of hair*

Ellie:

You noticed did you?

Claire:

*I noticed it ages ago
and then she confessed,
but I'm relieved she didn't cut all its hair off.*

The women had a significant attachment to these kept dolls. This is evident in Claire's relief when she noticed her daughter had cut a lock of Sasha's hair. The dolls were imbued with notions of feminine subjectivity expected of girls and were 'something to love' as Judy explained in the other series of Workshops when the women co-incidentally spoke about their dolls. Judy had decided to bring her doll the following week to use as a memory prompt, but on the day she had forgotten. She explained her disappointment and told the group that she felt a special attachment to the doll and that was the reason she wanted to bring it to the Workshop.

welcome **Judy**:

*well, I had in mind an object that I have had with me for the last twenty years
It's been with me
and it's been very spiritual.
It's a doll,*

*I guess it's about having something to love,
and spend time with and nurture.*

The connection Judy felt demonstrates that dolls continue to be imbued with emotion for adult women. This was made very clear when the women in the second series rushed back home to collect the dolls they had forgotten to bring. The dolls apparently represented something more than a loved toy, and were a tangible gift between generations of women and a focus of intimate connection. The act of handing the doll down is one aspect of connection, but the doll itself became an artefact that embodied love in that connection. Judy, for example, explained it was a spiritual connection. The kept dolls also constituted a responsibility in the handing down of a connection between women and girls, as Katie Cruise was for Ellie.

Janice Radway (2001) and Dan Fleming (1996) warn that one of the problems of play with dolls is that dolls provide few storylines for girls. Indeed the dominant discourses identifiable in my study related baby dolls and bride dolls as the most treasured dolls. In contrast, the dolls the women had played with were often naked or inscribed with pen art, piercings and operations. Doll play mirrored the constraint in life storylines but also in the active engagement and attempted subversion or transgression of those storylines.

Fleming (1996:168) questions how the child is positioned in particular forms of play, such as doll play. According to their memories, the participants in my study often positioned themselves as agents against the grain of gender expectations in their play. Of course in the Workshops they were making adult reflections on their childhood play with a degree of knowledge about gender roles but, dolls did appear to have provided a way to experiment, in playing schools or acting out adult power, or in the subversion of expected feminine appearances, haircuts and with body art. The women's memories indicated that they were not simply passive consumers of appropriate gender play. Clearly they understood the behaviour expected of them as little girls, but they found ways to experiment. Play that transgressed gender expectations was coded tomboyish even though adventure play with billy carts, scooters, motor cycles, in the bush or on farms were all very popular and considered great fun. Doll play, on the other hand, provided a means of *playing* with gender expectations within an acceptable activity.

Rachel told me that her mother had given her a doll's pram and the entire baby trimmings one Christmas, she said:

*Oh, it was beautiful!
But I swapped it with the girl next door.
Oh, she had been given a scooter,
it was marvellous,
but she preferred the pram.
But that scooter,
It was real fun.*

Rachel succinctly expressed her childhood awareness of what was expected of little English girls eighty years ago, and how she managed to do what she wanted to anyway.

*We knew when to be quiet and to be good,
but we did what we wanted to anyway.
The adults never knew.
I used go into my grandfather's room when he was out.
You weren't allowed in the adults' bedrooms,
but they never knew.
He had a four-poster bed with curtains
and I jumped up and down on it.
You know, on the feather mattress,
it was such fun.
Grandfather had a book on his shelves,
he had hundreds of books but I found one,
it had all the sexual positions of people from all over the world.
I would look at it and couldn't believe my eyes
I used to go back again and again,
Every time he went out.
It was such fun.*

Conversations such as this one revealed that doll play and activities coded appropriate for girls provide significant practice in balancing gender expectations with the girl-child's own desires. The juggling of expectations and desires was sometimes thwarted by adult intervention as when Rachel's mother was angry about swapping the pram for the scooter, when Judy was caught out playing like a boy on the billy cart and also when Margot was not

allowed to play with a doll's layette she had painstakingly knitted when she was nine. However, the women demonstrated acceptance that their balancing acts were a taken-for-granted part of life. Indeed the ability to balance disparities between gender expectations and women's own desires appeared to be well-developed and accepted attribute of feminine subjectivity that is learnt early and well practised in childhood.

Paul John Eakin (1999:141) explains that the performance and portrayal of a culturally acceptable, unified self remains socially necessary. Eakin says that the ability to demonstrate self coherently is a link made by psychologists, neurologists and conventionally socialised laymen with the notion of a healthy identity, a link that is monitored steadily (1999:141). Performing coherence and stability involves learning to restrain disorderly fluidity, or as Gillian Swanson (2000:126) suggests, women incorporate difference and loss into a contingent self that accepts the weight of the feminine subjective. This incorporation into a contingent self involves a constant juggling act.

Swanson (2000:117) argues that there is a persistence of models of personhood based on completeness and hierarchy that connects frailties of the subjective, including disorders of the senses, nerves and sexuality with a feminine sensibility 'that is managed by its spatial and psychological removal from public life and masculine character'. The dis/orderly, dis/ruptive excess must be hidden away. While Swanson (2000:117) sees this as a constitutive instability at the heart of notions of modern subjectivity, she argues that it 'does not simply limit the articulation of the subjective [...] but more accurately, it operates to draw the contours of subjectivity and its function in representation'. In making their negotiations with gender expectations the participants demonstrated awareness, consciously and unconsciously, of the instability at the heart of feminine subjectivity that Swanson speaks about. The participants certainly did recognise the contours of appropriate feminine subjectivity.

Experience, language, memory, subjectivity and lacework are similar in the way they cohere around the contours of known patterns, or storylines, generally stereotypes. However, between psyche and physicality, between past and present, is a permeable interface that allows movement to smooth over difference. In that movement both the inside and the outside are created in the way of the moebius strip where the surface is always in contact with the depths of the interior (Grosz 1994:36). So while negotiations with gender expectations generally produce an appropriate performance of respectably coherent self they also produce ambivalences and ambiguities arising out of the inherent instability. The participants in the

Workshops often spoke about those negotiations in conversation, but they were rarely the experiences they considered appropriate for recording as their life stories. Their expertise at juggling competing expectations and desire fell into the realm of the personal and mundane.

A Pandora's box¹⁷ of experiences

Participants in the Lifestory Workshops had clear perceptions about the kind of memories they considered appropriate to writing in their life stories. Other experiences, such as their doll stories, were initially considered irrelevant, uninteresting, trivial or else were just forgotten. Several women expressed the idea that memories were experiences they had locked away, or packed away to simplify their lives, for instance Bea and Claire spoke of memories as being 'in a box'. Annette Kuhn (2000:187) refers to 'memory boxes' where chosen traces of the past are kept. Kuhn (2000:186) explains that memory is performative and memory stories are produced from the traces of the past stored away. The 'memory boxes' of women in the Workshops constrained experiences with the weight of the feminine subjective. The women interpreted their lives through a master narrative that aligns legitimate memories with fact, and a humanist view of the subject as coherently whole. In that sense memory comprises conscious and repressed layers filtered through sometimes vague awarenesses. I liken Kuhn's memory boxes to Pandora's Box where experiences are managed and kept under control.

While Swanson (2000:128) is adamant that although the feminine subjective inhabits our personal relations and cultural imaginary, women need to understand how 'we may engage with it in order to make it our own; a move towards a dialogic vision of femininity arising from the specificities of narratives that do not claim the spurious authority of transcendent subjectivity'. The doll play stories indicated ways the women engaged with the weight of feminine subjectivity when they were children.

Informed by Gillian Swanson's (2000:128) use of Bakhtin's *dialogic* I came to understand the ability to live across disparity and inherent instability with ease as a seamless drifting over disparate experiences and discourses. However, dialogic d/rift is inherently dangerous because of the possibility of a rupture or unexpected clash of perspectives. Sometimes the slippage across narratives between different ways of being was acknowledged by the Workshop participants, but at other times the conversation drifted with ease for instance,

¹⁷ Pandora: Greek Myth, a box enclosing all human ills, which flew out when the box was foolishly opened; or, in a later version, letting all human blessings escape and be lost, leaving only hope; a thing which once activated will give rise to many unmanageable problems (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 2002)

between a childlike voice and adult talk, (or vice versa), between speaking about the dolls as a close friend or depersonalising them as an artefact. This kind of dialogic d/rift entails the discursive negotiation of difference. Opposing experiences are smoothed over, such as in the negotiation of stereotypes and personal desires that conflict with respectability. The movement between polarised opposites is highly mobile and fluid, contraindicating the notion coherence. It suggests women's involvement in the processes of subject formation where 'sexual difference is made, rather than simply in the image of masculinity [...] in the exchange between masculinity and femininity' (Swanson 2000:128).

The performance of respectability is a symbolic threshold between proper and abjected attributes of women's subjectivities. Some aspects of self are lost or constrained in the performance of respectability and good womanhood. Is this a source of longing?

A malnutrition of the spirit

In the 1972 Introduction Kylie Tennant wrote for her Australian novel *Tiburon* (1981), she said that 'respectability is a malnutrition of the spirit' created by fear, apathy and timidity. Tennant recounts her struggle with what she calls 'the contentment' of the respectable country people she observed when she went to rural New South Wales in the 1930s. However the *appearance* of contentment is an attribute of respectability which is a discourse that silences dissension. Respectability elides its classed associations incurring losses for women who have learnt to position themselves in relation to this sanctioning of feminine subjectivity. The disciplinary and punitive aspects of respectability are compounded for women whose lives are crosscut by other marginalisations.

Spirit and the spiritual were issues raised in Claire's story about her mother and also Judy's story about her special doll. The *spiritual* framed the something more that was expressed as a longing. Spirit is indeterminate and abjected. Its association with intuitive knowing draws on the unseen, though organised religions try to pin spirit down and package it in dominant discourses. Is this why Kylie Tennant says respectability is the malnutrition of the spirit, because respectability constrains longings?

Robin Morgan (2001:85) explains that, 'Religion, philosophy and aesthetics are all means by which the human psyche reaches toward something greater than itself, to glimpse life's meaning and beauty'. However, Morgan (2001:86) writes that, as institutions of patriarchy, all

three find consciousness intolerable, ambivalence unacceptable, and devalue these as womanly traits connected with intuition.

I think of spirit as an aspect of self-determination and therefore with potential and agency. My understanding of spirituality does not defer to an external authority but to authority I might find in myself, and take for myself. I think of this authority as a possibility for a connection between experience and knowledge that does not efface women, but it is a possibility that remains veiled by the patriarchal myth of coherence that incribes woman as lack (Miller 1986:271).

Losses in coherence

The participants' play with dolls and memories of childhood games resonated with the storylines folded into the narrative of bohemia, and demonstrate the ability to manage disparate and conflicting aspects of feminine subjectivity. The fabrication of coherent and respectable self involves losses in the elision of the work of crafting an image of coherent subjectivity with its disavowal of the abject or the inappropriate, and creation of absences. The work of smoothing over disconnections and disparity fabricates women's subjectivity in the image of lace, and women are the lacemakers who take an active hand in the processes of their subject formation.





Margot said, 'I knitted this when I was about nine years of age, and it took quite a while. And when my grandmother saw it, she said it was too good to go on the doll. And that's why I've still got it. She wouldn't allow me to put it on my doll.'
'Oh you would've been very cross', replied Rachel,
'My grandmother believed in keeping me busy, little girls were to be seen, not heard.'

Chapter Six

Entredeux

when paradox ruptures



I am pregnant with certain deaths
of women whose hands were replaced
by paper flowers, which must be kept
clean, which tear on a glance,
which could not even hold water.

They Inhabit Me
by Marge Piercy
from *My Mother's Body*, 1985

I tell myself this is the dark gut of the thesis, where impropriety will be written because it must. I didn't want this thesis to be a black hole of despair, but it must go to cold interior places. If only briefly. Because women do go there in desperate times. Some never return. The desperate agony of deaths, not ordinary deaths at the end of a long life, but murderous acts and premature deaths are irretrievable losses that ruptures threaten to execute.

I know what its like to live ruptures, to disconnect my heart from my body and shut my eyes to the fingers wrapping my throat, to feel even the softest sound erased and only a tiny breath escape. And to know it's because I'm a woman, that I have no voice of my own, no place of my own.

My friend made a clay foetus and gave it to a mutual friend whose son died in utero. He was a child of incest. His tiny body contained the intolerable threat of a rupture between love and pain in one perfect bundle. She never conceived again and her heart ached until it broke.

Rupture has a genealogy, and somewhere it eventually bursts.

Entredeux is a moment of rupture (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:10). Women are accustomed to living across ruptures. We navigate our lives constantly, even unconsciously through the practices of hegemonic heteroreality that structure life in oppositions. Janice Raymond (2001:12) goes as far as to say that every social relation is positioned in cosmic complementarity with its paired other in heteroreality. The binary oppositions that structure heteroreality incorporate rupture seamlessly, shaping the social/cultural world, and women as incomplete. Rupture is inherent, always possible. It is expressed in the slashes that couple and separate binarised concepts such as body/self, im/possibility, self/other, nature/culture, female/male.

Hélène Cixous (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:9) explains that we are always prey to otherness that threatens to rupture. We deal with ruptures in everyday life when we make instantaneous decisions, coming down on one side at the loss of the other. When conflicting experiences or emotions collide, or familiarity erupts into strangeness, it is immediate, a sudden turning point, or entredeux (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:10). Entredeux is a moment, Cixous writes, it is 'nothing', but it is the sudden confrontation with difference or an otherness that is part of the self (1997:10). Cixous explains that entredeux pierces the closure of everyday life (1997:9). This chapter is about living with ruptures and dis/em/bodiment, and moments of entredeux.

The stories in this chapter are about occasions when the image of stability and coherence ruptures and respectability is disrupted by the uncontrollable protrusion of messy traces of the (supposed to be) abject.

Damned Whores and God's Police by Ann Summers (1976) and *Good and Mad Women* by Jill Julius Matthews (1984) are both well-respected commentaries on Australian womanhood that testify to the binary structure of the moral and sexist underpinnings that structure women's experiences in Australia. Each points to conflicting polarities in womanliness and the determination of pathology or deviance involved in the failure of good womanhood, or the feminine subjective, to use Gillian Swanson's term (2000:112). Twenty years on, the themes of good, mad or bad women continue to exert influence on how women are perceived, how they assess their own lives and the lives of other women. Though moral and sexist codes are tempered by increasing tolerance for diversity, storylines that were important influences in childhood remain an underlying influence and a potential source of conflict, as shown in *Coffee Tea or Biscuits*.

In the Lifestory Workshops, the confusion (previously discussed) experienced by some participants when they were children, resulted from smoothed over disjuncture in family narratives. Sometimes when the cause of the disjuncture was brought suddenly into conscious awareness the child was thrown into an abrupt and immediate change of perspective that could be described as *entredeux*. Other women discussed experiences where opposing storylines came into conflict, causing confusion and a moment of rupture when the familiar was irrupted by an/other story. The following stories are about such situations where children's experiences were suddenly brought into sharp awareness of a contradiction, or confusing storylines previously unspoken, and they were forced to see their lives in new and unfamiliar ways. Significantly the stories involve a rupture in the unity that is *parents*, and also raise questions about women's abilities to deal with a clash of discourses in their lives.

Claire came into the last Workshop with an armful of camellias from her garden and a beaming smile of happiness. The flowers were for me, a thank you she said, in appreciation. I was stunned by her enthusiasm but grateful for her thanks, and flattered that she positioned me as instrumental to her discoveries. I remembered my feelings of inadequacy immediately after each session, wondering if I was giving the women something they were looking for by coming to these Workshops, and looking to me for. All I had offered them was an opportunity, the time and place to speak their lives, and a way of rethinking their life stories and

experiences. It was a chance to take their memories into their own hands. Our different purposes flowed parallel through the work we were doing together. Claire explained that the Workshop sessions had brought some significant events to memory and writing about them had been cathartic. The stories and insights they gave Claire were hers, always tucked away and needing only an opportunity to come forward, but I delighted in the huge bunch of camellias as well as the trust that was implicit in the offering of her stories.

We laughed a lot in this last Workshop. There was an irreverent remembrance of our little girlhoods and our play with dolls. It was the day we brought our dolls in for *Show and Tell*. Then, right at the very end of the session, Claire told us that she had a story she would like to read. She told us that she had written about an event from when she was ten years old. It was a story about her family.

Claire:

*well the non perfect family that I was in.
I wrote about the confusion that comes
from not knowing everything that's at play.*

Claire:

Mum had been struggling with her unhappiness for a long long time. Not just her dissatisfaction with her marriage but the deeper pain from her childhood, the loss of her mother and her crazy self blame for being second twin, the one that took longer to be born and somehow caused her mother's death. Drinking became a solace, a buffer from the world and her need to interact with it, she was so poorly equipped. Her older twin talked for her, got there first, paved the way.

She thought she didn't need people, that she could hide away just quietly sitting being left alone, but the more we tried to contain and control the situation the wider the crack for chaos to step in and out, and her life had indeed become emotionally chaotic. She was sinking and swimming in a turbulent ocean. All this had been passed from recovery of hope and simple happiness to plunging back to despair and aggression. Despite the pressures, I felt that we would stay together as a family and ride it through together, with blood and loyalty holding our mother in the threads that could, I hoped, be repaired. So the day I came home from school to find two strange women (tears) carrying (pauses) my almost dead comatose mother out of the bedroom whilst my father watched maybe as helplessly as me, is one of profound

dismay. Mum was being taken away. This wasn't a voluntary admission into a clinic... tears ... (it didn't feel like this when I wrote it.....it was fine when I wrote it)

Maryanne: *you've got me in tears too,*

Claire: *no no its beautiful its beautiful*

Ellie: (taking over the reading of Claire's story)

This wasn't a voluntary admission into a clinic to dry out, it was a life or death move. She needed to be locked up to dry out and get serious help in order to recover.

My dad told me that day that he couldn't cope anymore, that he could not care about my mother anymore. As the child that I was then, I could not understand what I came to understand over the many years, that no one could help her to find happiness that she had to find herself. I also couldn't see how one half of my parents could walk away from the other like an egg cracking and I was the yolk spilling suddenly, unprotected.

It has taken much time and thought, much sadness and anger, to understand what was at work that day, at that point of crisis. I know now that a death is also an invitation to a rebirth and that letting go of the old no matter how detrimental in its comfort, is taking a step toward something better. The confusion I felt that day about just how much someone could be expected to save another from falling, and how much of a balance lies between duty to self and others, love of self and others, is huge. But we have all survived, scarred but intact, and my mum's long journey towards self-love has been completed and it is wonderful.

Morgan:

Ten years ago, after eighteen years of marriage and four children we had decided to separate. As my husband and I walked away from each other how could we explain to our children all the confusion of reasons why we were separating? How could I make any sense for the boy who had given us, one each, the two halves of a perfectly matched crystal for a gift and another time had given us a tiny wire swing with a man and a woman sitting close, side by side. He saw us this way, we were that way, I wanted to be that way for him, for all of our children, but I couldn't be, any longer. We had sheltered them, the family unit, as an entirety, like an eggshell contains both the thick nourishing yellow and the sticky clear white. We were

a union, an entity, a whole, but the shell was breaking faster than we could patch up the cracks to prevent our insides from spilling and I couldn't manage the unhappiness any longer.

In the end there is no protection from rupture, though of course we told them what we knew and tried to reassure them that our love for them remained intact. But we couldn't explain the hurts, the worries, betrayals and the pain that made this a necessity for us, and left them feeling unprotected and confused. We didn't love them less, perhaps we were actually more aware of our love for them. But even love is no protection when the familiar ruptures, any more than you can prevent the fading of a dream in the waking.

Maryanne :

*I am just thinking about,
what I was in tears about was,
um I was just thinking about my children,
what they must have seen with me being carried out too,
because I tried to commit suicide ... I was so unhappy,
and I don't remember doing it,
and I just wonder what picture my kids have too.*

(tears)

*I've had that back in the memory banks for a long time,
and that's what I was just thinking too,
I was standing there with you and,
I was thinking maybe that was my kids too,*

Claire:

*but my mum has spoken about that time too since,
and she said that she actually felt that she had died,
she thought that they had come about a minute after she had died,
and I think that she had spiritually died,
she got to that point where she just couldn't carry on,
but for her that was that point, that no one could protect her from,
that no one could stop.
A friend of mine works at the youth refuge
and they're counselled,
that you cant stop someone from hitting that lowest point and...*

Maryanne:

and remembering it...

the only thing that I remember about the whole thing was being there

and being above and watching them doing things to me,

and then going to Tamworth

(she was institutionalised)

and being put in with people and,

someone was hitting someone,

and me thinking,

oh I'm sane, I don't need to be here.

Hitting that lowest point when the spirit wants to give up was a turning point for Claire's mother. For ten year old Claire seeing her mother wheeled out in a coma, for Maryanne the memory of catching sight of her sons as she was wheeled past them, and for Morgan's children, the moment when the life they had lived suddenly ruptured and forced a change of awareness was entredeux. In each of these situations conflicting and un/consciously confusing storylines came into sharp collision breaking down the family narrative that had defined their lives.

The three stories are grouped together above, overlapping, because Claire's reading of her childhood memory story sparked the other memories of situations when children were shocked by rupture in their lives and the image of coherence was shattered by the eruption of underlying conflicts.

No place to call home

It would be too great an imposition and too much presumption to say that these stories each involve a woman's frustration with 'her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order', that Julia Kristeva (Kristeva quoted in Moi 1986:157) writes in *About Chinese Women*. Woman's own desires, or the inability to cope with hegemonic patriarchal culture is the call of the mother, that threatens woman with madness, according to Kristeva (Kristeva cited in Moi 1986:157). Once the fragile envelope that is woman's ability to deal with the paternal order begins to slip or rupture, then her life is at risk (Kristeva cited in Moi 1986:157).

The lives of the women in the previous stories were indeed contained within a fragile envelope that was crumbling, in the stories above. Claire's mother felt a responsibility for her mother's death all her life and that was woven with threads from other stories Claire told about her mother, such as her description of her mother as having bohemian qualities (Chapter Five). These stories do suggest a conflict with the symbolic paternal order. Difficulties are expressed in attributions of guilt, shame, in/sanity, and quest for *spirit*. Maryanne's stories throughout this thesis also suggest her own poignant longing for connection, with her natural mother and her own woman-defined self, as do my stories. Conflicting emotions are inherent in the juggling the complexity of experiences that Frigga Haug calls the quicksands of life (2000:156).

The pain of powerlessness

The inability to cope with life experiences and the inability to bring about change is a profound expression of powerlessness that is trivialised and dismissed by the word *unhappy* (see Claire and Maryanne earlier in this chapter). Sally Cline (1995:274) makes a tentative link between extreme powerlessness and silencing of women by despair and self-blame, and a desire to kill themselves, following her research into suicide. Cline speculates that women who were subjected to violence as children are more likely to commit suicide than other women, even if they have children of their own (1995:273).

Nellie Radomsky (1995) is a medical practitioner who conducted research looking at women's experience of chronic illnesses and difficult-to-treat pain. Radomsky (1995:3) finds a 'connection between chronic pain and powerlessness in women'. Her research extends the widespread understanding of a link between child abuse and psychiatric illness by considering the victimisation of women and dismissal of their pain when no physical problem is conclusively identified (1995:4). Radomsky concludes that:

the feminine is so abused, denied and silenced [...] Somehow in this process of silencing of the feminine voice we see women in pain – women dissociated from the meaning of the pain in their bodies – women no longer connected to their own bodies. (Radomsky 1995:151)

Dissociation is a breaking apart or separation of processes of body, mind or spirit. It is learnt from rational discourses that valorise objectivity and privilege thinking over bodily awareness. Initially, participants in the Lifestory Workshops were more likely to write objectively than tell their stories from their own embodied experiences. They found it difficult to write from

embodied subject positions even though they named their emotions and were willing to speak about their lives. Speaking with authority from their embodied knowledge of experience was unfamiliar. Lena told personal stories but she said she didn't want to write about her emotions. She equated *emotions* with pain and suffering she thought everyone experienced.

Lena:

*Everyone's life is full of pain and suffering
but that doesn't mean we have to write about it.*

My own hesitation in writing from that place of abjection is a resistance to abstracted symbolic authority that threatens to objectify and define the abject in the language of dis/ease. Rationality devalues the emotions. Is the abject a place to speak or somewhere to be silent?

During one session Lena talked about anxiety attacks that she has had for about forty years, following a year she spent at boarding school.

Lena:

*actually school in the early days was ok.
but when I was twelve years old I went to a convent as a boarder
and that was run by the Dominican Nuns
and they were very, very fearsome.
Stern,
never showed anybody any love or caring.*

(murmurings of agreement and understanding)

*and that was a ghastly time of my life.
I haven't actually written any of this but I am going to write it.
And I started getting appalling anxiety attacks then,
but at twelve years old I didn't know what they were*

Bea:

*so it scared you off going to heaven,
because the nuns would tell God you were naughty.*

Lena:

*spoiled
the nuns said spoiled,
I used to walk and look at this picture of Christ bleeding with thorns
and ...*

Bea:

yeah isn't that horrid that...

Lena:

*and I used to have this feeling of utter misery,
which much much later in my life I was told was anxiety attacks.
but from that day onwards I got anxiety attacks up to this very day.
And it was really, really horrendous,
the school was not a place that I liked.
Although my early (school) days were ...
Oh I don't remember ...
But I think they were superimposed by that year at the Dominican Convent.
I did extremely well at ...
scholastically,
at the convent.
my mother was totally keen that I stay,
but I was in such a state that my father took me away.*

(collective murmurings: *bless him, good*)

Lena:

*there was a young girl of six there, who had been boarded out.
And I don't know how she would have survived.*

(collective murmurings of understanding followed)

The repression of femininity, sexuality and other traces of female corporeality in the convent turned girls away from the feminine and maternal. But this mother, like mine, wanted her daughter to have access to the success possible in the social world. The convent experience

compounded the displacement of female Self and dissociation of womanhood from the corporeal female body.

Lena:

*The buildings, were all built of stone,
the nuns, when we used to have a bath
and the young girl used to make us put towels around ourselves,
they couldn't bear us to show ourselves off,
in case they got some idea of who knows what.
It was ridiculous,
we used to go to the bath,
and with this thing tied around you just in case your bosom was showing,
but none of us had bosoms of course.
Shocking place,
Shocking.*

Bea:

*My childhood was fairly anxious too,
and I reckon I still do have anxiety attacks,
but not often,
but I could never pinpoint how come that might be
until I started to link it to my experience
and now I can see how that is,
because I lived in an anxious way,
and the amount of stress,
and amount of anxiety that your body just automatically carries that,
you know?*

Lena:

*some people's bodies do,
just mentally,
It's actually a mental problem
anxiety.
And some people don't suffer anxiety in their life,
though they might go through exactly the same things.
But I know I felt terribly abandoned at that convent.*

It was just awful.

As Lena explains, similar experiences produce different effects depending on the context of individual lives and the underpinning discourses. Restoring the connection between embodied awareness and experiences can reveal underlying influences because, as Lena points out, there is no absolute definitive response to particular circumstances. Responses are individual, formed in context.

The shameful femininity constructed by the convent experience (above) and the nuns' accusations of her being spoiled were storylines that intersected with Lena's experiences and her feelings of being abandoned by her parents.

Martina:

*Was there a particular reason why you had to go boarding school,
did you find out?*

Lena:

*Well my parents were getting divorced at this time,
I was twelve.
and the marriage had started to go down,
and as we start to talk more about our backgrounds I can tell you why.
And I think that could be because they wanted to get me away,
from the situation at home.
And also my mother had great ambitions.
I was going to be a scholar of some sort.
And of course the convent was renowned for good scholastic work.
I certainly did well there,
But, oh gosh,
I was miserable.*

Lena's story about boarding school and her anxiety attacks reveal tensions in her life that are not an uncommon experience for women. Susan Hawthorne (2002:158) writes that being sent to boarding school disconnects and displaces the child from place, especially *home*. The conversation above describes Lena's displacement in an environment that inscribed gender, class and spiritual expectations on her young body at the same time as it produced confusing

inconsistencies that disconnected her from the life she had previously known. Lena's year at the convent was a time of living through the rupture of her family life. Her parents' marriage was coming undone and she was sent away to school. Lena's powerlessness was acute.

Shattered selves

Dissociation disconnects the material difficulties from conscious awareness and in that separation provides a dispassionate objective vantage. Dissociation is a typical response when displacement and anxiety are locked in the body to avoid drowning in the quicksands of complexity. Compartmentalising experiences avoids the need to assimilate experiences when conflicting storylines cannot be reconciled. In compartmentalising our lives to survive and manage ambiguities and contradictions, Dorothy Allison (1994:16) writes that it is not a split but a splintering of subjectivity that occurs. Dissociation is most often silent and hidden.

Suicide, or attempted suicide, is a definitive and public statement of the desire for a way out of the quicksands of complexity. Sally Cline (1995:75) writes that women see death, like life, as 'inside' them (1995:24). No wonder Kristeva says a woman can carry off suicide as an inevitable, irresistible, and self-evident transition (Kristeva cited in Moi 1986:157).

In a discussion about the deaths by suicide of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Marie Tsvetaeva, Kristeva says that Tsvetaeva's longing was 'to dissolve being itself, to free it of the word, of the self, of God' (Kristeva quoted in Moi 1986:158). Woolf, Plath and Tsvetaeva were all disillusioned with the masculine model of femininity, its meanings and words, according to Kristeva (Kristeva cited by Moi 1986:139&156). So were the women in the Workshop stories (above), disillusioned with the meanings available to them as was Julie (Chapter Three), who never found the meaning that might make her life liveable. These women wanted to extract themselves from situations they experienced as intolerable.

Suicide was one of many mysteriously unexplained concepts when I was a child growing up. I knew that suicide was a way out of pain (but what pain?). I knew it was a failure and a cowardly escape (from what?). Suicide was a vague uncertainty hovering just outside my comprehension but brought closer when the woman next door took an overdose of pills and killed herself.

The woman who lived next door to us in Bankstown committed suicide when I was about ten. She was a shadowy grey woman who always confused me because she was the daughter of the

house, like me, but she was old. On the rare occasions when I saw her she glided in semi transparency with a minimal relationship between her body and the ground she trod. In my memory she was ethereal.

The significant feature of their place was the framework of a garage next to the fence out the side of our kitchen. The timber frame sat there, untouched for as long as I remember. There was no driveway to it, no car to go in it, no walls or no roof and no man lived next door to use a shed anyway. It was just a timber frame on a concrete pad, sun worn and baked out of its moisture like a dried up skeleton. It was an interior laid bare, left to drain the life out of the two women who were always secreted deep in the house, the mother, and the daughter who committed suicide. There was something embarrassing about the garage frame, like hanging your dirty washing in public. It hinted at unfulfilled desires and thwarted plans with no man about the house to make good the intention. After the suicide it reminded me of her.

I never saw the ambulance, never heard a sound but mum told us what's 'er name had committed suicide. She was a nurse and she hoarded pills. She died in the cold heartless centre of the house. Mum said.

The skeleton garage and the silent house were impenetrable to my childish imagination. They stood for a life wasted by inexplicable fears and an abiding shame. That shame was never articulated. It hinted at the failed femininity of the old maid living at home long after she should have married and had babies. There was some story of love years ago, but even with that it was a story of failure. The timber skeleton next door stood upright, keeping a sentry's watchful eye over our yard and the way to the toilet up the back.

I think it was the inactivity that was the most repulsive failure of respectability next door. It was deathly quiet day and night. Our place, by contrast, was a chaotic scene of out of control activity. We lived in a neglected burial ground of abandoned plans that were resurrected by mum and dad's means of escape, a bottle of beer, a cigarette and the races on Saturday afternoons. But at least it was life. All hope and desire had been abandoned next door.

The old maid died in the kitchen, but as long as I lived in Bankstown her spectre haunted the sad frame that was an ever present reminder of the fate of failed womanhood. I never compared mum with the neighbour though mum was always threatening to put her head in the

oven. On our side of the fence there was too much of life for mum to manage, but across the palings there was no life, and the grass grew taller than ours.

The woman's suicide was not a rupture in my life. Suicide, however, was endowed with meanings about failure, shame and passivity in my childhood and these have remained linked with her in my memories. I knew suicide was a failure of respectability and a failure to be satisfied by, or amenable to, the life offered.

The rational self can resist ruptures until moments of *entredeux* when everything changes unavoidably. After death an image of unity is restored in the completion of the polarity that is life and death, and closure is effected on the life story, but in the first moment, death is *entredeux*, an instant when life as it has been lived ruptures and we are forced to confront change and package messy complexities in manageable discourses.

Misty was killed recently when she was run over by a car. She was a loyal friend and I will miss her but I have to remind myself that Misty is a dog. Well, she was also my companion through most of fourteen years, but she was a dog. I prepared a choice of sheets to wrap her in, to bring her home from the vet. My friend said, 'make sure you take something warm, you don't want to bury her in a plastic bag'.

A body bag? Leave Misty's little body in a plastic body bag? I couldn't, I wouldn't.

But the vet had. He left the bag open but not one strand of her long silky hair escaped into view. I couldn't bear to carry the cold and rigid bag in my arms and I was grateful my friends had come with me and that Denis carried Misty. Back home I chose a simple cotton cloth to wrap around her. I had hemmed the cloth myself when the children were younger, and we'd used it as a backdrop to display special things, like collections of shells brought back from holidays, or Christmas tabloids we made from pinecones and holly, or autumn leaves the children collected each year to brighten the sparse winter days with colour. Misty was wrapped in the cloth that had been a part of many family occasions.

When mum was dying at home, life left her body gradually, shutting down her faculties and organs one by one. Soon after she sighed out her last breath, she was cool and the last remaining wispy soft strands of her hair lay life/less on the pillow. Then life left her body quickly and I thought my mother was gone. The body on my daughter's bed bore some

resemblance, though only a semblance really. Mum was already gone before the undertaker came and took her body away. Still, the sight of the body bag on the stretcher was a shock, as they wheeled her out of the house.

Sam came home from Bali in a body bag when she was finally identified more than six weeks after her murder. The bag was sealed of course. They put her on a stretcher and draped the Australian flag over the top as they escorted her from the plane to the waiting hearse. Her mum walked beside her as best she could. She wanted to hold her daughter in her arms, but they wouldn't let her, at first. Not until they had explained what to expect. Then she held the whole body bag in her arms. Not the body. Not whole. No/body.



An enveloping fragility has wrapped around me lately and I have become less interested in body needs, like the need to cook to provide good and tasty food, the need to exercise to keep burning up the excess nibbles I devour while I am writing and the need to walk to allow blood to flow through my limbs and my brain so that I might sleep well without a cess pool of stagnating thoughts clogging my system. I want my body to take care of itself, to not ask so much attention of me, I want my body to just perform as I have always expected that it will. I am asking my body to have no needs, like children ask of a mother. As grief pulls me back from body knowing do I really expect my body to be absent? I steel myself against the pain lodged in my limbs, in my head, in my heart. I want to keep functioning in the world, keep moving on with my work.

They have been big years since I moved away from my children to do this research. There was no seamless transition to a new way of life, but instead a series of traumas stretched the separation and independence between my children and me. Not only personal trauma. I will never forget that first image of the planes flying into the World Trade Centre. In the first millisecond before comprehension gathered images into knowable storylines, time suspended, then seconds, minutes, lifetimes caved in on each other and the unavoidable horror hit home. Moments such as that become fixed, so shocking that there's no space for understanding, only horror that assumes closure in its definition of the moment. Those first shocking seconds when the realisation of traumatic events floods in rip up time as decisively as I shred pages of words. It's been like that since I started my research. I don't want to count the number of times I have answered a phone call of tears.

*First one of my children's friends, and then another.
Both dead in car accidents.
Then a husband and wife are killed
when an oncoming motorist fell asleep at the wheel,
leaving a young girl's life shattered,
mum and dad.. gone..*

*But it doesn't stop,
a phone call to my youngest son, out of the blue,
'did you see Joe yesterday?
Did you share a drink with him, or a cigarette?
He died last night, meningococcal,
get yourself in for a test quickly, and an injection.'*

Still life goes on, and on.

*A call from a loved friend,
'We're pregnant,' they say,
'having it terminated,
we can't tell anyone, except you.'*

Then one Sunday morning I wake to the radio news. Why didn't I turn the alarm off? This was going to be a day of rest for me after a busy week away.

'At least twenty Australians are confirmed dead after a bomb blast in a popular nightclub in Bali...'

How dreadful I think...

get up and make tea, take yesterday's paper back to bed and lie in awhile longer.

It's so warm today, almost like summer, I think I'll get into the garden. I've been away from this house too long, and too often lately, too busy, the garden is so neglected.

At last there's a chance to think over the week that was, working here in the solitude of the garden...

That was a lovely evening last Thursday for my daughter's twenty-first, even if it wasn't what I would have liked to have given her. It was nice. A few of her friends and her grandparents, a lovely restaurant so I didn't have to do all the work. The young ones always go off to their friends at the end of an evening and leave us older generations to their perception of our age. But we oldies stayed, and we talked across the table, my ex and his father, my father-in-law's wife, and me. We caught up a bit but then they had to go, drive the hour back to Sydney. They want to take their daughter Sam to the airport early tomorrow, she's flying away for a well earned holiday.

This Sunday is gorgeous and a lethargy takes over my work with the weeds that are concreted in. When's it going to rain?

The phone rings but I get there in time, though I admit I hesitated for a moment. I am really too tired to go to a dancing lesson tonight, but, 'Yes, perhaps it will be good for me. Ok pick me up at five, yeah I heard about the bombing in Bali. How many dead? September 11? Are the two related? I can't imagine that, surely not! Just some extremists taking it out on tourists who invade their paradise. Surely nothing more? A few tourists killed, not an attack on Australia?'

The lethargy unwinds me and I lie down after the previous day's long drive back here from the birthday party. Drifting through the conversation with the grandparents, I remember their congratulations on my twenty-one years of mothering my beautiful daughter. Our two daughters are so alike, only eight years apart, both of them are party girls, vivacious and full of fun. Sam is a great friend to my girl, this has been a difficult year for her, that's why she's gone to Bali, for a break.

Sam? Sam's in Bali.

Sam?

Sam...

She's gone to Bali. Sam's in Bali.

Sam would've been where the nightlife was, just like my girl would, on a Saturday night.

*Oh no,
the bombing.*

Where's Sam?

The phone rings and rings and no one answers. Its late afternoon, where is everyone? All the phones ring out, and the mobiles. The grandparents, my ex's and his mobile, my daughter and each of my boys, all the phones ring out. Fear moves in.

Finally.

finally her brother answers,

'Have you heard from Sam?' I ask, expecting an indulgent response,

'No, We don't know where she is,

No one knows,

she was last seen leaving the dance floor in the Sari Club, but she hasn't been back to the hotel, no one can find her. Mum and dad have flown to Bali to look. Sam's missing.'

She vanished.

She just disappeared.

She's gone.

A terrorist attack? An attack on Australians, on families, on young people, carefree, fun loving Australians on holidays to escape their everyday lives?

Not a terrorist attack, not Sam in a terrorist attack...

At least eighty Australians killed, a direct hit on Australia.

I phone Bali and speak to her mum,

'We can't find her, she's missing' she says, 'We're searching the rubble. We've been through the bodies in the morgue and out on the street. We went to every hospital. We pasted her picture on the missing board, we gave it to the newspapers, we were interviewed by Sixty Minutes, we went through the bodies in the morgue again. And again, as best we could. We've been to all of the hospitals and searched the wards. We're walking the streets, perhaps she's stunned, has amnesia, is frightened, run away...'

'We called her name'

... Sam... Sam...

'It's hard to tell, bodies are burnt black, we searched again, went back to the rubble, we asked the police, and nurses, taxi drivers, at the hotel, her friend, we've been back to the morgue, we called her again, and again, ...'

Sam...

'We would know if it was Sam.

We don't know where she is. She's missing.'

Presumed dead.

A week or so later they came home. They brought her bags and all her be/longings.

Eventually the turmoil subsides on the surface. The torrent moves to interior regions and it stops being all right to speak of it. But I am saturated with the scent of death. It's a lump in my throat, an indigestible silence. Invisible fingers tighten around my neck. I'm choked quiet. The days have become longer and the sky's not as clear as before. My body is just numb. I run away to the sea, but there's no escape from myself.

When an event arrives which evicts us from ourselves, we do not know how to 'live'. But we must. Thus we are launched into a space-time whose contradictions are all different from those we have always been accustomed to. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:9)

I am betrayed by extremes of emotion and my body starts spewing its abjection. 'I don't have any resilience left.' I tell my counsellor, I'm all out of strength, and I want to go home. But where is that?

Woman, Cixous writes, has not been able to live in her own house, her very body (1996:68). Cixous says that there is no home for woman, because she is other and her body is appropriated and reappropriated by man, for man.

Is this me, this no-body that is dressed up, wrapped in veils, carefully kept distant, pushed to the side of History and change, nullified, kept out of the way, on the edge of the stage, on the kitchen side, the bedside? (Cixous & Clement 1996:69)



Is this me? This body treading water? Where is my home?

Right now home is my beachside retreat, my caravan house tucked into the fold of the dune. Now home is my bed, under the covers, where I can still hear the waves crashing against the mound of sand between me and the sea. I wrap around the sadness, and listen.

This is a dangerous place. Not a place of permanence or certainty. This place belongs to the sea and the river who, together, carved it a between place. The dune offers some protection for a time but unseen currents are in command here, in the movements of the sea and the weather. The wild chaos of the unseen shakes and batters my intruder's hold on this place. Here in the warm lee of the dune I'm a squatter. Many of the residents are loners like me. Even the sole rabbit escaped from captivity grows fat here flaunting its freedom.

The cornice spine of the dune rings the coastline where we intruders curl our longings. Be/longing and connection are organic here, a coordinated matter of being here at this time, in this place, in situ, now. This place is my home today, my escape from ruptures that threaten to shatter me. This is a precarious p/lace.



Gynaecology

*What cruel twist is this,
what artful ruse?
what ingenious plan to wrest a woman
from her self,
and call it care?*

*What fear is this,
what scaremongery?
what deceitful plan to undermine her strength,
in the name of care?
Is it only to scour her pretensions?
That she might mistake her body's intention,
and think it had failed?
Or that she had failed in her care,
of that dark continent?*

*She let her intuition slip
into uncertainty,
afraid of spewing abjection.
That's how it was she allowed him
in.*

*Only a male gynaecologist in town.
Get it done now,
don't wait
it might be dangerous,
or worse,
too late.*

*Cold and cruel,
his deprecating gaze
against the folly of her fear.
Just a simple snip and burn.
And then
the intruder is gone.*

But what's this? she asks.

*Nothing,
says he about the protrusions.*

Nothing.

Well, only the remnants of your hymen.